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A MULTI-ACTOR APPROACH FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD CHAINS: A DELPHI EXERCISE TO DEFINE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Findings from research activities conducted as part of the **Strength2Food** project have been assessed through a modified **Delphi method**, to evaluate, refine, and verify the factors that determine the success or failure of Food Quality Schemes (FQS), Public Sector Food Procurement (PSFP) and Short Food Supply Chain (SFSC) initiatives and their economic, environmental and social impacts.

What is the Delphi method?

Named after the Greek ancient oracle of Delphi, who could predict the future, the Delphi method is a technique for **understanding expert opinions on complex issues and problems**. It is a multi-stage procedure involving the initial measurement of opinions (first round), followed by data analysis, development of a new questionnaire based on experts' responses to the previous round, and the second measurement of opinions (second round). The method does not focus on generating one decision, but rather on investigating various views on policy and potential resolutions.

In the Strength2Food project, the team of Professor Konstadinos Mattas from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki led the application of a modified Delphi-SWOT analysis, that sought opinion from 108 experts on critical Strengths and Weaknesses for improving FQS, PSFP and SFSC, Opportunities or strategies to strengthen them and critical Threats or barriers that may confine their development. These critical SWOT factors were derived from project research findings on the determinants of success or failure of FQS, PSFP and SFSC initiatives and their economic, environmental and

social impacts. Experts were drawn from 5 contrasting European countries (France, Greece, Italy, Serbia and UK).

The work contributes to the provision of specific policy and practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to improve the effectiveness of FQSs such as PDO/PGI/Organic, PSFP in primary schools, and SFSC.

Expert opinions on Food Quality Schemes



The findings of the Delphi exercise reveal that **FQS labels remain a significant source of competitive advantage** as they can improve the bargaining power of farmers and food processors within food supply chains, and generate better employment opportunities for

workers in farming and food processing. Moreover, FQS products can provide further economic benefits for the agri-food chain, given that they **generate higher profit per employee at the farm and processing levels** than products without FQS labels. According to experts, there are opportunities for market growth both within the EU and on international markets. Providing producers with better market intelligence to understand and increase consumer demand for FQS products, can aid market growth.

However, experts think that **consumers' weak knowledge and confusion** about the origin of FQS labels **impedes efforts** to expand the sales of FQS labelled products. In some countries and markets, an extra barrier for their sale is consumers' prioritization of other ethical attributes, as animal welfare, environmentally friendly production, or fair trade, compared to FQS labels.

Expert opinions on Public Sector Food Procurement

The application of the Delphi framework highlighted the ability of PSFP to improve pupils' diets. The establishment of **in-school multi-stakeholder forums** to discuss meals and to work collaboratively on menu



development, the **arrangement of food supplier field trips/in class events** as part of the food and health curriculum, as well as the revision of **job roles and career progression for catering staff** can enhancing pupils' access to nutritious and balanced meals.

Among the findings, an **opportunity** emerged that relates to the **environmental benefits** of better school meals. In particular, according to experts, better monitoring needs to be implemented **to reduce plate waste** in the canteen and to mitigate the environmental footprint of the meals. However, **budget pressures** that affect spend on food and staff (e.g. catering staff, canteen supervisors) exert a **negative influence** on PSFP and put it in a precarious position.



Expert opinions on Short Food Supply Chain

Regarding SFSC, experts perceive that consumers highly value such supply chains and **regard provenance as important**. Experts also believe that SFSC provide important employment opportunities for women. Furthermore, the **creation of an EU labelling scheme** for SFSCs has been identified as a mechanism to strengthen the effectiveness of SFSC, given that **it could increase consumer recognition of SFSC**.

Concerning the **threats** to the development of SFSCs, experts considered particularly salient **food seasonality** that limits regular sales and that often a majority of **consumers are unwilling to pay more** for products traded in SFSCs.

Policy and practical recommendations



Based on the Delphi study, a set of **policy and practice recommendations** to improve the effectiveness of Food Quality Schemes (FQS), to strengthen the Public Sector Food Procurement (PSFP) in primary schools, and to stimulate the Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC) at

national, EU and international levels have been defined.

Concerning **FQs**, they generally provide superior benefits, in terms of economic, environmental and social impacts on rural territories, as they create value for farmers, consumers and the whole production system. However, they are still a niche activity that would benefit from policy intervention to generate benefits for a wider group of farmers. Intervention is warranted on both the supply and demand sides. In particular, **policy makers** should:

- Promote involvement in, and sales of, FQs, as they enhance the bargaining power of farmers and generate higher profit per employees
- Develop and implement EU and national policies to enhance intra-EU trade of products and to boost their sales to international markets
- Adopt coherent and coordinated EU policies to generate public goods through the FQS
- Encourage the use of Geographical Indication (GI) products as ingredients in “new” products, under a protection regulation
- Develop policies and mechanisms to raise consumer awareness and knowledge about FQS.

From a practical perspective, this means that **producers and processors** should:

- create specific communication campaigns promoting FQS and
- adopt a smart food labelling system reducing the complexity of different logos and improving the information available to consumers.

With reference to **PSFP**, **policy intervention**, to improve the nutritional quality of school meals and to reduce negative impacts on the environment, should consider:

- The development and the adoption of guidelines on the procurement of soft drinks (other than milk and water) that accompany primary school meals
- The incorporation of environmental and socio-economic criteria in procurement contract awards
- The development of policies and mechanisms to minimize plate waste in canteens



- The provision to authorities of additional financial resources to spend on improvements to primary school meals
- The definition of strategies to boost expenditure on staff recruitment and retention (e.g. catering staff, canteen supervisors)

At a practical level, **stakeholders** (teachers, nutritionists, catering staff) should:

- Organize multi-stakeholder forums (e.g. suppliers, catering staff, pupils, headteachers, etc.) to develop school menus
- Organize field trips for schoolchildren to visit food suppliers, as part of the food and health curriculum
- Revise job rules of catering staff and integrate them into other available school-based activities to improve the connectedness of such staff into wider school life.

Regarding **SFSCs**, its evolution is imperative, to become more cost-effective, resilient and more flexible in unfamiliar situations such as the unexpected crisis the world is trying to manage. In this context, policy makers and practitioners should contribute to its reform:



- Using SFSCs as a mechanism for the advancement of careers for women in logistics and retail activities
- Creating and promoting an EU labelling scheme for SFSCs that allows for consumer recognition and trust. This can aid the transition to sustainable nutrition, where interested consumers become responsible citizens
- Coordinating and harmonizing policy measures with increased access, awareness, and empowerment of consumers to choose healthy and tasty food, promoting the transition from food consumption to responsible eating behaviour, characterized by care, awareness, and responsibility.

Conclusion

The Delphi method was applied with experts from five European countries. Different perspectives across countries are apparent in terms of how they perceive the functionality and effectiveness of FQS, PSFP, and SFSC. However, the results of the analysis indicate that a consensus exists; with agreement that such initiatives have a positive impact on the development of rural territories and require a holistic and coherent policy approach for their effectual consolidation and implementation.

Policy measures must be coordinated on both the supply and demand sides, meaning that the availability and affordability of food through FQS, PSFP and SFSCs must also be harmonized with increased access, awareness and empowerment of consumers to choose healthy and tasty food.

Towards this direction, EU policymakers should focus on a holistic approach that will emphasize:

- (i) the economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability of FQS, PSFP and SFSC;
- (ii) integration between sectors, policy areas and levels of government;
- (iii) participatory decision-making processes for stakeholders involved in these initiatives; and
- (iv) a combination of mandatory measures and incentives to accelerate the transition to sustainable food systems and improve their effectiveness.

