ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the project was to provide a critical assessment of the scope for, and the limits to, sustainable school meals in Italy and the UK (and the US following an extension from ESRC). To achieve this aim we identified three research objectives:
(1) to understand the recently reformed EU regulatory regime for public procurement;
(2) to explain national diversity in the single market; and
(3) to analyse the creative procurement of school meals in seven case study areas – Rome and Piombino (Italy); London and South Gloucestershire (England); Carmarthenshire (Wales); East Ayrshire (Scotland); and New York City (US).

Main Research Results

(1) Regulatory regime. The reform of public procurement facilitates ‘greener’ policies by giving parity of esteem to competitive and sustainability criteria. This proved that the perceived regulatory barriers to local food procurement in the EU are more apparent than real.

(2) National diversity in the single market. The national interplay between culture and politics is the main reason as to why member states interpret/implement EU regulations differently. In the UK the transition to a more sustainable catering service is stymied by the fact that school caterers are expected to deliver a welfare service while they are still treated as a commercial service. In Italy, by contrast, the school meals service was never commercialized; consequently, a broader and more sustainable model of “best value” was developed and codified in national legislation.

(3) Creative procurement in practice. Our research areas emphasised different dimensions of sustainability in the design of their school meal systems. Therefore, they faced different constraints to the realisation of their vision, which were overcome in different ways:

- to overcome the problem of legal uncertainty as to what could be done under the new regulations, local authorities developed more creative tendering procedures
- to address problems associated with a consumer culture that does not adequately value healthful food, local authorities resorted to choice control and sought to involve consumers in the reform through the adoption of a whole school approach
- to overcome the obstacle of a low-cost catering culture that favours “cheap food” options, local authorities have embedded school food reform into wider strategies for sustainability and community wellbeing.

The links between producers, caterers and consumers are far more complex than we originally assumed. In addition to focusing on the provenance of food, caterers also consider the effects of the agri-food cycle on health and the environment, thereby
designing a new “ethical foodscape” that transcends spatial fetishism.

To help quality producers to overcome the challenges (e.g. seasonality of the market, low profit margins, etc.) associated with the school food market, caterers utilize both formal and informal mechanisms that foster new trust-based supply-chain relationships and a shared commitment to sustainable development.

Contrary to our expectations, consumers did not initiate school food reform. Rather, sustainable school meal systems emerged from the actions of highly-committed caterers, politically supported by their Council. Theoretically, this highlights the role of local governments in “greening the State”, a process whereby localities become laboratories of sustainable development.

Local authorities in our case study areas do not expect consumers to take on the full costs of quality food, which are partly covered through public subsidies. However, the active involvement of consumers is considered crucial to sustaining the reform process. To ensure that the landscape and mindscapes of the school are mutually reinforcing, local authorities adopt a whole school approach to healthy eating.

Aside from the whole school approach, there is a striking paucity of systemic mechanisms to include children in school food reform. In Italy and the US, this is compensated through a high level of parental involvement in the system, which is creating a synergy between children’s food habits at home and school. In the UK, where no formal mechanism is in place to involve parents, children are more willing to try new foods at school due to peer pressure, but this does not have a major effect on their food habits at home.

In conclusion, six key points can be distilled from this project:

- **The value of values.** Real “value for money” needs to be buttressed by a broader metric of sustainability that reflects a range of socio-cultural values, rather than a one-dimensional economic value
- **Power of purchase.** Creative procurement is easier to implement when there is a politically supportive milieu and where procurement officers have the competence and confidence to internalize health and environmental costs
- **Calibrating demand and supply.** Creative procurement can nurture new food systems that re-connect producers and consumers around contrasting quality conventions
- **Disseminating good practice.** More effective diffusion mechanisms of social learning are needed to ensure that good practice becomes the norm, rather than the exception
- **Spatial fetishism.** Theoretically, school food reform highlights the need to transcend the binary thinking that attaches benign attributes to the local scale and malign attributes to the global scale
- **Ethic of care.** Disquiet about food and health problems raises the need for a stronger public ethic of care to fashion new generations of knowledgeable food citizens.

**Academic achievements**
The researchers have published 1 book, 3 refereed journal articles and 3 book chapters; they have presented their findings at 6 international academic meetings; and have given 9 invited lectures (including Columbia University, Pisa University, Wageningen University...
Dissemination
The research has been widely disseminated through participation at 48 conferences in 13 countries (including the UN). The project has also received extensive international media coverage (including BBC, New York Times, London Times and Italian national television, radio and press). The BBC is planning a TV program on our book.

Impacts on policy and practice
The project has informed school food policy in: the UK (through advisory work with the Soil Association, WAG, East Ayrshire Council and LACA); Italy (through advisory work with the City of Rome); the US (through contact with the Community Food Security Coalition); and the UN (through contact with the Sustainable Development Commission and a pilot project sponsored by the WFP).