

Best practice in Organic Public Procurement: The case of Denmark

A successful business case for organic public procurement. With useful lessons for other nations.



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The conversion to organic food in Danish public kitchens started in childcare centers and schools. Now it covers all types of public institutions, from hospitals, senior homes and city halls to ministry canteens, military barracks, and prisons. Research indicates that successful transition to organic, healthier and climate friendly meals can be achieved without higher operating costs through a combination of policy, capacity building in organic NGOs, value chain collaboration and active engagement of kitchen staff.



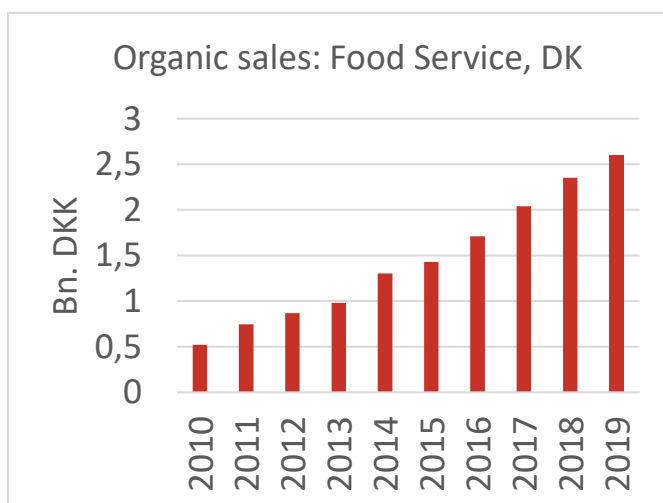
After successful organic conversions in pioneer institutions and cities in the 90s and 00s, a key turning point came in 2012 when the Danish government launched a new organic public procurement strategyⁱ. The goal was to create better public meals, reduce climate emissions and increase the organic farming area, with its proven benefits for biodiversity, environment and avoiding pesticides in food and drinking water.

The Danish Model is a strong example of positive interplay between ambitious and transformative government policy frameworks, on the one hand, and the simultaneous mobilization of the food sector and NGOs on the other. A model research deems highly transferable to other countriesⁱⁱ. Critical to success was the **combination** of 4 public policy initiatives (procurement goals, financing, labeling and NGO capacity building) and 3 organic sector initiatives (supply chain collaboration, organic schools for food service and education for kitchen workers). This created collective motivation and **critical mass** in green transformation in public kitchens. Efforts were expanded in a new organic action plan in 2015ⁱⁱⁱ pushing total conversion to 30 percent in 2020^{iv} where new financing was allocated (2021-24) to drive conversion towards 60 percent.

This fact sheet describes the business case for organic public procurement, and key policy tools and lessons.

Strong Business Case for Organic Public Procurement

The Danish Model has changed the food that cities buy, and the way meals are made. Most striking for many officials and kitchen leaders, is that the conversion to 60 and even 90 percent organic has been achieved within the same operating budgets. The organic price premium, was covered by reducing waste, buying seasonal foods, and converting to a more plant-rich diet, with less meat. While the conversion itself required a public investment in the short term (for planning and education), *the result of this holistic approach to sustainable conversion, is a diet and kitchen practices that give **healthier, more climate friendly and organic meals with no increase in operating budgets.***



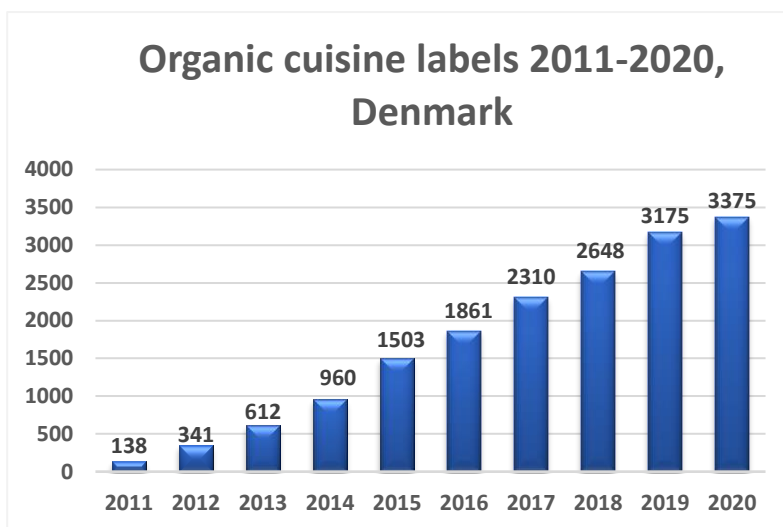
Public kitchens—a motor for organic sales, and more organic farmland

Organic public procurement has increased organic sales and been an important catalyst for organic sales in private food service—restaurants, hotels, catering, and canteens serving private employers. This has resulted in a **five-fold increase in organic sales in the food service sector over a ten-year period**^v. This market signal, and value chain collaboration on sourcing of organic products in Denmark, has been a significant contributing factor to the **70 percent increase in organic farm area in this same period** (2011-2019).

Catalyst for organic conversion in private food service

Food Service companies, that geared their businesses to supply public kitchens, brought these new values, supply chains and competencies to their customers in Denmark's restaurants, hotels, cafés, and catering sector. By 2018 total sales in private food service matched organic sales to public kitchens and today organic growth rates in private food service exceed sales in public kitchens^{vi}.

The conversion to organic, healthier and more climate friendly meals in the private sector kitchens multiply public benefits from public procurement policy, achieving national goals for climate, health, environment, and more organic farmland.



Active organic policy, and positive influence on private food service, has rapidly expanded uptake for the national **Organic Cuisine Labels**, for 30, 60 and 90 percent organic. Today, over 3300 kitchens have organic labels.

Less waste and fewer climate emissions in kitchens-- and in the food system

Studies commissioned by the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration showed that under organic conversion, kitchens reduced waste in food production by 88 percent and by 26-50 percent in serving and plate waste^{vii}. This has both climate and economic benefits. Danish and international studies have also documented how shifts from animal-based to plant-based food can reduce CO₂ emissions and ingredient costs, allowing purchase of higher quality organic ingredients and more labor for better food preparation^{viii}.

Organic conversion and documentation in the public kitchens, and the organic cuisine labels, also provide a platform for use of digitalization in the measurement of CO₂ emissions from food purchasing and food waste. New knowledge and positive experience with more plant rich meals in public kitchens is also expected to have positive spillover effects on Danes eating at home, adding to health and climate benefits.

Saving on health costs

While the benefits of organic farming and food for lower pesticide residues in food and drinking water, and less use of antibiotics and food additives are better documented, studies also indicate that organic public procurement drives conversion to healthier diets^{ix}. In a new report (2021) the Department of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Copenhagen has now estimated^x the **economic benefits**, including savings on health care costs, where meals are aligned with the Danish Dietary Guidelines for health and climate—precisely the diet that danish organic public kitchens have spearheaded. The Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries declared **significant socio-economic benefits for the nation** from this shift, including reduced risk of serious health problems such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and cancer^{xi}.

Research estimates the benefits of meal conversion at 1,6 bn euros annually^{xii}. Or 300 euros per person, per year, based on average, realistic adoption of new habits. Full adoption of the diet would save 5 bn euros per year. Based on percentages of meals consumed in public kitchens, and annual investments of about 2,7 million euros in meal conversion, a rough estimate is that for every euro invested as a **one time** investment in public sector kitchens, there would be a savings on health costs alone of 35 euros **annually**. To this can be added savings on replacement of contaminated drinking water wells costing ½ to 1 million euros each.

Greater pride and job satisfaction—and fewer sick days-- among public kitchen workers



Research shows that conversion to healthier, organic and climate-friendly meals has created new pride, prestige and dedication to sustainability among kitchen staff^{xiii}. 73 percent of kitchen leaders work for more organics. Workers show new competencies, fewer sick days and a 54 percent increase in job satisfaction^{xiv}.

Economic benefits from mobilization of private sector resources

Research also indicates that policy for organic public procurement has mobilized significant *private sector resources*, both for-profit and non-profit, towards national goals for healthier, organic, and climate friendly public meals^{xv}. This reduces costs and ensures greater effect from public investments in organic policy.

Lessons from Denmark: Key policy tools

1. Clear national and municipal goals.

The national government goal (2011) of 60 percent organic in all public kitchens served as a strong motivation for government leaders at all levels, and for both kitchen leadership and the food service industry. A source of inspiration was Copenhagen which at that time already had surpassed 60 percent. Copenhagen is now at 90 percent organic, and the last public tender had 100 percent organic procurement.

2. Financing for education in the kitchens

The national government created a pool of 4 million euros per year to finance conversion planning and education in the public kitchens. This was highly motivating and within 3 years, 30 percent of municipalities were completing conversion projects. Education was needed because the shift was not just a replacement of conventional food with organic, but a complete change in purchasing, food preparation, meal planning and waste reduction. Support from trade unions and NGOs ensured financing for education in 2021 budget.

3. National label for organic cuisine.

A key ingredient, for both documentation and motivation is the danish Organic Cuisine labels in gold, silver and bronze, representing 90, 60 and 30 percent organic. This recognition of high-performance kitchens is a point of pride and highly motivating for workers and for leaders interested in branding.



The Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries is responsible for the label and annual inspection. The model has now been adopted in Norway and Germany.

4. Support for Capacity Building in the organic sector NGO and the ministry

Capacity building in the organic sector was financed by the public Fund for Organic Agriculture. This allowed Organic Denmark to mobilize the organic value chain and collaborate intensively with the food service industry, trade unions representing kitchen workers and other stakeholders. It also allowed The Copenhagen House of Food and others to drive conversion and education. Research indicates that this combination of policy, collaboration, pooling of expertise and building ministry and NGO capacities for implementation created the basis for success^{xvi}.

Lessons from Denmark: NGO and supply chain mobilization

1. Broad stakeholder involvement and mobilization.

To promote the new organic goals and funding, the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration teamed up with Organic Denmark, the organization for organic farmers, food companies, consumers, and food professionals. They organized a campaign and a nationwide tour targeting local and regional government, trade union leaders and kitchen managers. The meetings demonstrated best practice in organic kitchens, debunked myths, and showed how organic price premiums could be covered within budget. Matchmaking sessions brought officials together with “conversion advisors”, such as the Copenhagen House of Food, who brought years of experience

in citywide conversions, from baseline data gathering, to motivational hands-on education for workers on the ground. These close collaborations proved crucial to policy success^{xvii}.

2. Organic Schools for the food service industry

To motivate the food service industry, Organic Denmark created “Organic Schools” to educate frontline salespeople on “the why” of organics, bringing them out onto organic farms to see the benefits for animals, nature and environment. They became strong catalysts for organic sales to the public and private sector.

3. Deep focus on training and motivating food professionals as motors for change.

The organic shift involved *significant* changes in meal plans and preparation, including deep reductions in waste, less meat and less pre-prepared or frozen food. This required new skills and a real buy-in from kitchen staff and managers. Copenhagen launched the Copenhagen House of Food specifically to train, guide and motivate kitchen staff transitioning to “healthy, happy and sustainable food”. New food culture required new ways of thinking^{xviii}. NGOs and the ministry make a point of celebrating kitchen staff, raising banners on city squares, and holding festive celebrations awarding organic labels in gold, silver and bronze.

Central barriers addressed or removed

1. Uncertainty regarding legality of new public procurement policies

Local, regional and national government procurement managers were concerned that organic purchasing criteria would violate EU rules. To alleviate this concern, and promote tenders with strong focus on organics, a mobile public procurement team assisted procurement managers at all levels^{xix}. Best practice from Copenhagen was also disseminated, and a new national network for public procurement managers has been launched. The result: municipal tenders including organic goals and paving the way for organics.

2. Fears in the kitchens regarding inspection costs, bureaucracy and resistance from diners.

Another barrier was fears of costly and bureaucratic paperwork in the kitchens. This was addressed by a national waiver of all fees for inspection for the Organic Cuisine Label; and a collaboration between Organic Denmark, authorities and Food Service Companies, providing kitchens with the organic-calculations, necessary for the organic label. Communication gave diners insight into the benefits of organics and plant-rich meals, even creating support in military barracks where some resistance was originally experienced^{xx}.



This combination of effective holistic policy, NGO capacity building and multi-stakeholder mobilization, was highlighted in the 2018 [Future Policy Award](#) from FAO, World Future Council and IFOAM Organics International. The world’s most climate-ambitious cities in C40 adopted the Danish Model for organic and climate friendly food in their declaration and the Mayors Climate Summit (2019): [Good Food Cities: Achieving a Planetary Health Diet for All](#). Additional information: Organic Denmark www.organicdenmark.com, Holmbeck EcoConsult, www.paulholmbeck.com and the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration <https://www.oekologisk-spisemaerke.dk/horeca-en>.

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