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How cities can use procurement to shift towards sustainable food consumption

[Food](#)[Spotlight On: Sustainable Consumption](#)Author(s): **C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, C40 Knowledge Hub**

Food is a major source of urban consumption-based emissions, accounting for an average 13% of cities' total emissions.¹ By supporting the consumption of healthy, plant-based diets and reducing food waste, cities can play an important role in reducing food-related emissions while delivering important health, economic and social benefits.² As municipal authorities are often among the largest food purchasers in a city, they have an opportunity to leverage their own purchasing power to ensure that food served in institutions such as schools, shelters, prisons, hospitals and government agencies is healthy and sustainable. Leading by example can also help municipalities to inspire and work with school districts, private institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and state- and national-level governments to shift their purchases towards climate-friendly food.

Here is how cities can use food procurement to achieve climate benefits by prioritising locally sourced, sustainable and low-carbon-footprint food options.

Gather evidence of the food being procured by the city

Identify the food venues under municipal control, especially those that could most easily adopt climate-friendly food purchasing. Cities typically have most control over the food served in:

- **School cafeterias**, which are usually the largest area of city-controlled food procurement.
- **Other public institutions**, such as hospitals and government offices.
- **Municipal facilities**, such as community centres and recreation centres, as well as city-sponsored

events and functions.



Cities that do not have direct control over food procurement can work with schools, state- and national-level government and NGOs to influence procurement practices.

Understand what food your city is buying. Collect data on food procurement practices, including what types of food are being purchased and where they are from. In cities that have a dedicated procurement officer or team, this can involve a review of their procurement practices. In cities where procurement is conducted through various teams and departments, a broader food procurement study and mapping exercise can help to identify and understand the range of purchasing practices. A mandate from the city leadership may be needed to require different procurement officers to share purchasing data.

Consider conducting a consumption-based emissions inventory. Consumption-based emissions inventories can help to make the case for more sustainable food procurement practices by assessing the scale and sources of food-related emissions. *How to cut your city's consumption-based emissions* explains more.

- Copenhagen's consumption-based emissions inventory revealed that food consumption was the largest source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the city. In response, the city developed the Food Policy for Copenhagen, which aims to reduce emissions from food consumption by promoting more plant-based diets, reducing food waste and increasing the consumption of organic and local foods.
- New York City's consumption-based emissions found that food consumption was responsible for approximately 14% of the city's GHG emissions and recommended strategies to reduce them, including promoting plant-based diets and reducing food waste.
- Portland found that emissions from food consumption were primarily from production, rather than transportation or retail distribution. Explore what Portland learnt from its consumption-based emissions inventory in our data story.



Build political support among key internal stakeholders

Use your evidence, as well as leading research on sustainable diets such as *Food in the Anthropocene*, to build support for sustainable food procurement practices across relevant agencies, particularly:

Mayor and senior leadership of agencies responsible for public health, procurement and sustainability. Highlight a range of benefits, particularly with regard to: improved health; lower healthcare costs associated with diet-related diseases; more jobs and socioeconomic benefits associated with a stronger local food production system; greater social equity through better access to healthy, fresh foods in underserved communities; stronger local food cultures; and community-building through food-related events and activities.

Nutrition team. Many cities have nutrition teams that are responsible for policies and programmes that promote healthy and sustainable food environments. These teams are often tasked with developing nutrition standards and guidelines for schools, hospitals and other public institutions that serve food. They often control changes in food procurement policy and are essential delivery partners, but can be unaware of the health benefits – or even have concerns about the nutritional safety – of plant-based diets low in animal-sourced and highly processed foods. Raise awareness to help gain their buy-in.

Commit to reducing food consumption emissions through procurement

Start by pledging achievable targets and increase commitments over time to fully align with a Planetary

Health Diet. The following pledges offer programmatic targets and support for achieving your food procurement goals:



- **Start by adopting a reductions pledge, such as:**

- The Cool Food Pledge asks cities to commit to a target of reducing the GHG emissions associated with the food they serve by 25% by 2030 relative to a 2015 baseline – a level of ambition in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement.
- The Good Food Purchasing Programme helps public institutions to transform their food purchasing practices by creating a transparent and equitable food system built on five core values: local economies, health, a valued workforce, animal welfare and environmental sustainability. The Center for Good Food Purchasing provides a comprehensive set of tools, technical support and a verification system to assist institutions in meeting their programme goals and commitments.

- **Work towards full alignment with the Planetary Health Diet with pledges such as the C40 Good Food Cities Accelerator.** Cities committing to this accelerator work with residents to achieve a Planetary Health Diet for all by 2030, with balanced and nutritious food, reflective of the culture, geography and demography of their residents. Signatory cities include non-C40 member cities.



Enact a climate-friendly food procurement policy

These policies, guidelines and regulations should apply to all public-sector food procurement by city-run kitchens, canteens and other restaurants on city-owned properties, as well as catering for government meetings and city-run events. They should also be applied to contracts with providers, where cities have the power to do so. Cities can begin by focusing on priority institutions, such as schools, or start with a pilot project as a step towards city-wide policy.

Prior to 2017, many food procurement policies focused on procuring locally and organically produced food. However, on average 75% of cities' food consumption emissions are from animal-sourced food. Cities should target both a reduction in animal-sourced food and an increase in organic, locally sourced food.

Use non-binding resolutions, such as ‘Meatless Mondays’, as a step towards binding action in the future. This can be an effective way for cities to raise awareness and encourage more sustainable food procurement practices without mandating specific actions or making significant policy changes. Examples include:



- **Los Angeles** passed a resolution urging city departments to offer meatless options.
- **São Paulo** passed a resolution declaring every Monday ‘Meat-Free Day’ in public schools.⁴

Integrate climate-friendly procurement into related policy.

For example:

- **Helsinki** is adopting low-carbon and sustainable food procurement as part of its strategy for carbon neutrality, which includes a goal to increase the share of organic and locally produced food in public institutions and reduce food waste. The council aims to halve the use of meat and dairy in municipal procurement by 2025.⁵
- **Vancouver’s Greenest City Action Plan** includes a goal to ensure that 50% of all food served in city-owned facilities was from local and sustainable sources by 2020.
- **Sydney’s Sustainable Sydney 2030 Plan** includes a goal to reduce the carbon footprint of food served in city-owned facilities by 50% by 2030.
- **Bristol’s One City Plan** includes a goal to promote sustainable food production and consumption, reduce food waste and increase the availability of healthy and sustainable food options.

Pass a legally binding ordinance.

For example:

- **Copenhagen** passed a law requiring 90% of food served in public institutions to be organic by 2020. The law also requires at least 30% of the food to be locally sourced.⁶
- **Barcelona** passed a law requiring all food served in public institutions to be organic, locally sourced and ethically produced by 2022.⁷

Use a mayoral executive order.

Cities where the city leader has power over procurement practices can pass executive orders to enable sustainable practices. Examples include **New York City**, where the mayor signed an executive order committing to cut the city’s food emissions by 33% by 2030 and to engage private-sector partners to join the city in cutting their food emissions by 25% by 2030.⁸

Develop climate-friendly food standards and definitions

Food procurement policies typically establish a broad framework for purchasing certain categories of food, such as climate-friendly, local and healthy food. Standards provide the definition required to determine which foods are and are not considered in these categories. These standards are often managed by municipal nutrition teams and may need to be developed along with a food procurement policy to enable implementation. For example, New York City adopted standards defining healthy, economical and environmentally sustainable procurement practices.⁹

Work with staff and food suppliers to create an implementation strategy

Consider how you will substitute animal-sourced food from wholesalers. Cities will need to work with food suppliers to build their capacity to procure more plant-based food and, more specifically, to determine how to enable the ‘protein transition’. Fostering collaboration and information sharing while providing incentives is key to scaling plant-based food purchasing over time. This can include organising supplier summits, hosting networking events or facilitating partnerships between food suppliers and plant-based food producers.

- **Provide education and training programmes** to food suppliers to raise awareness of the benefits of plant-based foods, including proteins, and how to source and supply these products. These can include webinars, seminars or workshops on topics such as plant-based nutrition, cooking techniques or supply-chain logistics.
- **Provide incentives for suppliers who offer more plant-based products.** These incentives can include grants, tax breaks or subsidies to help offset the costs associated with the switch to sourcing and supplying plant-based foods. For example, **Helsinki** provides funding for schools to offer vegetarian meals and has subsidised the cost of plant-based meals at city-owned cafeterias.¹⁰
- **Create certification programmes** that recognise and promote wholesalers who specialise in plant-based foods. This can help build trust among municipal kitchens and encourage them to source their food from these certified suppliers.
- **Encourage food suppliers to innovate** by creating incentives for the development of new plant-based products. This can include funding for research and development, offering prizes for the best new plant-based products, or hosting innovation challenges. For example, **Austin** has hosted an ‘Innovation in the Food System’ challenge to encourage the development of new plant-based products and services.¹¹
- **Work with food suppliers to promote supply-chain transparency.** This can include requiring suppliers to disclose information about the sources of their ingredients, their sustainability practices and their labour policies. **Copenhagen** requires all suppliers of food to public institutions to disclose information about the environmental impact of their products, including their carbon footprint and water usage.¹²

Amend contracts with food suppliers to switch to plant-based foods. This requires long-term commitment and collaboration between the city and suppliers.

- **Review current contracts; determine which contracts are top priorities and when they are up for renewal.** Review the terms of current contracts with food suppliers to understand what provisions can be changed and the process for making changes. Consider starting where change is easiest, for example, with vending machines or a pilot project, as a step towards a municipality-wide policy.¹³



English

- **Ensure that climate-friendly standards are referenced in upcoming bid solicitations** for commodity contracts, food service agreements and concessions contracts, and **make sure that climate-friendly purchasing standards are considered** when bids are evaluated.
- **Negotiate contract changes**, which may include new pricing, delivery schedules or product specifications. The city should meet with food suppliers to discuss the proposed changes and how they can be implemented. Enter into open and collaborative discussion and listen to the supplier's concerns and suggestions.
- **Monitor compliance.** After amended contracts are in place, monitor the supplier's compliance with the new provisions and evaluate the effectiveness of the changes. This can help identify areas for further improvement or adjustments to the contract.



Bring kitchen staff on board. Transitioning to more sustainable menus involves new ideas and approaches to buying produce, meal planning and cooking. It often means finding new providers and sometimes shifting from pre-prepared or frozen food to freshly cooked food. The buy-in of kitchen staff, including managers, buyers and chefs, and/or catering companies is vital. Cities should engage them in the development of a sustainable food policy, as well as in its implementation.

Copenhagen's city-run menus are now 90% organic – without increasing kitchen budgets



English

In 2007, Copenhagen City Council decided that foods purchased by the City of Copenhagen would be 90% organic by the end of 2015 (compared with 51% in 2007) to improve the quality of public meals. At that time, public kitchens relied on bags of frozen and semi-finished products. The majority of the 900 publicly run kitchens in Copenhagen met this goal, and nurseries and kindergartens exceed it. They cook fresh food as much as possible, use more vegetables, less meat and more seasonal produce in menus, and food waste is minimised. These changes have together enabled the organic and plant-based transition without increasing costs.

To achieve this, the city established the Copenhagen House of Food in 2007, a first-of-its-kind foundation working with professional kitchen staff and municipalities in pursuit of a healthy, happy and sustainable food culture. It provided training and education services and encourages new ideas.

Apply nudging strategies to guide diners in city-run kitchens towards plant-rich dishes in food service. The World Resources Institute's playbook offers food service providers clear, evidence-based guidance on how to use behavioural change interventions to encourage diners to select more plant-based meals and reduce consumption of animal-based meals. It can inform public institutions serving food and cities' engagement with restaurants, canteens and other food retailers. The playbook prioritises interventions that are both highly influential and highly feasible.

Where cities do not have direct control over food procurement, partner with other government bodies and NGOs to support change

Engage with public institutions to understand what support existing food providers need to adopt more sustainable food procurement policies. For example, cities can conduct communications campaigns, while an institution can amend supplier contracts.

Provide technical assistance to institutions to help them transition to more sustainable food procurement practices. This can include workshops, webinars and one-on-one coaching to help institutions understand the benefits of sustainable food procurement, identify suppliers and develop menus.

Offer incentives to schools or other institutions, such as grants, subsidies or rebates for purchasing plant-based foods, organic products or products from local and regional suppliers. For example, **Los Angeles** passed a resolution encouraging the city's public schools to serve more plant-based meals. As part of the resolution, the council also called for the creation of a pilot programme to test the feasibility of incentives for schools that serve more plant-based options.¹⁴

Create networking opportunities and partner with community organisations. Cities can create opportunities for institutions to connect with sustainable food suppliers and other institutions that have successfully implemented sustainable food procurement practices. This can include hosting events,

creating online directories or facilitating partnerships between institutions. Cities can help facilitate English partnerships with institutions and community organisations, such as local food banks, farms and food cooperatives, to help them access sustainable and locally sourced food. These partnerships can help institutions and organisations save money on procurement costs while also supporting local food systems.

Set goals and track progress to encourage institutions to make measurable progress. This can include tracking procurement data, conducting regular audits and reporting progress to stakeholders.

Create institutional feeding programmes or take over operation from non-city entities. Cities can universalise and streamline food procurement where international development agencies, state or national government, or other entities manage food procurement in a piecemeal approach. Often, cities can run comprehensive food programmes more easily than NGOs or state or national governments. This will also enable direct control over the types of food cities procure for these programmes, enabling the purchase of climate-friendly foods. For example, **Addis Ababa** implemented a school feeding programme in all public schools, taking over operations from multiple entities to alleviate hunger in public elementary schools and to improve nutritional and educational outcomes.¹⁵



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Conduct educational and communications campaigns to gain local support

Develop a clear and concise message that emphasises the benefits of plant-based foods to health, the environment and the local economy. The message should be tailored to the target audience and communicated in a way that resonates with it.

- **Use multiple communication channels** to reach different segments of the community. This may include social media, newsletters, community meetings, school events and local media outlets.
- **Engage with key stakeholders**, such as parents, students, school administrators and local chefs, to build support for plant-based food procurement initiative. This can involve conducting surveys, hosting focus groups, and soliciting feedback and input from stakeholders.
- **Partner with local organisations**, such as health advocacy groups, environmental organisations and food justice groups, to amplify their message and reach a wider audience. **Los Angeles** Unified School District partnered with local organisations, such as the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, to provide educational resources and support for the initiative.¹⁶
- **Provide educational resources** to help community members understand the benefits of plant-based foods and how to incorporate them into their diets. This may include recipe books, cooking classes and educational materials for schools and community centres.



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