RURAL PUBLIC FOOD POLICIES AND STRATEGIES
CASE STUDIES FROM DENMARK, SWEDEN AND LITHUANIA
Rural Public Food Policies and Strategies - Case studies from Denmark, Sweden and Lithuania

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This report discusses regional and local food policies and strategies in selected rural areas and rural municipalities in Denmark, Sweden and Lithuania. The aim is to shed light on both the development and implementation of regional and local food policies and food strategies and whether these have an influence on food innovation and growth amongst local food producers.

Food policy and strategy as business policy

The report demonstrates that the examined regional and local food policies and food strategies in rural districts are characterised by their focus on the development and support of local food businesses. In other words, food policy is also food business policy, which is often also connected to tourism or export policy.

Food is of particular interest in rural areas because the majority of such areas are characterised by significant agricultural production, which means it is natural to develop that field through further local processing of the local raw materials.

Local food policies and strategies are used to counter urbanisation, which for many rural districts and rural municipalities means depopulation (especially the outmigration of highly educated people) and the loss of jobs, which has social and economic consequences.

Therefore, the aim of local food policies and strategies is often to create good local conditions for food companies in order to attract new food start-ups while ensuring that existing food companies remain in the local area and either maintain or innovate their production.

Thus, in essence, local food policies and strategies in rural districts are also business strategies. The rationale is that increased activity in the food sector will improve job opportunities, thereby attracting new settlers.

With this focus on developing local food businesses, rural food policy differs from urban food policies in a number of major cities such as Milan, Barcelona, Bristol or Toronto, which typically focus on meal policy in public institutions, often with social and environmental aims.

However, the report also emphasises that urban food policy can be inspired by what is happening in rural areas: Malmö, Skåne’s largest city, has added a food business aspect to their food policy in recent years. In concrete terms, the surveyed food companies highlighted the following strategic elements as being valuable for the development of their businesses:

- Advice to individual businesses based on the needs of the individual food company, e.g. product innovation, sustainability in connection with the climate and environment
- Courses and webinars for all local food producers
- Joint marketing of local products through, e.g. tourist brochures, magazines, national TV with information for consumers
- Markets with the opportunity to sell locally produced food
- Tours that take tourists to local producers and shops

Networks that help small producers in connection with public catering to the national goals. This means that national food policies have played a central role in developing and supporting regional and local food policies and strategies. Sweden has been successful in developing and implementing regional and local food policies and strategies. This report shows that the success can be ascribed to the following key activities: the involvement of stakeholders, the presence of political will to act in the food area, cooperation between the public and private sectors, partnership agreements and financial funding opportunities. The main goals for the national and regional food strategies are to increase food production and competences among food producers in order to maintain the competitiveness of the Swedish food sector and also to improve food security for Sweden as a whole.

Food policy and strategy as branding

The support and development of the local food industry is often linked with a marketing strategy: local food is marketed as being unique, comprising authentic products that are the result of local craftsmanship and the special nature and climate of the local area. The local aspect of food is not only used to brand the food products themselves, but also to brand the region/municipality.

In commercial terms, the marketing of the local food narrative is used to promote exports and it is also used in the tourism industry’s experience economy. In the regions and municipalities, locally produced food is used as an identity marker to make the local area stand out from other areas as being particularly attractive with strong and unique raw materials and food culture.

Food policy and strategy as sustainability

Locally produced food is often portrayed as being more sustainable than food that comes from the globalised food industry. In terms of the environment, the short transport distances and the innovative local food companies that are able to reduce food waste, for example, are highlighted. From a social perspective, the fact that local food can contribute to the pride and joy of living in an area that is capable of producing such unique products is emphasised.

Food policy and strategy as a process

In Denmark, the initiative to formulate local food policies and strategies in rural areas has usually been in response to one or more challenges faced by local actors, i.e. food businesses, the authorities and citizens, with local food production being seen as part of the solution. Therefore, the process of development and implementation has primarily been decentralised and separate from the national political context. This means that there has not been an overall framework of support and, therefore, in many ways, actors have had to explore and develop ideas for a local food policy and strategy. The food policy process has proceeded very differently in the surveyed municipalities. The study indicates that the progress of the local food strategy has often depended on the commitment of local people and their efforts in the area. Furthermore, the involvement of many actors and cooperation across organisations seems to give food policy more weight and make it more resilient.

The Swedish model for food strategies describes how the national and regional strategies are formed in parallel and simultaneous processes, how regions adapt to the national food strategy through regional strategies, and how municipalities adapt their own business development strategies and policies for public catering to the national goals. This means that national food policies have played a central role in developing and supporting regional and local food policies and strategies.
tion with its closeness to mainland Europe into account. The example of the region of Kalmar County illustrates the agility of a smaller region with less diversity, but with a significant food production to quickly develop a regional food policy with a clear delimitation of goals. Kalmar County was also the first Swedish region to adopt a regional food policy in 2015 and, following its evaluation in 2019, the implementation of a second action plan is focusing even more on, e.g. food supply in crisis because of climate change, and regional food identity with the examples of the implementation of a terroir map and coming investments in the House of Food during 2021.

Lithuania is not as far down the road as Denmark and Sweden and there are no local food policies as yet. In Lithuania, political processes are primarily top-down and, therefore, there is typically less room for the development of local political processes concerning, for example, food. However, in a few municipalities, food businesses are requesting local food policies and strategies that support the work that some of them are already doing to preserve and develop the local food sector.

2. AIM OF THE REPORT

This report addresses public rural food policies and strategies in selected rural regions and municipalities. The case studies in the report are the following three countries: Denmark, Sweden and Lithuania.

The case studies discuss how rural governmental bodies have adopted and implemented food policies and strategies as an instrument to support and strengthen the local food sector. In this process, collaboration with the commercial private food sector and, to some extent, also civil society is a recurring topic.

As the adoption and implementation of food policies and food strategies in a rural context is relatively new phenomena, the report explores how rural governmental bodies attempt to recast themselves as developers of food policies and implementers of food strategies.

Special attention is hence placed on:
- Food policies: developing and adopting policies and visions for the regional/local foodscape.
- Food strategies: measures undertaken by regional and local governmental bodies to implement the food policies.

The report is intended to shed light on the development of local rural food policies and strategies and also, hopefully, to inspire those already or intending to work with food policies and strategies in rural areas.
In a broader historical perspective and in an European context, the notions of food policy and food strategy apply most often to the national and international (especially EU) level. Food policies and strategies have, until recently, almost exclusively been developed and implemented by political and administrative bodies on the national and international level.

Typically, such national and international food policies and strategies deal with issues such as food security, food safety, trade regulations, regulation of organic production, consumer protection, animal welfare, etc. On a concrete level, food policy concerns limit values for contaminants and food additives, the establishment of risk assessment procedures, the adoption of hygiene rules and procedures for the handling of food, the development of guidelines for managing animal diseases and animal welfare, securing the right level of consumer information and consumer protection, etc.

Thus, for a long period, food and agricultural policies and strategies were disconnected from the regional and local governmental and political sphere as these issues were mainly decided upon at the international and national level and regional and local public authorities had little or no say in these matters.

However, in the last one or two decades, the notions of food policy and food strategy were first verbalised in a regional context, it was in urban and peri-urban settings and the themes addressed were typically access to healthy food for everyone, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, food security, empowerment, and economic and community development.

From the outset, urban food policies have been human-centred. The main aim of urban food policies so far has been care for the citizens of the city: how to cultivate and form a food system that can support the citizens’ needs for healthy food, public meals (kindergartens, schools, nursing homes, etc.) and community development. The strategies developed for this purpose are manifold and range from the establishment of local garden communities based on volunteering to commercial trade relations with peri-urban vegetable growers and farmers.

The development of food policies and strategies in rural areas has many similarities with the urban setting. The same kind of aims and goals of food policies and strategies can be found in numerous public rural policies and strategies.

However, most rural food policies and strategies differ from the urban context by giving a high priority to the local commercial trade relations with peri-urban vegetable growers and local garden communities based on volunteering to community development. The strategies developed for this purpose are manifold and range from the establishment of local garden communities based on volunteering to commercial trade relations with peri-urban vegetable growers and farmers.

Typically, such national and international food policies and strategies are often grounded in the idea that a number of local benefits can be attained at the social, human and environmental level from working with regional and local food policies.

As the notions of food policy and food strategy are brought into regional and local contexts, the content, meaning and purpose of these notions change. When food policy and food strategies were first verbalised in a regional context, it was in urban and peri-urban settings and the themes addressed were typically access to healthy food for everyone, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, food security, empowerment, and economic and community development.

The list in Table 1 presents the main concerns and values associated with regional food policies and strategies identified in this study.

Table 1: Main drivers and values in food policies and strategies in rural governmental bodies

1. Business and jobs: support for the local economy, entrepreneurs, companies, more jobs, new markets
2. Attractive areas for newcomers and tourists: life in the local area and unique food
3. Meaningful jobs: professional pride
4. Food safety: secure food supply and availability of food
5. Food quality: fresh raw materials and products and improved health for the population through access to healthy food
6. Environment: reduced transport, local raw materials, sustainable food and reduced food waste
7. Perceived quality: closeness, traceability, knowledge of the producers, seasonal rhythm, trust
8. Knowledge and transparency: visibility of production history of the food
9. Place: relationships, sense of belonging, identity, connection

This could be seen as an indication that rural food policies and strategies are a relatively new phenomenon that is still in its infancy, and that so far only a few regional and local governmental bodies have developed and adopted food policies and strategies. It is, of course, also an indication that the drivers for developing food policies and strategies have been stronger in urban settings than in rural. Either way, in part 7, references, we have listed relevant literature and links for further inquiry.

Links and references
The existing body of literature (academic papers, guidelines, public food strategies, pamphlets, etc.) on regional and local food policy and food strategy focuses mainly on the urban context. To our knowledge, investigations and surveys concerning urban food policies far outnumber those on rural food policies and strategies.

3. INTRODUCTION TO RURAL FOOD POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

In a broader historical perspective and in an European context, the notions of food policy and food strategy apply most often to the national and international (especially EU) level. Food policies and strategies have, until recently, almost exclusively been developed and implemented by political and administrative bodies on the national and international level.

Typically, such national and international food policies and strategies deal with issues such as food security, food safety, trade regulations, regulation of organic production, consumer protection, animal welfare, etc. On a concrete level, food policy concerns limit values for contaminants and food additives, the establishment of risk assessment procedures, the adoption of hygiene rules and procedures for the handling of food, the development of guidelines for managing animal diseases and animal welfare, securing the right level of consumer information and consumer protection, etc.

Thus, for a long period, food and agricultural policies and strategies were disconnected from the regional and local governmental and political sphere as these issues were mainly decided upon at the international and national level and regional and local public authorities had little or no say in these matters.

However, in the last one or two decades, the notions of food policy and food strategy are increasingly finding their way into the regional and local levels. The attraction of using the notions of food policy and food strategy are increasingly finding their way into regional and local contexts, the content, meaning and purpose of these notions change. When food policy and food strategies were first verbalised in a regional context, it was in urban and peri-urban settings and the themes addressed were typically access to healthy food for everyone, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, food security, empowerment, and economic and community development.

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However, most rural food policies and strategies differ from the urban context by giving a high priority to the local commercial food sector. Today, the movement of companies to urban areas and the resulting loss of jobs is a constant threat in rural areas. As farming and, to some extent, food production is common in rural areas, it seems natural to focus on food and the food system as a way of maintaining local companies and jobs. Regions such as Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna in Italy were early examples of this as they have been promoting local food of high quality and uniqueness as part of their regional and local governmental food policy for decades. Amongst the benefits has been international branding and export of locally produced foodstuffs and also increasing food tourism, which in turn supports regional farmers and food processors.

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This could be seen as an indication that rural food policies and strategies are a relatively new phenomenon that is still in its infancy, and that so far only a few regional and local governmental bodies have developed and adopted food policies and strategies. It is, of course, also an indication that the drivers for developing food policies and strategies have been stronger in urban settings than in rural. Either way, in part 7, references, we have listed relevant literature and links for further inquiry.
4. FOOD POLICY AND FOOD STRATEGIES IN DANISH RURAL AREAS

In several Danish municipalities, interest in food and food products is increasing. In particular, it can be said that several municipalities have turned their attention to local food production that can create jobs and local consumption of food that can create social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

In some of these municipalities, e.g. Bornholm, Lolland, Guldborgsund, Lejre, Odsherred, Sønderborg and Ringkøbing-Skjern, this interest has manifested itself in a very concrete way in the form of initiatives that involve food companies, food services, interest groups and citizens.

The effort that is put into the area of food may result in the formulation of concrete municipal food policies and strategies. When this occurs, it is of course because there is a desire that the area receive special political attention in a municipality. In Denmark, there is no requirement for municipalities to have a food policy or strategy, which means that they engage in such work on a voluntary basis. Furthermore, some municipalities have invested a lot of time and effort into food policy, but have not considered it necessary to make it explicit in distinct food policies or strategies. Therefore, there are many ways of working with food in the Danish municipalities.

In order to examine the municipal food policies and food strategies in rural areas in more detail, the following three case study municipalities were selected: Bornholm, Lolland / Guldborgsund (these two municipalities cooperate on a joint food strategy) and Ringkøbing-Skjern. These municipalities were selected on the basis of their work on food policy and food strategies and because all three focus on encouraging growth and innovation among local small and medium-sized food businesses. All three municipalities have food strategies that have been adopted by the municipal council. In all municipalities, interviews were conducted with municipal officials, local business organisations and food companies.

The aim of the study is to shed light on the following:

1. **Creation**: How do food policies and strategies come about?
2. **Implementation**: What activities and actions are included in the implementation of the food strategy?
3. **Effect**: What effect has the food strategy had on small and medium-sized food businesses?
4. **Evaluation**: Assessment of the suitability of food strategies as a tool for developing local areas.

During several interviews, the participants were asked to draw a timeline of events for the creation of the food strategy.
Lolland-Falster’s food strategy

The municipalities of Lolland and Guldborgsund have a joint food strategy, which was adopted in the spring of 2018. The strategy is titled ‘Strategy for food production and food tourism on Lolland Falster’ (LF-strategien, 2017). It was created through collaboration between the two municipalities on the basis of a report that analysed the potential of a joint food venture (LF-strategien, 2017).

The food strategy will “establish a focus and prioritisation for how the two municipalities and Business Lolland-Falster can together further develop business and tourism with food production as the focal point” (LF-strategien, 2017). The goals and success criteria are as follows: 1) stimulate a direct increase in employment and turnover with international sales of products and; 2) attract tourists from both Denmark and abroad through authentic food and food tourism (ibid.)

The vision is to make “the South Sea Islands well-known among Danes, professional Danish food customers and foreign tourists as an area with authentic food products, producers and experiences” (ibid). Furthermore, from 2017 to 2025, it is envisaged that turnover and employment in small and medium-sized food companies and food tourism will double on Lolland-Falster. The food strategy, thus, has the following three focus areas: 1) identity and marketing; 2) authentic food, and; 3) food tourism.

The focus area ‘identity and marketing’ will be addressed through a local food narrative, the goal of which is to strengthen the common Lolland-Falster identity of authentic food. To this end, a joint platform will be developed for marketing the “South Sea Islands” for branding and disseminating the food narrative.

‘Authentic food’ will be promoted through a growth programme for small food producers, while a number of joint activities will be carried out in connection with product development and scaling of production as well as marketing, distribution and sales. Among other things, the focus must be directed towards supporting individual producers who have ambitions to establish or scale existing processing and establishing joint processing for small producers. In order to increase awareness of local authentic food, the creation of a label for food from Lolland-Falster has been proposed; something which received broad local support.

‘Food tourism’ must be developed by strengthening manor house gastr-tourism, establishing food routes and the creation of a Gastronomic People’s Food Assembly on Lolland-Falster.

The strategy highlights how Lolland-Falster has unique conditions for agricultural production and describes how Lolland-Falster has “very fertile soil and favourable climatic conditions for crop production. This has meant that the area has been the centre for large agricultural and raw material production for centuries in areas such as grain, beets, peas, fruit and berries” (ibid p. 3). The strategy also emphasises how Lolland-Falster has a culture of raw material production with a tradition for growing sugar beet and producing sugar.

Authenticity, thus, involves grasping the historical agricultural traditions and, since agriculture produces raw materials, authenticity according to this interpretation equates with proximity to raw materials: “Authenticity is rooted in an interplay between high quality raw materials, the history of products and producers, the creation of raw materials and products as well as the unique natural and cultural environments that characterise Lolland-Falster. This represents the foundation of authentic food products from the area in the future” (ibid). Therefore, the understanding of authenticity leans on the concept of terroir: it is food that has been grown in Lolland-Falster’s unique soil and processed according to historical traditions.

The results of the strategy

Lolland-Falster’s food strategy has given rise to the following activities and results:

- The Soil Network. The strategy has, among other things, contributed to the establishment of the Soil Network, which has 41 member companies, and the development of the joint brand ‘Soil’ for authentic and local food from the South Sea islands.
- The People’s Food Assembly. In May 2019, the People’s Food Assembly became a reality for the first time. It has been decided to repeat the success when the Corona Virus situation allows it once more. Both the municipalities and the other actors behind the first People’s Food Assembly are in support.
- Guldborgsund and Lolland municipalities have launched a number of development projects in connection with the food strategy. Among others, a so-called ‘Tour-Bo’ project about sustainable food tourism.

www.muldollandfalster.dk
The food strategy sets out the following four specific aims:

- 20% local food in the public kitchens.
- Coordinated collaboration on advice for food producers between Bornholm's Agriculture and Food (Bornholm's Food Strategy, 2017-2025, 2017). The food strategy was created through collaboration between the three organisations in the ‘Partnership for the development and marketing of Bornholm quality food’, which have been engaged in strategic collaboration since 2014. The partnership regarding the food strategy between the municipality and the business interest organisations differs from most other municipalities’ food strategies as these are typically prepared by the municipality alone. Bornholm’s food strategy is based on a vision of the position Bornholm should occupy in the long term: “Bornholm is the beacon in the Danish food landscape and the island must grow and flourish from this point” (Bornholm’s Food Strategy, 2017, p. 6). More tangibly, the mission of the food strategy is: “With the consumer in focus, together we will strengthen the ability, willingness and motivation of the island’s small and large food companies to develop, preserve and sell Bornholm’s local qualities, its distinctive raw materials and special food experience” (ibid, p. 7).

The food strategy sets out the following four specific aims:

- Bornholm offers Denmark’s best food environment - coordinated business promotion
- Bornholm produces Denmark’s best food experiences - the taste of Bornholm
- Bornholm chooses local raw materials and production - increased self-sufficiency
- Bornholm secures the future through diversity - sustainable, green, gifted

With the goal ‘Bornholm offers Denmark’s best food environment’, the partnership wants to: “focus on coordinated business promotion by creating a framework and development within business services, framework conditions, education, knowledge sharing and production facilities” (ibid, p. 10). Each of the partners contributes in different ways to the fulfilment of the goal. Bornholm’s Agriculture and Food will “further develop advice about food on Bornholm” and, among others, offer attractive advice packages to food start-ups and entrepreneurs as well as facilitate knowledge-sharing groups for farmers and food producers.

Gourmet Bornholm will contribute to entrepreneurship and attract new food producers through, e.g. operating the food culture house, Gaarden, and working to develop a national resource centre for food culture and food skills - a food education for food producers. Bornholm’s Regional Municipality will ensure a focus on quality in the joint business service in the area of food. They will do this by, e.g. prioritising the area of food in the business development strategy and working with municipal food supply in order to support increased supply and sales for local food companies.

As the food strategy is based on joint goals, but with each partner contributing in their own way, there is room for different initiatives that the partners do not agree on. This is most evident under the goal “Bornholm secures the future through diversity”, where the aim of Bornholm’s Regional Municipality is that 20% of the cultivated area should be organic. Bornholm’s Agriculture and Food has no goals regarding more organic produce, but is instead working with green business plans and is exploring the business potential of the circular economy.
Ringkøbing-Skjern’s food policy

Since 2015, Ringkøbing-Skjern Municipality has been working with food strategy initiatives. On the basis of an internal business analysis in the municipality, the area of food was highlighted as one of the municipality’s strengths together with energy, production businesses and tourism. The Business Council was the author of the first Food Policy 2015-2019, which was adopted together with an action plan by the municipal council.

During the town council’s term from 2019 to 2023, a new food policy and action plan will be prepared (Ringkøbing-Skjern Municipality food policy, 2019). In Ringkøbing-Skjern, it is known as the official food policy, but in the daily work of Ringkøbing-Skjern Business Council and their cooperation with food companies, it is also called the food strategy. Since 2017, a so-called ‘Food board’, made up of food company stakeholders, has functioned as an advisory board for the municipality’s work with the policy and action plan.

The food policy is part of the municipality’s initiative called ‘Nature’s Riches’. The vision of the policy is “A strong food sector in West Jutland that asserts itself nationally and internationally for the benefit of our area.” The food policy consists of the following four aims:

- **The food narrative**, which communicates activities and results, must help promote knowledge of local food, develop the good food narrative and put Ringkøbing-Skjern Municipality on the map.
- **Production and sales**. To improve the companies’ business development, production and sales and help to strengthen the companies’ and entrepreneurs’ business development and competitiveness as well as attract companies.
- **Innovation and knowledge**. The food and business models of the future demand innovation and knowledge, which is supported through partnerships with a link between knowledge and practice.
- **Sustainability**. The goal is to work across the board to create good food, healthy meals and good taste experiences as a basis for the good life and at the same time encourage the development of sustainability in local food production.

The food narrative is about strengthening communication and the stories about locally produced food with a special focus on the small and medium-sized food companies within entrepreneurship, processing and experiences. The food narrative is disseminated in various ways including via the Taste of the West and the Food Assembly in May 2021 (Smagen i vest, 2020).

A concrete action based on the food policy will be the establishment of a Food Hub, which will function as a local logistics centre with a fridge and freezer and will help to coordinate and facilitate the purchase of local food for the municipality’s public kitchens.

The results of the strategy

From 2015-2019, food policy and local food production resulted in the creation of 50 to 75 jobs (Interview with Søren Holm, Ringkøbing Skjern Business Council). Both primary agriculture and fisheries are large sectors in the municipality, but the activities focusing on the Centre for Food Development in the food policy are new areas which, among others, have contributed to the creation of Food Park Skjern Enge (Fødevarepark Skjern Enge, 2020).

Since 2015, 15-20 new local food companies have been established and they are still in operation. The food policy has meant that small food businesses are still being prioritised politically. In the past, business policy focused, in particular, on the processing industry and agriculture. However, since the implementation of the food policy, supporting small local food companies has been given higher priority both through business promotion and in the municipality in general.

The focus on food policy over several years has meant that Ringkøbing-Skjern Municipality has become well-known among national actors, knowledge institutions and companies for having made a strategic investment in the area of food, which gives both the municipality and local employees, companies and other actors the resolve and desire to continue to strive to strengthen local food in West Jutland.
Value creation for local food producers

As illustrated by the above discussion of the food policies and strategies, they are mainly targeted at the development, branding and marketing of local food businesses and their food. The food companies were, therefore, asked the following questions concerning their views on the food policies and strategies:

- How have food companies been involved in shaping the local food strategy?
- Have the food strategies resulted in any value creation for them?
- What are their aspirations regarding the local food strategy in the future?

Involvement in shaping the local food strategy

All interviewed companies know that their municipality has a food strategy, and they are also aware, at least roughly speaking, of its content. None of the surveyed food companies said that they had been directly involved in the development of the food strategy and yet some still feel that they have been heard, while others do not.

In terms of how the municipality is implementing the food strategy, some companies feel that they are doing a lot, while others think that there is more talk and marketing than actual action.

Value creation

The food companies were asked whether the municipal food strategies have provided value for their business. Below is a list of the activities that the companies say they have participated in:

- Individual business advice. This could involve, e.g. improving websites, the circular economy, establishing a business, finance and budgeting, identifying competence gaps in the company, networks and network building in the local area. For example, Rinkabing-Skjern Business Council has a large network of advisers and individuals from the business community and they are very helpful when it comes to finding relevant advisers.
- Courses and webinars. These may be about sensory science, the experience economy, social media, sales and customer relations. They are arranged by, e.g. local business councils.
- Funded projects on local development. There are several examples of municipalities, in collaboration with other actors, managing to attract funds to spur innovation and cooperation between food companies both within the municipality’s borders and in collaboration with other municipalities.
- Promotion. Via tourist brochures, magazines, national TV (e.g. celebrity chefs visiting food companies in Denmark).
- Trade fairs. Used mostly as a forum for debate (and not for sales), which can thus help to raise awareness of locally produced food.
- Markets. Market participation provides good value for local food producers.

Tourist tours. Tourist trips to small food producers and farm shops increase sales directly and subsequently through the web shop.

Network. Involvement in local associations, food networks and food clusters (such as Gourmet Bornholm, Bornholm’s Agriculture and Food, the Rinkabing-Skjern Business Council, food policy networks, Regional Food Culture - Culinary West Jutland) helps small producers to develop their businesses in the early years, but not as much once the company has become reasonably well-established.

Aspirations for the local food strategy of the future

The food companies have a number of suggestions regarding what they would like to see in future municipal food strategies:

- Product development. More input on the development of new and innovative food that can help renew the company’s product portfolio.
- Advice and support for reducing impact on the climate. Several companies want to become CO2 neutral, and this requires new knowledge and investment, which today comes from the companies themselves. Several state that the local food strategy should support climate-friendly food production.
- Supporting biodiversity. One of the companies is doing a lot to preserve and increase biodiversity. They want to inspire others to do the same and believe the local food strategy should include a biodiversity plan.
- Buy locally. One company mentioned the problem of getting Danes to buy local products rather than ones from abroad. The food strategy should support the provision of information to consumers about the benefits of buying locally.

An overall coordinated effort. Some companies mentioned that there is a tendency to start projects that have a narrow focus on individual areas; Several mention that there is also a need for a greater overall effort, which can create synergy and cooperation between the actors in the area of food.

Joint promotion. Several mentioned that it would be beneficial if a local food strategy focused on joint promotion via, e.g. a joint store in large cities or in connection with tourism PR for the areas.

Venture capital. The companies have many ideas, but often lack the capital and resources to realise them. The food strategies could help pave the way for raising venture capital.
The history of food strategies in Sweden in local contexts goes back almost three decades to when municipalities and regional councils launched “dietary policies” for public catering focusing on nutrition and dietary recommendations. Around 2010, the focus started to change towards meal policies rather than dietary policies and a more holistic approach was adopted. At the same time, attention to small-scale food production and food tourism as a means of rural development increased in Sweden.

National Food Policies and Strategies

The first national Swedish food vision titled Sweden – the new culinary nation 2008-2014 covered the following five areas: 1) Primary production; 2) Processed food; 3) Public catering; 4) Food tourism and; 5) Restaurants (Jordbruksverket, 2010).

In 2015, Sweden started to prepare for its first national food strategy. Preparation included dialogue meetings with regional stakeholders in 6 regions. A National Food Strategy for Sweden was made public in 2016 (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2016) and launched by the Swedish government in June 2017 (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2017). The vision for 2030 is that the Swedish food chain should be globally competitive, innovative, sustainable and attractive to operate within. Overall aims are to minimise vulnerability in the food system, increase food security, secure jobs, improve health and add product value through cooperation and innovation in the food chain. The main objectives are the implementation of a competitive food supply chain and the fulfillment of national environmental goals. An important focus is on increasing food production of both organic and conventional produce to attain a higher level of food security (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2016).

As the national strategy took shape, the process also led to the formalisation of the work with the regional strategies, which allocated the responsibility for implementing the national goals to the regions. The development processes for a national strategy and the regional strategies were, to a large extent, parallel, and most regional strategies were adopted by the end of 2017, as shown in Figure 1. The processes were, thus, not a top-down approach with the national strategy dictating regional strategies.

A follow-up on Action plan I 2017-2019 was completed in June 2020. Comprehensive statistical documentation shows a positive development in the food chain during the period when the strategy was being developed (2015-2017), thus being a result of ongoing initiatives. Value added and jobs in the food chain as a total was 10%. In the restaurant sector, added value was +15% and in the primary production +14% (Jordbruksverket, 2020).

Action Plan II 2020-2025 concentrates on the long-term effects of the strategy in order to achieve the goals by 2030. The government has ear-marked resources for authorities and stakeholders to strengthen the whole food system in a holistic approach Action Plan II has a total budget of approximately 64 million Euros, which is mainly linked to the national Rural Development Programme (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2020).

Figure 1. Regional strategies in Sweden and the innovation ecosystem for Skåne as part of the regional strategy.
Regional and Municipal Policies and Strategies

The visions and goals developed at the national level were "customised" by regions in parallel processes taking the specific geographical, business, and social landscapes of the regions into account. The ambition of regional strategies is to encourage concrete plans for action that can support the needs of a specific region whilst supporting the general aims of the national strategy. Due to the traditional top-down approach between regions and municipalities, municipalities generally tend to adopt regional goals.

As a result, the national and regional food strategies are adopted and incorporated into, e.g., business development strategies and initiatives in the municipalities. Thus, the more overall food strategies from national and regional levels are found to be well-implemented as guidelines for general municipal strategies and development.

Even though there is an increased focus on more holistic approaches in the food system, municipal meal and/or dietary policies often have a narrow focus on public catering. Municipal food policies rarely include other municipal strategic goals such as business development, economic growth and securing workplaces.

Some municipalities consider public catering as a strong tool in the development of local and sustainable food production. Furthermore, branding initiatives for local food and food tourism has caught the attention of municipalities. The trend in the development of local and sustainable food production.

Furthermore, branding initiatives for local food and food tour has been an inspiration for SMEs as well as a funding tool as the regional innovation eco-system is the starting point for development and innovation capacity, developing Skåne into a recognised gastronomic region (Livsmedelsakademien, 2015).

The above-mentioned investments and strategic choices also made it clear that a food strategy was needed to ensure long-term development and continuous innovation and growth. The first steps towards a regional food strategy were taken when the first regional food-related strategy in Sweden, titled Skånsk Dryckestrategi, was launched in 2013 (Livsmedelsakademien, 2013b). The strategy was a result of the thorough development work carried out, which highlighted beverages as a potential growth area with regard to the abundance of raw materials, knowledge and opportunities for creating more added value through processing. The strategy was also a tool for a more strategic direction and cooperation in the food system. After the launching in 2013, the strategy has been a tool for raising awareness and has been an inspiration for SMEs as well as a funding tool as the strategy very clearly points out needs, goals and an action plan. This strategy has also been a good example and inspiration for a number of organisations in both Sweden and other Nordic countries as to how to involve stakeholders and achieve very concrete and engaging goals and action plans. The key to success was the involvement of stakeholders strongly associated with the strategy, which resulted in stakeholders taking responsibility and ownership of the implementation of the strategy.

During the period 2010-2015, the three initiatives 1) the Skåne Food Innovation Network platform Taste of Skåne, 2) the Kirnovoca Incubator & Science Park innovation arena and 3) the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences’ pilot plant for drinks and beverages, Centre for innovative beverages Balsgård developed into a strong foundation for rural development and became important regional strongholds for innovation and the development of SMEs focusing on innovation and business development. Substantial public investment during the period (5 million Euros) led to well-documented results, development and innovation capacity, developing Skåne into a recognised gastronomic region (Livsmedelsakademien, 2015).

In January 2015, the first steps in developing an overall regional food strategy in Skåne was initiated by the Skåne Food Innovation Network, the regional faculties of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Skåne and the local branch of the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF Skåne). One of the main objectives of the initiative was to raise political awareness of the threats and opportunities facing the food industry in Skåne. The region is recognised for its diverse food production and for contributing significantly to Swedish food production. However, there was not much political interest in maintaining and developing the industry and, thereby, a thriving agriculture in Skåne as, e.g., part of a food security policy, important export business etc. with thousands of jobs and growth potential. Furthermore, there was no significant political interest or awareness of job losses in agriculture and the potential threat posed by ownership in the food industry moving from Swedish to international owners.

Skåne region: SMART FOOD 2030 – a partnership strategy

Skåne is the food larder of Sweden with a long tradition in both food industry and flourishing networks of SMEs. Skåne is amongst the smallest regions in Sweden, but it has significant agricultural production and is acknowledged as a food tourism destination. Food is the most important business in Skåne in terms of employment and also by its connection to other businesses in the region, e.g., packaging and logistics.

In 2009, after more than ten years of rural development work and in dialogue with local stakeholders, a strategic line for the regional funding of food and food tourism projects was set out by the local public authorities without any formal strategic tools or politically taken visions, other than a vision for public catering by Region Skåne to develop Skåne into a leading European food region by 2020.

Early in the process, the two regional authorities, the Regional Authority of Skåne (hereafter Region Skåne) and the County Administrative Board of Skåne also joined the project group. During the spring of 2015, Region Skåne took over the management of the process, anchoring the political ownership of the coming strategy.

The initial project group arranged a first dialogue meeting for the regional strategy on the same day and place as the national dialogue meeting was scheduled to take place in Skåne in June 2015, thus drawing advantage of the stakeholders already gathering. After the initial process, Region Skåne took over management of the strategy process, and the project group was enlarged to include around 10 important development and innovation organisations, representing the triple helix structure (academia, public and private organisations.)
To get a broader perspective on future needs and opportunities as well as threats and challenges for food and food-related issues, the project involved several stakeholders in the process. Five dialogue meetings were held during the spring of 2016 involving around 800 participants. The resulting data was processed together with other important insights such as statistics, forecasts, etc. in the project group and together with other stakeholders. Because of the way the process was driven forward, involving a large number of engaged organisations, the regional food strategy also became a partnership strategy. The strategy “Smart Mat 2030” [Smart Food 2030] was accepted by the Regional Council and launched in December 2017 after almost three years of work. With the vision of the strategy “Smart Food driving the open and vital Skåne 2030”, four guiding value statements were set. The strategy comprises five focus areas as seen in Figure 2 and is connected to 20 strategic joint action points (Region Skåne, 2017). The figure also illustrates the connection to the national food strategy as well as the connection to the EU programme, Food 2030, and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

The food strategy is related to the main political regulatory documents in Region Skåne, i.e. the Regional Development Strategy, and is aligned with the Innovation strategy (the regional EU Strategy for Smart Specialisation) and the Regional Cluster Development Programme, which comprises nine clusters (one food cluster, and packaging, telecommunication, life science clusters, etc.). Also, the Rural Development Programme for Skåne, which is administered by the County Administrative Board, is linked to the strategy.

Launching the food strategy was a remarkable achievement in itself when food was finally accepted on the political agenda. The regional council provides networking, seed funding and support and contributes to policy development. A special non-rural case is Malmö municipality.

In 2008, to help with the implementation of the food strategy, a food strategist was employed who leads the process together with a partnership group established under the Research and Innovation Council in Skåne (“Forsknings- och Innovationsrådet i Skåne”, FIRS). It is important to emphasize that Region Skåne did not involved in executing the action plan in the partnership strategy, but always delegates this task to partners and stakeholders.

Until now, only limited ear-marked funding has been provided by the Regional Council in Skåne. Therefore, an important part of the food strategist’s work involves optimising resources and finding synergies between partners by mapping and coordinating on-going activities relevant for the strategy. The tasks also include investing seed money into new projects and activities fulfilling the strategic goals. The work also includes monitoring and reporting on a national level, e.g. guarding the implementation of the national food strategy in Skåne and cooperating with other regional strategies. In 2021, for the first time, a small budget will be allocated to the regional food strategy by the Regional Council in Skåne. An evaluation of the regional strategy is planned to take place in 2021.

The 33 municipalities in Skåne are all obliged to adapt to the regional strategy through the political process. Thus, the regional food strategy in Skåne has paved the way for local municipality strategy and policy developments. A special non-rural case is Malmö municipality.

Malmö is the largest city in Skåne. When the national and regional food strategies were launched in 2017, Malmö City decided to participate in the attempt to achieve the goals by leveraging the public meals and sustainability policy implemented in 2010 (Malmö Stad, 2010) and by focusing on engaging communities and citizens as well as developing SMEs, also in the rural areas surrounding Malmö. With the vision “Together for the world’s best food in Malmö”, the aim of Malmö City is to increase awareness and availability of sustainable local food for its citizens and to become Sweden’s first Food Council in 2021 (Malmö Stad, 2019).

Initiatives include an increase in urban farming, support for food markets and Sweden’s biggest REKO ring with 34,000 members, which a new way for rural SMEs to sell directly to urban consumers. In addition to raising awareness, these initiatives are increasing the availability of local food in the city and improving food security, which means they are of great importance to the development of SMEs in the surrounding rural municipalities.

The approach of Malmö City to embrace the local food system, including the surrounding rural municipalities, illustrates that cities recognise the importance of the urban-rural relationship, e.g. building on municipal partnerships and is, thus, becoming an important facilitator of rural development.

The strategic focus areas of the national food strategy as well as the connection to the EU’s Food 2030 programme and the UN’s sustainable development goals.

Figure 2. Skåne’s food strategy is based on four guiding value statements and five strategic joint actions. The figure illustrates the connection to the three strategic focus areas of the national food strategy as well as the connection to the EU’s Food 2030 programme and the UN’s sustainable development goals.
Eslöv municipality – a food strategy for business development

Eslöv is the main town in the Mid-Skåne region. Surrounded by some of the best agricultural land the food production in Eslöv has always been the core of industrial food production in Skåne, and is thus important to the municipality, dominating the local economy. Traditional Swedish brands, some being more than 80 years old, have their origin in Eslöv, e.g. Felix, Kavli, and Ekström’s Blueberry soups. The food industry is still important to the municipality as Norwegian-owned Orkla has established a factory for vegetarian and vegan food production. In total, 48,000 tonnes of food are produced in the factory in Eslöv each year (Orkla, 2020). Today, some of the industry has disappeared, but on the positive side, small-scale food businesses and food tourism have emerged in the villages of Mid-Skåne.

The municipality of Eslöv does not have a specific food strategy. However, around the year 2000, a very real threat to the municipality provided an opportunity to develop a more distinctive business strategy focusing on food, when forecastings showed that big food companies in the municipality would be forced to migrate. As a result of the strategies, partnerships have been established with Malmö and Lund, the two largest cities that are close to Eslöv, and surrounding municipalities. The focus of the partnership is mainly on cooperation in terms of SMEs, strengthening the strategic focus on developing the business opportunities for small-scale food enterprises.

As a result of the strategies, partnerships have been established with Malmö and Lund, the two largest cities that are close to Eslöv, and surrounding municipalities. The focus of the partnership is mainly on cooperation in terms of public food procurement with the goals being to increase local and organic food and to develop and promote small-scale business and food tourism. In recent years, a lot of effort has been put into building Mid-Skåne as an international destination with a clear potential for the future within, e.g. the “Brown Bean of Oland” as a cultural heritage with an EU certification of geographical indication (Kalmar County, 2015).

To follow up on the positive development in agricultural production and clear potential for the future within, e.g. the production of plant proteins, a political initiative to develop a regional food strategy was adopted by the regional council in 2013. The project included future-oriented studies, analyses of the current situation and regional statistics internally processed in the project group. The stakeholders were involved in a series of around 60 meetings and workshops.

Approximately 900 people have been involved in the process. In the beginning, the goals and strategy were not discussed directly. Instead, common ground was sought through discussions in order to understand the current situation in agriculture, food, and related businesses. Against this background, a SWOT analysis focusing on future potential was carried out. The strategy was then completed by the project group.

The Kalmar County is responsible for the agricultural production in Kalmar county contributes around 10% of the region’s BNP. The agriculture and food industry provides jobs and income in the region and, even though the agricultural profile is less diverse than it is in Skåne, the region makes a significant contribution to Swedish food production. 95% of Sweden’s brown bean production, 25% of its chicken production and about 10% of its milk, eggs, and cattle production come from Kalmar County. In the period 2005-2013, an average of 13% of the growth in livestock production in Sweden was found in Kalmar county, while in the period 2007-2012, the growth in jobs within the agricultural sector was 8%. Kalmar county is also well-known for producing plant proteins, e.g. the “Brown Bean of Oland” as a cultural heritage with an EU certification of geographical indication (Kalmar County, 2015).

The Kalmar County is responsible for developing a regional food strategy in cooperation with the County Administration of Kalmar and the local office of the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF Sydost) in a public/private partnership. These three organisations comprise the project group. A steering group was appointed, and two reference groups also helped to determine the direction of the strategy. The strategy “Växande Värde” [Growing Value] was launched in 2015 and was the first regional food strategy in Sweden, launched two years prior to the national food strategy.

The vision of the strategy is that Kalmar County (2016-2025) should become a well-known, high-class food region. The goals are as follows: 1) that more people choose food from Kalmar County and; 2) that the food industry increase its competitiveness, productivity and innovation capacity, sustainably and on a long-term basis. The strategy has the following six focus areas, or measures: 1) To form a council for competence development and a “Mat-college” (food education college); 2) To include the food industry in the business support system; 3) To focus on proteins—building a platform for research, innovation and development; 4) To establish a national meeting place for food; 5) To develop the county’s food identity; and; 6) To implement the county’s Food Strategy together with all stakeholders. A specific focus was placed on the green industries as a possibility for further developing the know-how in the region and for a more sustainable future, as
the protein-shift was noticed as a growing trend in Sweden at the time (Kalmar County, 2015).

In order to optimise resources and accelerate the strategic process, the project “Food development Southeast” [Livsmedelsutveckling Sydost] was launched in 2015 focusing on proteins and the development of SMEs. The responsible authority of the project running in the period 2016-2019 was Kalmar County and the project was run by the original strategy partnership in cooperation with Linnaeus University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. The focus of the project is activities related to increased growth, employment, new products, development and cooperation from a sustainable perspective. The project is partly financed by the European Regional Development Fund and the partners. A long-term goal for the partnership is to form an independent cluster of public organisations, academia and food-related businesses (Kalmar County 2020a).

The first evaluation of the regional food strategy was carried out in 2019. The main results of the evaluation showed that the project had led to increased cooperation between stakeholders, and trust in the support system. The evaluation also showed that more effort should be put into strengthening cooperation with academia. In the period 2010-2017, statistics showed a 54% increase in added value in the food industry, when the average for all industries was 27% in the same period. The evaluation also found that the project “Food Development Southeast” had developed into a platform for connecting stakeholders and for future development of SMEs in the directions given by the strategy (Kalmar County 2019).

Some of the work carried out in the first period involved exploring the food identity of the county. An interesting result is the ‘terroir atlas’ for Kalmar County, which was developed in 2016. The terroir atlas is comprised of natural and cultural geographical conditions for food production and is used for describing the characteristics and uniqueness behind the values of the food produced and consumed in the region. It, therefore, describes Kalmar County from a culinary point of view. The terroir atlas is a communication tool for primary producers, food manufacturers and actors within food tourism to develop concepts and storytelling around both traditional and new products (Malmlof, 2016).

Since the evaluation in 2019, Kalmar Region has been implementing the second phase of the strategy with a new action plan (2020-22) replacing the six prioritised focus areas with the following four adjusted focus areas: 1) Renewal, Science and Innovation; 2) Supply of skills and competences; 3) Food supply in crisis and; 4) Regional food identity and experiences (Kalmar County 2020b).

The project ‘Food Development Southeast’ was extended until 2022 in order to develop the platform further, which is now an activity under focus area 1 – renewal, science and innovation. The project received 1.26 million Euros in finance from the Regional Development Fund (50%) and project partners (Kalmar County 2020a).

As a result of a pilot study (2020), a new initiative for a ‘House of Food’ is planned under focus area 4 – food identity. The plan is that the concept should comprise three tracks; 1) for meeting, inspiration and learning; 2) as tourism destination and; 3) for digital concepts and solutions. The work recently started with the idea phase and drawings, which will be evaluated in the autumn of 2020 (Kalmar County, 2020c).
Lessons from Swedish Food policy and food strategy

The motivation behind initiating a process for the development of local food policies and strategies varies. In Kalmar County, the positive development in the food sector was behind the county’s decision to develop a food strategy. In the case of the Skåne region, a lack of political awareness regarding job losses and the prospect of future challenges, as described above, not being met stimulated organisations to initiate a process to develop food strategy from a bottom-up approach. Both strategies show the importance of understanding the needs, opportunities, challenges and threats within a region.

In Eslov and Region Kalmar, the political will to act was a key driver behind development, adaptation and implementation. In Skåne, during the previous two decades, the agriculture and food industry has lost jobs to a much larger extent than other branches such as IT or telecommunications. Initially, there was no political will to save what has historically been the most important industry. In 2015, when organisations gathered strength and were given the opportunity to present the facts about the industry to politicians, political interest was awakened. Awareness of food security, sustainability and food as an important industry. In 2015, when organisations gathered strength and were given the opportunity to present the facts about the industry to politicians, political interest was awakened. Awareness of food security, sustainability and food as an important industry.

The Kalmar county food strategy was produced by three organisations working closely together and involving around 900 participants. This demonstrated that a small project group of three partners with a closely-working top-down leadership focusing on a single large project has been a good model for implementing the first food strategy in Sweden. Interestingly, one of the main goals of this first regional strategy was to increase productivity. Later, when the national strategy was developed, this showed also to be one of the main national goals. The Kalmar county policy was also the first regional strategy to be evaluated. The results show that cooperation between stakeholders with a focus on SMEs has increased as well as trust and business development.

Lessons learned from the two regional strategies described here was that cooperation between stakeholders with a focus on SMEs has increased as well as trust and business development. Therefore, it can be concluded that involvement and cooperation are the most important factors when developing a food strategy. Engaging stakeholders leads to a recognized and well-implemented strategy, that can work as a tool for development and innovation. It is also shown that involvement of stakeholders can and should be on different levels during the process, e.g. when creating the project group and reference groups.

Public funding of the two regional strategies described here was very different. The Kalmar County strategy involved substantial public funding and, since 2016, funding has been provided for the large project, Food Development in the Southeast. The regional strategy in Skåne allows direct financing through a limited amount of seed money to start new initiatives, which should also be seen in the light of a well-established, but also complex, ecosystem in Skåne as well as decades long traditions of public investments, e.g. cluster development and business development of local food and beverage companies involving a great number of organisations. Both regional strategies and the national food strategy highlight that for the strategies to be operational, it is crucial for public sectors to cooperate and allocate resources, both of which are the aims of the public partnership behind the national food strategy. Common financing tools are the EU programmes, e.g. the European Regional Development Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

In Skåne, more than 10 years of systematic development work was carried out before the work with the regional food strategy started in 2015. Recognising the potential of the region, the aim of the local authorities, the County Administrative Board of Skåne (responsible for the Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) and Region Skåne (one of the responsible authorities for allocating resources within the Regional Development Fund) was to optimise public resources and offer substantial public investment, i.e. going from a range of small rural development projects to investing in three main initiatives as described above.

Much of this work focused on helping and facilitating the SMEs to reach the market through, e.g. business development, product innovation, development and selection of suitable market channels, and concept development. SMEs were offered useful competences and the importance of cooperation was emphasised. Between 2010 and 2015, it was estimated that approximately 200 new jobs were created per year as a result of the incubation and business development programmes at Krinova Science Park & Incubator. Around 50 SMEs enrol in the programmes per year (Krinova, 2019).

During the period 2010-2015, around 6,700 individuals from SMEs participated in 300 Taste of Skåne events. Of those, 800 have participated in more than 50 competence development activities. One of the main results is the concept “Taste of Skåne – locally produced and carefully selected” (Smaka på Skåne – lokalt och nogat utvalt), which was established in 2011 with the purpose of helping SMEs to gain access and visibility on the market in cooperation with supermarkets, delicatessens and other shops. About 30 supermarkets and shops and 160 producers are participating. Products fulfilling criteria on origin and artisanal quality. Additional results on the impact on innovation and growth of SMEs in rural areas, and development tools can be found in the report Smaka på Skåne 2010-2015 (Livsmedelsakademin, 2015). In Kalmar County, the results of the first few years of the strategy resulted in the development of e.g. a tamor atlas, which is often used in Sweden to develop regions into gastronomic regions, both from an internal perspective to create identity, awareness and proudness as well as externally for food tourism and branding. The evaluation in 2020 revealed close cooperation between the food industry and the actors within the public business support, leading to an increase in resources allocated to the food industry as awareness increased. With clear delimitations of focus areas and goals in combination with financial support to one large project, Livsmedelsutveckling Sydost (Food Development SouthEast) instead of support to a range of projects, the strategy is very concrete and resources optimized. An evaluation of the project revealed that the SMEs had gained trust in the project and the supporting system, and were, to a larger extent, identifying new ideas, developing products and new markets as well as developing competences compared to the situation before the regional strategy. Another important outcome was that the SMEs had developed networks for strengthening their development and competitiveness.
6. LOCAL RURAL FOOD POLICIES IN LITHUANIA

In Lithuania, public food policies and strategies are in their infancy. Political initiatives targeting food are dictated nationally and at the EU level. Until now, the major focus has been on school food policies in terms of the development of nutritional guidelines and ensuring a healthier eating environment in schools. Only a few municipalities or regions have initiated their own food policies and worked more extensively with public-private food collaboration.

In 2001, the Lithuanian government approved a State Food and Nutrition Strategy along with an action plan for the period 2003-2010 (European Commission, 2016). In 2018, the Minister of Health in Lithuania approved the Description of the Procedure for the Organisation of Child Meals (by order no. V-394 “On the Approval of the Description of Child Nutrition”). This established mandatory requirements for the supply of healthy food to Lithuanian educational institutions.

Another recent strategic document on food policy is the “Strategy for the implementation of school programmes in Lithuania in the 2017/2018 – 2022/2023 school year”, which was published in 2017. The main objective of this document is to increase the amount of fruit and vegetables, milk and milk products consumed by children. The strategy also focuses on the availability of local or regional products by identifying product selection criteria and priorities (Atkociuniene et al., 2018).

As Lithuania has been an EU Member State since 2004, most food policy and legislation comes from the EU and is implemented at the national level. Since gaining EU membership in 2004, Lithuania has experienced rapid structural change in rural areas due to implementation of the CAP support scheme, which has resulted in higher rates of investment, equipment and concentration of farms, etc. After the financial crisis of 2008, there was a decline in general demand from consumers on more expensive products, which led to problems among farmers since many were in debt due to investment in new equipment. This resulted in farmer protests as many of them had built large-scale farms. Against this background, the government started to support the creation of local food infrastructure and to revise legislation to make it easier to market food products directly to consumers. As a result of these changes, Lithuanian cities now host multiple farmers markets, which feature produce that is exclusively of local origin (Blumberg & Mincyte, 2019; Blumberg, 2015).

At the municipal level, the dominant development does not differ substantially from that dictated by the government or European regulations. However, a few exceptions exist, and these are discussed below in connection with Rietavas municipality.

No laws, besides the public procurement regulation, directly address the government, regional or municipal role in the private food market development, which confirms the impression that Lithuania policies are not focusing on a proactive role as policy makers and legislators which could potentially promote food networks locally or regionally. This is despite the fact that the number of SMEs is increasing in Lithuania and the claim that local food is still an important part of the preferences of the citizens of the country according to Blumberg and Mincyte (2019).

Rietavas Municipality

One of the municipalities that is working with food at the local level is Rietavas. Their food vision includes a focus on areas such as food production, food technology and reducing the length of food chains. The ambition of Rietavas is to create partnerships and collaborate with external and international partners, but also to enhance local producer networks and their opportunities to sell their produce locally.

Rietavas municipality has around 8,000 inhabitants. The municipality is dominated by agriculture, forestry and peat extraction. Rietavas municipality is 60 km from the largest city in Lithuania – Klaipeda. In the agricultural sector, organic farming is emerging and farmers are becoming increasingly engaged in activities besides farming. By having initiatives engaging farms such as the Milk road initiative described below, there seems to be a greater opportunities for small, cooperative farms and businesses to develop.

The official food policies in Rietavas municipality follow the government’s guidelines on nutrition, which were discussed earlier, and they are here implemented at the municipal level. As there is no official local food strategy for Rietavas as yet, the municipality does not have a documented plan. However, food actors in the municipality want to engage in more local food initiatives and are interested in sharing experiences and developing ideas to get more activities on the local agenda, while the Mayor is also interested in the initiatives. In addition, the tourist office seems to be a driver of food-related collaboration.

According to Laima Docolivečiūtė, the Director of the Rietavas Tourist and Business Information Centre, Rietavas municipality is rich in lively rural communities, which have distinctive recipes and are rooted in culinary traditions passed down by their ancestors:

“People from major cities come to Rietavas because they are looking for healthier and more natural products, and they are discovering local communities, local artisans and farmers.”

Laima Docolivečiūtė - Director of the Rietavas Tourist and Business Information Centre
Rietavas municipality works actively to support local SMEs. One example of this SME support can be seen in the organization of the school meals in Rietavas, which is different from the majority of school meals in the country. In Lithuania, most public agencies, schools, and kindergartens have contracts with external catering companies whereas Rietavas, the majority of schools collaborate with the municipality to employ kitchen workers. The head of Laurynas Ivinskis gymnasium, Alma Lengvienė, states that, in 2018, they had to change the menu drastically due to the new recommendations in the national health guidelines mentioned above. Although time consuming, the changes were necessary according to Alma Lengvienė: the school has reduced the amount of fried food and uses less fat. Moreover, education about healthy eating has been prioritised, which resulted in chaos in the beginning.

“A big impact came from the change in the laws made by the government. Recommendations of what should be served, for example. It was a mess at the beginning, examples of foods were bizarre and hard to follow. They were only recommendations but we decided to follow them”

Alma Lengvienė, Head of Laurynas Ivinskis gymnasium

It is important to note that the suggested changes were only recommendations from the Ministry of Health, but the school decided to follow them all and put them into practice. Three primary schools in Rietavas have their own kitchens with canteen workers employed by the municipality. Here there is also a continuous focus on quality and nutritionally healthy food, which is uncommon in Lithuania since the majority of Lithuanian schools, as a result of their contracts with food provisioning companies, often have the dominant goal of making a profit. This means that sometimes less attention is paid to food quality.

Through these local initiatives, Rietavas municipality has been supporting activities which means that local producers are able to sell their produce at the schools as at least partly a consequence of a local policy support. Some of the local food actors have also been involved in EU funded projects with the aim of promoting and supporting innovation in the area.

The Milk Road Initiative

An initiative in the region that demonstrates engagement in food-related activities outside schools is the Milk Road initiative. The main aim of the initiative is to preserve dairy traditions and develop unique regional experiences for visitors and tourists by supporting traditional dairy farmers and engaging a wide range of different players, but also helping local producers to sell locally. An additional aim is to bring consumers and tourists closer to the producers of local food products, but importantly to help farmers to collaborate and recognise the mutual benefit of maintaining the network and expanding the collaboration.

The Milk Road initiative consists of farmers, local producers, rural communities, rural tourism homesteads, cultural and creative sector players, artisans from municipalities in Rietavas, Plunge, Telšiai and Kupiškis. They all work together to encourage tourists and city dwellers to meet the villagers, hear their stories, learn and see how cheese and other dairy products are made and taste traditional regional dishes. A tourist route has been established, which can be followed in order to get a better understanding of local producers and consumers. In search of healthier and more natural products, tourists by supporting traditional dairy farmers and engaging in rural tourism homesteads, cultural and creative sector players, artisans from municipalities in Rietavas, Plunge, Telšiai and Kupiškis. They all work together to encourage tourists and city dwellers to meet the villagers, hear their stories, learn and see how cheese and other dairy products are made and taste traditional regional dishes. A tourist route has been established, which can be followed in order to get a better understanding of local producers and consumers. In search of healthier and more natural products, tourists by supporting traditional dairy farmers and engaging

According to the head of the Rietavas Tourism and Business Information Centre, Laima Dockevičienė, the Milk Road initiative has been a tremendous success and has brought tourists to the rural region. The tourist center and the municipality see a lot of value in emphasizing food tourism in the region. The activities and maintenance by constantly making sure the initiative is still functioning and that farmers and local people are ready to invite tourists into their farms etc. are mostly driven individuals with a personal interest in saving the region and attracting visitors.

Although the initiative was, in general, a success, there have also been challenges. According to Laima Dockevičienė, all the participating project partners have faced similar problems related to the fact that there are still only a few tourist routes or educational trails in the country. This leads to poor tourism marketing and a lack of connection of cultural heritage sites to tourism. To date, no developed tourist routes are included in Lithuania’s national tourism strategy. The tourist centre also experiences inefficient use of information technologies and challenges in collaboration between farmers. There are also problems in connection with product sales and marketing due to several of the above-mentioned factors.

Due to this initiative and the identified problems, a mobile consulting, new technology and product demonstration office has been established, which organises mobile consultations, presentations of local products, and the sale of products at fairs and exhibitions.

One of the main actor groups, namely the farmers, has been increasingly avoiding participation. The problem is that farming consumes many hours and their efforts in the network are on a voluntary basis. Also, they do not consider the effort to be worthwhile and, therefore, they do not allocate the necessary time and resources to developing tourism on the farm as an alternative income. Because of the lack of farmers, other actors in the collaboration or the visitors themselves may lose interest. Instead, the challenge of maintaining the Milk Road seems to be increasing every year. The public sector and institutions such as the Tourism Centre are interested in financing the farmers’ participation, but the struggle is to locate sufficient funding that will ensure steady collaboration.

Challenges for local public food strategies in Lithuania

Governmental interest in food strategies is still lacking in Lithuania, which may also be reflected in regional interest and regional economy. The need for a processing centre or hub has been discussed in Rietavas Municipality, but the idea has been hampered so far by procurement laws and the understanding that the municipality does not have the authority to change them. Head of the tourist centre in Rietavas, Laima Dockevičienė, expresses the need for changes to be made to the procurement laws as follows: “Although farms can produce healthy, high-quality food products, it is still difficult in Lithuania for local producers to access public sector companies due to strict procurement procedures and exclusion of SMEs.”
In general, municipalities in Lithuania do not apply local food strategies. Rietavas municipality is unusual in Lithuania in that it has started playing a more active role than previously. According to several actors one option could be to create National Food Council, which could focus on regional economy within a food strategy. Rimantas Čutkas, a scientist at the Vytautas Magnus University Agriculture Academy, emphasizes that not everything should run by market economics: “We also need to keep high attention on social economy, especially on regions and SMEs, this way they could revitalise and produce local goods.”

According to Blumberg & Mincyte (2019), the local markets and infrastructure already exist and have been throughout the different political regimes and governance models. Local food is still a common thing in Lithuania according to the authors. People are still oriented towards their local heritage in their eating culture, and they value the local products although the globalization has also formed the consumption patterns the citizens of Lithuanians. By putting greater political focus on more community-based engagement, public policies could start playing a more active role than previously. According Atkociuniene et al (2018), since 2018, there has been a focus on achieving a more transparent organisation of food purchase tenders in municipalities.

Besides funding gaps, there is also a lack of understanding of how food strategies or innovation focus could work in the future. Thinking big and making strategies for the long term is not a common in rural areas in Lithuania according to Laima Dokičienė. Many people in rural Lithuania still only seek to evaluate and appreciate the physical results of innovative action such as improved infrastructure in their area. It is not easy for local and regional societies to understand all the implications of “the fruits from the future”. Rather there is a dominant discourse of wanting results now. This skepticism of more central and long-term solutions is a feature of life in Lithuania and is probably due to its history of having a dominant state structure that takes away the freedom of choice, and where people do not trust the public sector or government.

This complicates the process because the authorities spend a substantial amount of their time trying to convince people about the usefulness of public initiatives. Since the 1990s, a neoliberal discourse has dominated the governance approach in Lithuania, which led to substantial liberalisation of farms and markets. In order to survive, many farmers revitalised existing local food infrastructure from the Soviet period and before (Blumberg & Mincyte 2019 ).

What can Food policies contribute

Atkociuniene et al (2018) state that if municipalities were to set up local food systems, in particular, to serve publicly funded catering establishments, there would be a need for local farmers to cooperate and meet the needs of the local market. Such opening up of the local market would help to preserve the diversity of local food products and it would become one of the few viable social inclusion solutions to improve the situation of small and medium-sized farmers and entrepreneurs in rural areas. According to the authors, this would be in line with the provision of the current governmental programme, which declares that “one of the main priorities for Lithuanian agriculture is to maintain the viability of small and medium-sized farms” (Atkociuniene et al, 2018).

A new food hub

The municipality in Rietavas sees some potential in creating a new hub for food related projects. One of the municipality’s proposals is to establish a Regional Innovation Centre, which would provide consultancy services, and space for pilot projects in relation to food initiatives.

The Mayor of Rietavas expresses the idea of co-operatives with local enterprises working hand in hand with each other: “[The] Municipality could help with creating local co-operatives. Because it is necessary. For example, a local apple garden wanted to sell their fruit to supermarkets, but it just turned out to be mission impossible, their amounts were too small and they could not compete with producers for example from Poland. That is why we need co-operatives.” Antanas Cemeckis, Mayor of Rietavas

By establishing a hub, there is also another aspect of importance. Local professionals, SMEs and farmers all stressed that local producers need “middlemen” in their activities from producing to selling their products since this is not a key competence of the farmers. The centre could be a platform to help people establish their business ideas and develop innovative products or services and to have science support and a knowledge collaboration station.

Municipal representatives in Rietavas are about to start work on a Strategic Plan 2021-2027, in which, hopefully, they will include the aim to establish an innovation centre and strengthen the financing of farmers’ contribution to local tourist routes. The symbiosis and local political support of all stakeholders at all stages of food production is very needed and appreciated.

Main results

- In general, municipalities in Lithuania do not apply local food strategies as a tool for the development of local food businesses and community development.
- Rietavas municipality is unusual in Lithuania in that it has numerous active private sector food entrepreneurs in farming and tourism; they call for a municipal food strategy to support and develop local food business activities.
- Healthy school meals are supported by national policies and could be a driver for more local food production as seen in Rietavas.
Rural Public Food Policies and Strategies - Case studies from Denmark, Sweden and Lithuania

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