
Quality food, public procurement, and sustainable development: the school meal revolution in Rome

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Abstract. In the last decade the concept of quality has been widely used to describe the dynamics that have been shaping the agrifood system. Despite differences in research focus and approach, scholars agree that quality is the outcome of a contingent and so far underresearched process of negotiation that entails and determines relations of power in the food chain. To understand the nature and implications of the relationship between quality and power in the food sector, this paper focuses on the recent 'quality revolution' implemented in the school meals system in Rome. Based on the analysis of documentary material and qualitative data collected through formal and informal interviews, the paper examines the process through which city authorities have integrated different (and at times contrasting) quality conventions. The analysis shows that procurement policies such as those implemented in Rome have the power to create an 'economy of quality' that can deliver the economic, environmental, and social benefits of sustainable development.

Introduction

During the last decade the concept of quality has been widely utilized to describe the dynamics that have been shaping the agrifood system. Along with other contested concepts, such as embeddedness and territoriality, quality has proven to be especially useful to describe the 'turn' away from the conventional and industrialized food system towards alternative and localized food products and practices (Goodman, 2003).

In this context, scholars have adopted two main approaches to quality. Some have focused on the *demand* side of the food chain, arguing that changing perceptions and concerns have originated a set of physical quality characteristics, measurable and standardized, which work their way back through the food chain, ultimately affecting also the material relations of food production (Mansfield, 2003, page 4). Most researchers, however, have turned their attention to the *supply* side of the food chain, where quality is mostly defined in opposition to industrial production. Through the adoption of conventions theory, many have argued that food quality tends to be associated with an 'interpersonal world' of markets, products, and practices that are territorially and socially embedded (see, for example, Kirwan, 2006).

Despite these differences in research focus and perspectives, scholars agree that quality is not an inherent characteristic of food. Whether it is seen as a product of consumers' concerns and demands or, rather, of producers' relocalization strategies, quality is unanimously considered as the outcome of a contested and contingent process of negotiation that entails and, at the same time, determines relations of power amongst different actors in the food chain (Harvey et al, 2004b). At a time in which quality is increasingly shaping access to the food market (Renard, 2005, page 420), this constructivist interpretation highlights the need for research that analyzes the whole process of qualification—or, in other words, the process through which quality is established and attributed to a food product or system. How exactly is quality constructed, by whom, and why? What are the implications of qualification processes for the social, ecological, and political relationships that cut across the food chain?

More in general: what is the nature of the relationship between quality, power, and sustainability in the food sector?

To address these issues, this paper focuses on school meals in Rome. Since 2000 the Roman school meals system has been subject to a process of radical reform that has been carried out under the official banner “all for quality”. Through an analysis of policy documents and of data collected at various stages of the reform,⁽¹⁾ the paper examines the discourse that city authorities have constructed around the notion of food quality. The analysis shows that such discourse is creating a food system that embodies and, to a certain extent, integrates the “increasing complexity ..., conflicting understandings and contradictory paradigms of quality” (Allaire, 2004, page 62) that characterize the contemporary food sector. As I will argue in the conclusions, this case study raises the need for research and theory that overcome the dichotomy between place-based and consumer-driven interpretations of quality that have so far dominated the agrifood literature. The public sector is emerging as a powerful actor in the food chain—one that has the capacity to reconnect producers and consumers through a process of qualification that extends beyond the market and the food products alone. By also acting upon the less visible aspects of the food system—including service, transport, labor, eating practices—procurement policies such as those implemented in Rome are designing an ‘economy of quality’ that has the potential to deliver the environmental, economic, and social benefits of sustainable development—in and beyond the food system.

Quality and power in the agrifood sector: a critical review

In the last ten years the concept of quality has been steadily but variously used by agrifood writers to refer to the turn away from the logics of standardization and mass production that characterize the industrialized food sector, towards ‘alternative’ food systems that are embedded in place, tradition, and trust (Feagan, 2007, page 28). As many have argued, in contrast with the orientations of the mainstream food industry towards cost reduction, convenience, consistency, and predictability (Harvey et al, 2004a, page 3), alternative food systems redistribute value-added gains across the food chain, reconvene ‘trust’ between producers and consumers, and articulate new forms of political and market governance (Marsden et al, 2000; Renting et al, 2003; Whatmore et al, 2003). In this context, food quality can become “anything that the conventional food system is not: an identifiable place of origin, traceability, aesthetic attributes, nutritiousness” (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006, page 185).

Over time a number of scholars have attempted to refine this loose definition of food quality and to explore more critically the nature and implications of quality

⁽¹⁾ Research in Rome started in September 2005 and has been going on since then. In fact, the development of professional relationships of collaboration with the city has allowed me to remain connected to the main actors in the system and to repeatedly conduct formal and informal interviews with them. Over the years I have interviewed representatives from the two largest catering companies supplying Rome, the Councilor for Education, the Director of the Education Department, the Director of the Food Planning office, the lawyer in charge of designing the tendering documents, the head of procurement, three dieticians working for the Education Department, and the director and dieticians from one of the largest districts (or *Municipi*) in which the city is divided. I have also had many opportunities to formally and informally discuss the impacts of Rome’s school meal revolution with representatives from the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and from organic associations. Interviews have been taped, transcribed, and analyzed in relation to one main research theme: the actors’ varying perceptions and applications of the relationship between school food and sustainable development. The paper is also based on the analysis of Rome’s tendering documents and dissemination material.

attributes in the food sector. For the most part, these studies have focused *either* on the demand side *or* on the supply side of the food chain. As a result, two main interpretations of the concept of quality have emerged. Some argue that quality is socially constructed at the consumer level (see Mansfield, 2003, page 4) in response to public concerns over health and ecology and to the emergence of aestheticized and individualized food consumption patterns (Allaire, 2004, page 63; Marsden, 2004). In simple terms, as Renard (2005, page 419) explains, the liberalization of agricultural production has been increasingly accompanied by a crisis of confidence in the supply chain, which has been addressed through the introduction of new regulatory forms based on health, food, and the environment. These regulations have produced standardized and certified qualities that are defined in terms of links between food and bioprocesses (Marsden, 2004). Quality, in this sense, evokes nature and ecology. As is the case, for example, with organic and integrated products, quality means safety, nutritiousness, and accessibility (Harvey et al, 2004a, page 3) and is identified with “a set of physical characteristics that can be measured and standardized and that have a material effect within systems of production” (Mansfield, 2003, page 4). Starting from this focus on the power of consumers and retailers in defining food quality, some scholars have then expanded their research focus by taking into account the complex ways in which consumers are interrelated with producers, traders, and retailers within commodity chains (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Mansfield, 2003).

Other scholars have shown that quality emerges at the supply end of the food chain, where some producers (particularly small producers) are increasingly attempting to distance themselves from the conventional system and to gain a competitive advantage through the development of discourses and strategies that embed their products in a specific social and territorial context (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Morris and Young, 2000; Sonnino, 2007a). Quality, in this case, implies and relies upon a broad idea of traceability—“the local, the knowable, the specialized and the exclusive” (Harvey et al, 2004b, page 197). As in the case of the EU regionally certified products or of Fair Trade products, the emphasis here is mostly on the links between the quality properties of a food product and its producer or place of production (Marsden, 2004, page 135). Drawing upon an image of the farm or the region as a source of ‘quality’, these producer-driven strategies ‘relocalize’ food—or, in other words, link it to (or embed it in) local farming practices, rural nature, landscapes, and resources (Renting et al, 2003, page 398). As some researchers have argued, this bioregional notion of quality raises important questions about the spatialization of productive activities (Feagan, 2007; Parrot et al, 2002)—particularly with regard to the new geography of food emerging in Europe (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006, pages 186–187).

Despite these differences in perspectives and concerns, researchers agree that quality is not an inherent and objective feature of certain food products and systems. Quite the contrary, it is socially and politically constructed through the complex and interrelated practices of different actors (Mansfield, 2003) and the incorporation of social values into products (Renard, 2005). Indeed, as many have argued, quality never refers exclusively to the physical properties of the food. It also embraces the processes of production, distribution, and retailing through which such properties have been achieved—or what Renard (2005, page 421) calls “cultural and ethical qualities”. For Morris and Young (2000, page 105), “it is these different methods and systems that are responsible for the reshaping and reorganization of food supply networks as producers and other actors are forced to modify methods of production and processing, build new relationships with others in the supply chain, and adapt to new regulatory pressures.”

Some scholars have attempted to make sense of the outcome of these processes through the adoption of conventions theory, with its analytic focus on “the underlying

systems of negotiation that configure modern economies” (Murdoch et al, 2000, page 113). According to conventions theory, a productive activity is a form of ‘collective action’ regulated by ‘conventions’, or “practices, routines, agreements and their associated informal and institutional forms which bind acts together through mutual expectations” (Salais and Storper, 1992, page 174). Different production networks assemble and combine different conventions and ‘qualities’ to create apparently stable “worlds of justification” (Kirwan, 2006, page 303). In the context of agrifood, four main types of quality conventions (and associated ‘worlds of justification’) have been given analytical prominence (Morgan et al, 2006; Murdoch et al, 2000; Renard, 2003):

- commercial or *market conventions*, which define quality through market laws— or, in simple terms, through the price mechanism;
- *domestic conventions*, which are largely based on trust, face-to-face relations, attachment to place, and traditional methods of production;
- *industrial conventions*, which evaluate goods and products on the basis of their efficiency and reliability and rest on standards and objectified rules;
- *civic conventions*, which respond to a set of collective principles and involve goods and products that have general societal benefits.

Although it is useful to classify and distinguish different kinds of food systems, conventions theory has two main analytical limitations. First, as some critics have argued, it is too production focused and does not take into adequate account the role of consumers “as active, relational partners in the transformation of agro-food practices” (Goodman, 2003, page 6; see also Straete and Marsden, 2006). As Barham indicates (2002, page 357), there is a need to more actively incorporate the consumer perspective into the theorization of production organization (see also Kirwan, 2006, page 304). Second, and perhaps more crucial, conventions theory is contingent, useful to capture the functioning of different worlds of food, but limited in its ability to account for the operation of power in the process of qualification (Harvey et al, 2004b, page 196; Wilkinson, 2006, page 25). Power relations are not a minor aspect of the dynamics of qualification. At a time in which quality definitions seem to be increasingly determining access to, and exclusion from, the food market (Renard, 2005), the qualification process often entails a competition amongst actors for the authority to define the particular character of food quality. As Hatanaka et al (2006, page 45) argue, “many consumers are demanding higher-quality foods, retailers are increasingly competing on quality, some suppliers are gaining market advantages through producing quality products, and many NGOs are trying to bring quality into food and agricultural practices.” In this context, quality becomes a site of conflict and negotiation, the object of competing discourses through which powerful actors in the food chain can potentially appropriate and co-opt quality (Evans et al, 2002, page 319), as the example of the ‘conventionalization’ of organic farming in California shows (Guthman, 2004). The ongoing battle fought around different sociotechnical definitions of quality (Marsden, 2004) empowers or disempowers particular sets of supply chain actors—“a process that has ramifications both at the level of food production, where it can affect rural development, and at the level of food consumption, largely, but not exclusively, in the urban realm” (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006, page 194).

There is, then, a need to refine our understanding of quality through research that captures and explains the process of qualification—or, as Harvey et al (2004b, pages 206–207) define it, “the changing relationships between market and non-market spheres, the breakages, the linkages and the shifting boundaries between production and consumption”. Such dynamics, as this paper will show, do not necessarily involve just food producers or its consumers. In an era of growing ‘moral panic’ around food, health, and obesity (Morgan and Sonnino, 2007), the public sector is becoming an

increasingly powerful actor in the definition and assemblage of quality conventions. A new type of power and a different interpretation of quality are emerging here. In contrast with prevailing theorizations in the agrifood literature, the power of the public sector is not the outcome of a struggle to gain control over the market. In democratic systems, public authorities have a *unique mandate*: to promote the public good along clear lines of accountability to the population (Meadowcroft, 2007). Economically, the public sector also has a *unique advantage*: it is in complete control of the public procurement market, a sector that in the EU represents 16% of the total GDP (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008). In this context, power takes the form of a peculiar, unique capacity to design socioeconomic systems that address and embody concerns over sustainable development—an internationally recognized goal that governments today are expected to pursue (Meadowcroft, 2007). As the analysis of the school meal revolution in Rome will attempt to show, in this case public institutions do not necessarily rely upon “rather unproblematic definitions of quality as something which can be measured, regulated and attached to localities through certificatory and legislative measures” (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000, page 230). In contrast with the too simplistic scholarly use of ‘quality’ as an umbrella term that describes a range of different dynamics at work in the agrifood sector, in Rome policy makers and procurement officers have adopted a holistic approach to quality. Over time, this has created innovative and important connections between consumers and producers, between the global and the local, and between conventional and alternative food systems. As it will be argued in the conclusions, this public-sector-driven and governed ‘economy of quality’ has a crucial role to play in achieving a balance among social justice, economic development, and environmental conservation—the three fundamental pillars of sustainable development (see Carter, 2007; Meadowcroft, 2007).⁽²⁾

Negotiating food quality: the school meal revolution in Rome

Sustainable forms of public food procurement have quite a long history in Italy, where a number of municipalities began introducing organic products in their public canteens as early as the mid-1980s (Morgan and Sonnino, 2007; 2008). For larger urban centres, however, the qualification of public procurement policies began only in the late 1990s, when the national production of organic food products started to increase and the Italian government issued two important pieces of legislation on public food procurement. On the one hand, DPR 128/1999, which transposed into national legislation the EU directives on the marketing of foods for infants and children, established that “special attention must be paid to the conservation, freshness and absence of harmful substances in the ingredients utilized.” On the other hand, Finance Law 488/1999 explicitly encouraged public institutions that manage school and hospital canteens to “provide in the daily diet the use of organic, typical and traditional products as well as those from denominated areas, taking into account the guidelines and other recommendations of the National Institute of Nutrition” (Soil Association, 2003, page 65).

For the City of Rome, organic catering was an ideal strategy to achieve the paramount goal that public authorities associate with the school meals system: guaranteeing and protecting children’s health. Indeed, as the procurement team explained, the lack of pesticide residues makes organic food especially safe for children. However, for a

⁽²⁾ Although a thorough discussion of the concept of sustainable development goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to point out that the analysis in this paper is based on a normative view of the concept that, as Meadowcroft (2007) explains, sees sustainable development as a point of reference for policy making, rather than as an operational rule. In this view, sustainable development is about sustaining societal advance through the achievement of an appropriate balance amongst the environment, economy, and society.

city that feeds 140 000 school children every day for 190 days a year, the organic conversion raised peculiar challenges. As Silvana Sari, the Director of the Education Department in charge of school meals, explained:

“We were the largest contractor in Italy, 40% of all public school meals were catered in Rome ... and we knew that our demand could have raised the prices of organic products in an uncontrollable way.”

Determined to start what was officially called a ‘quality revolution’ in the school meals system, Rome chose a progressive and creative food procurement approach. On the production side, representatives from the organic certification bodies were asked to identify the products ready to sustain the economic impacts of Rome’s massive demand; on the consumption side, nutritionists were consulted to find out which organic products are mostly beneficial to children’s health. At both ends of the food chain, Rome received the same response: fruit and vegetables needed to be prioritized in the call for tender.

Rome’s authorities decided that the implementation of the quality revolution also required a redefinition of power relations through an upheaval in the city’s procurement policy and tendering procedures. In the previous ten years, Rome had adopted a ‘negotiated procedure’ approach through which a small number of catering companies were invited to bid for the eight territorial lots in which the city had been subdivided. Under this system, Sari pointed out, the school meal system became characterized by “very high prices, no rules, basically no organic products ... and no control over the number of staff needed to guarantee a quality service.” At the onset of the reform, Rome decided to adopt an ‘open procedure’ system that allows any catering company to respond to the call for tender. At the same time, to break the consolidated linkages that had developed amongst the catering companies under the old system and to reallocate power to the central department, the city redivided its territory into eleven lots.

In contrast with conventional assumptions about the high costs of quality food, for Rome’s authorities ‘quality’ and ‘price’ are not irreconcilable goals. As Sari stated:

“If a public administration knows what it wants and clearly identifies the various components that make quality ... it can easily pre-determine everything and it can foster a competition based on the maximum rebate.”

As in other European countries, the contracts were awarded on the basis of the “economically most advantageous tender”. However, in contrast, for example, with the UK (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008), this principle was not interpreted in terms of cost reduction. Quite the contrary, Rome also took into consideration the socioenvironmental externalities of the service in its evaluation of the bids submitted. Specifically, the 2002–04 tender identified a number of essential criteria to guarantee the basic quality of the service. For instance, catering companies were required to provide fresh organic fruit and vegetables during the first year of contract and to add organic legumes, bread, baked products, pasta, rice, eggs, and canned tomatoes during the second year. An exception was made for vegetables with a short harvesting season, such as peas, green beans, and spinach, which could be supplied frozen. In addition, the tender introduced a set of very innovative award criteria that aimed to stimulate bidders to further develop the socioenvironmental quality of the products and services offered. Contracts were awarded on a 100-point award system in which the price proposed accounted for 51 points. Another 30 points rewarded the organization of the service (that is, the number of staff and working hours offered by the catering companies, the environmental certifications they held, and the environmental friendliness of the transportation system they had organized). Fifteen points were awarded for ‘projects, interventions, and services’ proposed to promote food education amongst

the users of the service⁽³⁾ and to reduce noise in selected school canteens. Finally, 4 points were allocated to catering companies capable of offering additional organic, PDO, and PGI food products⁽⁴⁾—beyond what the tender required. By “leaving to the market itself the opportunity to respond”, Sari stated, Rome unexpectedly managed to also bring to the children’s table organic olive oil, mozzarella, yoghurt, veal, pork, turkey, and ham (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008).

A “Roman model, based on food security and quality and on the idea that the meal consumed at school is an educational experience”, as Sari described it, began to emerge, but not without difficulties. On the production side, catering companies had been struggling for years to respond to the national demand for organic food in the public canteens. The director of one catering company explained:

“When we started dealing with organic products in the late 1990s, before Finance Law, there were periods of the year in which some products were not available or you had to go back to the source to get them, which implied paying also for the higher transportation costs. These difficulties and costly activities were not rewarded by the local authorities.”

The new demand from Rome further complicated this scenario. Another caterer said: “Today we are asked [by Rome] to provide not the dish of the day, but a level of quality that is good and that remains consistent. So we cannot plan our activities on a daily basis, you can’t do that when you deal with these numbers.”

Faced with all the economic and logistical difficulties that supplying such a large market involved, the contracted companies requested and obtained a dialogue with Rome’s procurement officers. A permanent table was created to allow public institutions, producers, and suppliers to meet on a regular basis to discuss problems, to do the necessary planning, and, perhaps most important, to foster “a shared willingness of going in a certain direction”, as the director of one catering company explained. At the same time, however, Rome made an effort to maintain control over its power relations with the suppliers through the development of a very stringent control and monitoring system. All contracted companies were required to obtain the ISO 9001 quality certification,⁽⁵⁾ to develop an HACCP plan,⁽⁶⁾ and to produce a handbook of good hygienic practice specifying all the rules adopted with regard to the hygiene of staff, equipment and premises. In terms of control, it was established that contractor’s compliance with the guidelines specified by the city could be verified by a number of different bodies. The Municipi (or districts) into which Rome is divided manage the contracts and the relationships with the contracted companies. Through their dieticians, they monitor the service and apply sanctions and fines in case of misconduct. The central Education Department supports and advises the Municipi but can also perform autonomous inspections through its dieticians. There is also a specialized contracted company that verifies the quality and hygiene of the food (through chemical, physical, and

⁽³⁾ As specified in the tender, contracted companies are expected to organize training courses for teachers and informational campaigns for children and parents around six main themes: ‘quality’ and the main features of the tender; food and lifestyle; the sociopsychological aspects of food; food and multiculturalism; children and food choices; improving children’s food habits.

⁽⁴⁾ On the basis of a European legislation introduced in 1993, a Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) product has been produced, processed, and prepared within a certain geographical area that is exclusively linked to the quality and characteristics of that product. A Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) product has been produced, processed, and prepared within a certain geographical area that attributes to the product its characteristics.

⁽⁵⁾ This is the internationally recognized standard for the quality management of businesses. It applies to the processes that create and control the products and services supplied by an organization.

⁽⁶⁾ The Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points is a food safety methodology that relies upon the identification of ‘critical control points’ in food production and preparation processes.

microbiological analyses), the hygienic and cleaning procedures utilized in the premises, the management of the service, the compliance with the menus designed by the city, the certification of organic products, the maintenance of the equipment and machinery, and the implementation of the HACCP. In addition, local health authorities can inspect the schools, which are also individually controlled by the so-called ‘Canteen Commissions’, a governance mechanism that facilitates consumers’ involvement in the school meals system. Formed by at least two parents and present in every school, the Canteen Commissions assess the compliance with the menus, the expiration dates of the food products utilized, and the hygienic conditions of the premises (Comune di Roma, 2004, pages 23–27). Most importantly, they fill out checklists to provide feedback to the central department about children’s reaction to the food served in the schools.

Through the operation of the Canteen Commissions, children have become active participants in the school food reform. For example, during the first stage of the quality revolution the central department learned through the Canteen Commissions that children found the organic meat served in the schools too tough. As a result, procurement officers decided to request PGI, rather than organic, meat in the following tender. The Canteen Commissions also turned out to be a fundamental tool for city authorities to explain to parents the meaning and purpose of their quality revolution. This was especially important at the onset of the reform, when Rome had to face consumers’ distrust. As Maria Coscia, the Councillor for Education, recalled:

“Back then parents were sceptical because in Italy people were used to food products that looked good. Organic products are smaller and at times they look rotten ... so there was an initial lack of trust amongst consumers.”

In 2004 Rome entered the second stage of its school meal reform. Data provided by the National Institute for Research on Food had showed that, in the year 2000, 24% of Italian children under the age of ten were overweight and 11% were obese. It was at that point that Rome coined the slogan “all for quality” and integrated its original emphasis on issues of health and safety with a new focus on children’s eating habits (Comune di Roma, 2004). In fact, in addition to defining the modalities that catering companies had to adopt with regard to the conservation, handling, cooking, and distribution of the food, the 2004–07 tender also reduced the amount of animal protein contained in the school food; it specified the exact weight of all cooked food; it introduced healthy mid-morning snacks (fruit tarts, bananas, and bread rolls) for all school children; it diversified the meals on the basis of children’s age; and it redesigned the menus on the basis of four quality principles (Sonnino, 2007b):

- *Seasonality*. The menus, which have a summer and a winter version, are mostly based on the use of fresh ingredients.
- *Variety*. To ensure an adequate intake of all necessary nutrients and to introduce children to different foods, it was established that no dish is to be served more than once every five weeks.
- *Locality*. To support the national market and, at the same time, deal with children’s complaints about the toughness of organic meat, Rome prioritized certified meat products—a move that opened up a new market for Italian veal producers but also for Welsh lamb producers and French pork producers. In addition, it was established that the bread served in the schools must be baked and packaged within 6 hours and must be consumed no later than 12 hours after it has been packaged.
- *Nutritiousness*. On the basis of the guidelines provided by the Italian Institute of Nutrition, Rome established that the mid-morning snack must provide 8–10% of the daily nutritional intake, whereas lunch must guarantee 35% of the nutrients children need.

The tender also introduced new incentives to improve the social and environmental sustainability of Rome's school meals service. The list of mandatory organic products expanded considerably to include all the products that catering companies had offered as optional with the first tender. Again, companies able to offer additional organic products were awarded 4 points—an initiative that has added organic Parmigiano, mozzarella, and butter to Rome's school food and that has enabled the city to achieve a total of 70% organic supply in the schools. To reduce the potential for contamination of organic products and, at the same time, to develop short supply chains, Rome rewarded with another 4 points catering companies capable of supplying 'bio-dedicated' products—foods that are produced, processed, packaged, and distributed by firms that operate exclusively in the organic sector. To emphasize provenance and traceability, 9 points were allocated to bidders that offered PDO and PGI products. Finally, under the stated objective of "preventing situations in which the actions we perform to improve our quality of life threaten the quality of life of people in other areas of the world or that of future generations", the city also allocated 2 award points to encourage catering companies to source Fair Trade products. As the Councillor for Education explained:

"In the schools we organize many activities around the theme of solidarity with developing countries. [...] The meal is [...] an educational moment, it's not just a question of feeding the children, it's part of a broader project."

Today 280 000 Fair Trade bananas from Ecuador and 140 000 Fair Trade chocolate bars from the Dominican Republic are served every week in the Roman public schools—a figure that has increased the market for Fair Trade products by 20% in Italy (Massimiani, 2006, page 17). With regard to the service itself, Rome decided to reward initiatives proposed to improve the kitchens and the eating environment (17 points) and to employ a high number of staff as well as trained dieticians (5 points). Finally, the last 8 points available were allocated to projects proposed to educate parents and teachers on food issues.

The food system that Rome is creating is in many ways blurring the boundaries between the conventional and alternative food sectors. In fact, on the Roman school children's plates, organic, bio-dedicated, and certified foods coexist with more conventional products. This is not necessarily a harmonious coexistence. Indeed, there are tensions and internal contradictions that are posing a threat to the sustainability of the emerging food system. For example, food safety and hygiene requirements are forcing contracted companies to rely exclusively on large providers. As one representative explained:

"The critical point in the food chain concerns self-control, the application of the HACCP. Large companies always have labs that perform micro-biological and chemical analyses on the products they purchase and then sell to us. ... It is difficult to conserve the artisanal dimension in all of this."

Artisanal productions cannot reach the capacity needed to supply a large urban system:

"The artisanal producer cannot provide a standardized product in this kind of volume. With artisanal producers you can reach high levels of excellence, but there is a total lack of standardization. ... Conventional products in Italy have an average qualitative standard that is not simply acceptable; it is good, and it complies with the standards established by the tender. ... With bio-dedicated, Fair Trade and PDO and PGI products there are problems, in the sense that it is a brand new market that only exists in Rome and in a few other places. The supply does not meet the demand."

There are also weaknesses in terms of environmental sustainability. For example, some products leave the Roman countryside, where they are produced, to reach national

food platforms that are located elsewhere in Italy, and then come back to Rome. For the catering companies, these food miles are unavoidable:

“It is certainly a waste of energy, but this is the only way to achieve the kind of volumes we need to supply Rome.”

In addition, producers and caterers have been facing financial difficulties that pose another type of threat to the sustainability of the system. In commenting on the price of €4.23 per meal that the city paid to the contracted companies until early 2007, one director said:

“We have been lucky to be able to accompany them along this path of qualification, of specialization ... but catering companies have their own adjusting time, which is different from that of the public administration. ... If they don't raise the price, today's excellence can become tomorrow's weakness.”

For another caterer:

“They must understand that this guaranteed, verified and verifiable quality has a price. ... Without its size and its visibility on the market, Rome would have never achieved this level of quality at the price it pays.”

Once again, Rome decided to listen to its suppliers. As Sari explained:

“Through the whole process, we have created a new respect for the public customer. In the past, catering companies were in control. ... With the second tender ... competition has been accepted. The companies have realised that if they promise something ... they are expected to deliver. They have understood that the City of Rome is capable of managing the tender and wants to manage it. And they have given up on ideological and political attacks. ... At this point it is important that we listen because we have asked them to make an enormous financial effort.”

In March 2007 the city entered the third stage of its quality revolution. The new tender covers five, rather than three, years—a time span designed to allow producers and caterers to adjust to the new demands and to make new investments. The price paid to the contracted companies has been increased to €5.23 per meal. In exchange, contractors have been asked to develop further innovations. Once a month, they serve ethnic dishes to celebrate the increasing diversity of the Roman school population. Leftovers from school lunches are delivered to animal shelters, whereas unutilized foods are destined for charity associations. Incentives are provided for companies that source food from social cooperatives that employ former criminals or that work land confiscated from the mafia. In response to growing environmental problems, the providers of the school meal service are required to utilize only biodegradable plates, to develop recycling schemes, and to utilize detergents that have a low environmental impact (Maisto, 2007). Significantly, amongst the new award criteria identified by the city of Rome there is also ‘guaranteed freshness’, which rewards the utilization of food products that have been harvested no earlier than three days before being served in the schools. To assess the freshness of the foods offered, Rome looks also at ‘food miles’—or, specifically, the number of kilometres and hours that separate harvesting and consumption.

This time, suppliers and catering companies seem to be ready for the new quality requirements. To quote again the director of one of the largest suppliers:

“Rome has a strong emphasis on quality ... in the widest sense of the term, starting from the quality of foodstuffs in terms of taste to the quality of foodstuff in terms of provenance. ... There has been a progressive evolution. ... And there is also a broader type of quality that concerns the service, so not just what is eaten but also how the food is prepared. And then there is an attention for the environment in which the meal takes place.”

After years of efforts and continuous improvements, Rome's qualification process has perhaps reached a stage of non-return: as Sari stated, “we have created so much

cultural awareness that everybody now accepts and understands that quality in Rome will never be sacrificed again”.

Unpacking the qualification process: an analysis of Rome’s public procurement approach

The process of qualification of the school meal service in Rome is guided by a procurement approach that has three main characteristics. First, it is an *inclusive* approach that actively involves both producers and consumers in the qualification process. In describing the ‘economy of qualities’, Callon et al (2002, page 212) argue that the functioning of this kind of economy “involves the establishment of forms of organization that facilitate the intensification of collaboration between supply and demand.” In Rome, city authorities are making a considerable effort to network with (and gain the support of) actors at both ends of the food chain. On the supply side, the establishment of a permanent round table where catering companies regularly meet with city authorities and procurement officers has created relationships of trust and mutual respect between the public and the private sector. It is mostly because of this trust and respect that caterers have managed to endure, during the early years of the reform, the difficulties of entering a market that initially left them with a profit margin of just €0.13 per meal served in the schools. Quoting the example of a three-month ‘moratorium’ that the city granted to the providers of the service to allow them the time to organize themselves, the director of one of the contracted companies stated:

“[city authorities] have been tolerant, and the catering companies have been responding to this positively. We feel they understand us.”

At the same time, consumers have also been included in the process of qualification of the service in two fundamental ways. In general, children and teachers are targeted by food education initiatives, organized by caterers, which aim to share with the users of the service all main aspects of Rome’s school meal revolution—from its technicalities to the values that underlie it. Parents, on their part, are given access to the system through the operation of the Canteen Commissions, which, as explained above, play a role in the monitoring and control of the school meal system and provide an important feedback mechanism. More specifically, Rome’s inclusive approach manifests itself also through the action taken to incorporate in the system children with different socio-economic and ethnic background. In fact, the city has made the school meal service free for families that have an income of less than €5164 per year, whereas families with an income of less than €12911 per year are entitled to a 25% discount on the monthly fee. In addition, since the very beginning of the qualification process Rome has designed special menus that guarantee access to a nutritious and healthy diet also to the roughly 4500 school children who have specific religious or health requirements. More recently, as mentioned earlier, the process of social inclusion has been further broadened through the introduction of ethnic dishes designed to celebrate the increasing diversity of Rome’s school population and to use food as a means to promote the value of solidarity (Maisto, 2007).

Second, Rome’s approach to the qualification process is a *dynamic* approach that constantly renegotiates, and progressively revises, the notion of quality. At the onset of the reform, city authorities were especially concerned with children’s health and food safety. In this context, organic and bio-dedicated products were prioritized because of the absence of pesticide residues. Confronted with the inadequacy of a market that had not yet reached the size necessary to provide 27 million school meals per year, Rome decided, on the one hand, to adopt an incremental approach to the organic conversion of the school meals system and, on the other hand, to broaden its interpretation of quality through an emphasis not just on the ‘naturalness’ of the products offered, but also on their provenance. When asked to explain the city’s decision to switch from

organic to PGI meat, for example, the head of procurement not only referred to children's reaction to the toughness of organic meat and to health reasons (specifically, the higher nutritional value provided by certified animal breeds), but also pointed out that, given the scarcity of PGI-certified meats in Europe, the decision was made to create new opportunities for local meat producers. In this sense, Rome's emphasis on provenance becomes also a relocalization strategy, a mechanism used to promote local economic development and environmental protection, as implied also by the new requirement of 'guaranteed freshness'. At the same time, however, in Rome provenance is also seen as a tool to open up new opportunities for local producers in other areas of the world; through its demand for Fair Trade products, the city promotes the values of social justice and solidarity beyond its most immediate boundaries.

Third, and partly as a result of all of this, Rome adopts an *integrated* procurement approach, capable of reconciling different, when not conflicting, quality conventions. The four 'worlds of justification' most commonly discussed in the agrifood literature coexist in the Roman school meals system in no particular 'order of worth'. Through their integration, city authorities are attempting to reconcile economic development, social improvement, and environmental conservation—in a few words, to promote sustainable development. Specifically, *market conventions* guided at least two fundamental decisions made at the beginning of the qualification process: the identification of the price proposed as the single most important criterion for the awarding of the contracts; and the radical changes introduced in the tendering procedures, with the shift to a system that opened up the competition to all suppliers interested in participating—a move that has proven crucial to stimulate the organic market. Issues of standardization and reliability, which lie at the core of *industrial conventions*, are emphasized through expectations in terms of environmental certifications that all contracted companies must possess and through standardized quality controls across the food chain. At the same time, the massive demand coming from such a large city inevitably implies a more general standardization of the quality of the foodstuff itself, which practically means an emphasis on conventional products (the kind of products that can be continuously monitored and easily controlled) at the expense of artisanal techniques of production. In this regard, the analysis of Rome's qualification process may prove, as Hatanaka et al (2006) argue, that the production and maintenance of quality in the food sector require both standardization and differentiation. As we have seen, differentiation is in fact also promoted in Rome through a progressive demand for local (that is, bio-dedicated and certified) products. Combined with the development of menus and of educational initiatives revolving around the values of food territoriality, such demand embeds in the Roman school meal system the *domestic conventions* of attachment to place and to traditional production methods. Finally, through the introduction of Fair Trade products and of ethnic dishes, domestic conventions become inextricably linked with *civic conventions* that extol the sociocultural meanings of food and its potential to foster social justice and solidarity across space.

Some final thoughts: towards an economy of quality?

The Roman school meal system has not emerged in a political vacuum. Quite the contrary: it has been shaped and supported by a governance philosophy that emphasizes the inextricability of economic development and social cohesion. In the words of Walter Veltroni, Mayor of Rome until early 2008 (2006, page 144):

"There is no real development without social quality. ... If there is a Roman model, if many people today are talking in those terms about our experience, it is because everything we do aims to keep together economic growth and social cohesion and because at the foundation of every choice we make there is always a way of

working, of collaborating, of ‘concerting’, of proceeding together: the municipality, the city council, and, with them, the business world, the trade associations, the social forces and the various subjects of the civil society.”

In this perspective, school meals are assigned a role that goes well beyond the commercialized view of the service that prevails in countries like the UK (Morgan, 2006) or the United States (Allen and Guthman, 2006). As Rome’s Councillor for Education stated, the meals children consume at school are conceived of as an integral part of the wider role of the school as “a place that promotes cultural, healthy and solidarity values that are important for the well being of the entire community”.

In this context, public procurement policies redefine the relationship between power and food quality. Food chain actors usually compete with one another to control the ecological, ethical, or historic relationship between a food product and a specific context of production. Since, as the literature makes clear, these relationships are largely responsible for the attribution of quality characteristics to food, gaining the power to control them is a crucial mechanism to succeed in the food market.

The public sector does not need to engage in this type of competition with other actors. Procurement policies and funding provide public authorities with the political and economic power to *create* top-down food systems in which, as the case of Rome demonstrates, the meaning of quality extends beyond the relationship between food products and their production context. Driven by a governance philosophy that emphasizes social inclusion and explicitly sees school meals as a tool to improve the well-being of the larger community, public authorities in Rome are also including in the qualification process the less visible aspects of the food system—transport, labour, waste. In short, what is emerging through the city’s reform of the school meal system is an ‘economy of quality’ in which the economic relationships between producers and consumers are socially and environmentally embedded. In various ways, this economy of quality is attempting to reconcile economic development with social justice and environmental stewardship—that is, to achieve sustainable development. From a social perspective, through its Fair Trade sourcing policy, the city is contributing to a redressing of unequal transnational labour relations. At the same time, labour is also qualified at home through measures that specify the number of staff that contracted companies must employ to guarantee a quality service while also rewarding them for employing additional staff (including skilled labour). Furthermore, by making the meals affordable and, simultaneously, differentiated in their composition, Rome is providing access to the service to *all* consumers, regardless of their socioeconomic and ethnic background. Finally, as mentioned above, the city’s procurement policy is currently bringing into the system charity associations and social cooperatives—the most vulnerable segments of the city’s population. As for the goal of environmental stewardship, over the course of its quality revolution, Rome has encouraged catering companies to shorten the supply chain; to source foods that have been produced through low-impact methods; to reduce noise in the school canteens; to acquire environmental certifications; to develop recycling schemes; and to utilize environmentally friendly detergents and biodegradable plates.

It is important to highlight that this economy of quality is not a perfectly sustainable system. As previously noted, Rome has not yet managed to reduce food miles, to include small, artisanal producers in its school food market, and to make the system financially secure for its suppliers. Moreover, it is too early to assess the *concrete* impacts of Rome’s economy of quality in achieving the objectives of sustainable development. However, this case study highlights, at the very least, the potential of the public sector in mobilizing support for sustainable development across the food system. By complementing their market interventions with food education and with the

development of an ongoing dialogue with actors at both ends of the food chain, Roman authorities are reconnecting producers and consumers through a new “sense of mutual endeavour, or perhaps even commitment, to support a production–consumption space that is more human-centred and related to a sense of morality” (Kirwan, 2006, page 310). As DeLind has recently argued with reference to local food systems, “without an emotional, a spiritual, and a physical glue to create loyalty, not to a product, but to layered sets of embodied relationships, local will have no holding power” (2006, page 126). If, as DeLind concludes, new ways of thinking and feeling about quality food are crucial to protect these alternative systems from “the reductionist rationality of the marketplace”, initiatives like the one implemented in Rome assume special relevance, both theoretically and practically. In theory, they are raising the need for studies that take into account the rise of the public sector as a new actor on the agrifood scene—one that, as this case study shows, has the power to integrate different quality conventions and reshape the spatial, economic, environmental, and socio-cultural relationships between producers and consumers. In practice, this case study highlights the potential of political action, even at such a large scale, in developing food systems that are governed through the creation of a *collective* commitment to a sustainable future of economic development, environmental stewardship, and social justice.

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