

## Rome, Italy: A Model in Public Food Procurement What Can the United States Learn?

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*The school meal is at the forefront of the debate about the health of our young people ... a prism through which we can examine some of the larger questions that face us today.<sup>1</sup>*

There has been a remarkable (and enviable) shift in Rome's school meals – something on the order of a truly green revolution. If the food is not organic, you can probably count on its being seasonal and locally/regionally sourced or fairly traded (as with the bananas and chocolate), and always cooked from scratch. Environmentally-friendly equipment, cleaning products and the like are standard fare since Dr. Silvana Sari designed and introduced her ALL FOR QUALITY food procurement principles to Rome schools in 2001.<sup>a</sup>

With strong support from both Rome's Mayor and the Counselor of Education, the school system – under the leadership of Sari – laid the groundwork of ALL FOR QUALITY through a series of contract changes that continue to evolve. While recognizing that Rome's approach is quite different than the regulatory and contracting protocol followed in the US and that the food culture is still even more different, the city's transition is still an important one to watch.

This briefing paper will:

- examine the recently introduced food procurement changes and their cost implications based on a series of lectures given by Dr. Sari and Dr. Roberta Sonnino<sup>b</sup> in the New York metropolitan region during the spring of 2006;<sup>c</sup> and
- reflect on key similarities and differences between meals programs in the US and Rome, as understood by a group of Americans involved in school meals work who participated in a seminar conducted by Drs. Sari and Sonnino at that time.

### Background on the School Meals Program in Rome, Italy

In the spring of 2007, the school meals program in Rome, Italy will enter its third round of tendering to support its ALL FOR QUALITY principles introduced six years ago.<sup>d</sup> Arguably, Rome's efforts are the most far-reaching worldwide – in terms of systems change – to support a “big tent” definition of health, one that includes the social and nutritional health of the child along with a clear philosophy of environmental stewardship. Interestingly enough, no one event seems to have triggered the profound change in Rome. Instead, more like a slow-moving train, deep and longstanding cultural traditions about food in Italy, together with a long history

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<sup>a</sup> Dr. Silvana Sari is the Director of School and Education Policy for the City of Rome.

<sup>b</sup> Dr. Roberta Sonnino teaches in the School of City and Regional Planning at Cardiff University, Wales and is a member of the research team monitoring changes in school meals in Italy and the United Kingdom.

<sup>c</sup> These included: Baum Forum: Schools and Food Conference; Pre-Conference Seminar on Public Food Procurement in Schools; Annual Meeting of New York State Farm-To-School Initiative; interview with Jan Poppendieck, Hunter College sociologist writing a book on school meals; NYC Department of Education, Office of SchoolFood; Program in Nutrition, Teachers College/Columbia University.

<sup>d</sup> Tendering is roughly the equivalent of the bidding and contracting process used by school meals programs in the United States.

in sustainable food procurement have confronted a cluster of dilemmas: increasing numbers of overweight and obese children, specific concerns about BSE and pesticide residues in food and a more generalized food anxiety across the European Union.

School meals represents 40% of public catering in Rome, serving approximately 140,000 meals each day plus a mid-morning snack for all (rather than a School Breakfast Program as in the US). Of the total meals served, 4,000 are based on special recipes for medical, ethical or religious reasons. 92% of the schools prepare their own meals on site in 645 different schools (for three to 14-year olds) and 180 kindergartens for the children up to three years of age. When children enter high school at 14 years of age, they begin their school day quite early and return home for lunch and the rest of their day.

The basic program structure is almost entirely privatized – in this case, private food companies employ the staff needed to prepare and serve meals in publicly owned facilities.<sup>6</sup> The national health care system in Italy is responsible for the employee's health care, not the responsibility of either the contracting food company or the school system. The framework of the contracting process divides the city into eleven lots. Per "lot", the estimated number of meals ranges, from a low, of approximately 2.9 million meals to a high of 4.3 million. While food companies may bid on as many "lots" as possible, no one company can receive an award for more than two of them.

Instead of the "one-big-company model" typical in the US, current contracts with six companies were selected from a pool of 57 smaller food companies. The companies provide the lunch service plus a mid-morning snack. A three year contract supports both a steady amount of business as well as a certain competitive edge (only 3 years). The fact that so many companies competed in the most recent round suggests that school meals in Rome is an appealing market to local food companies, even with the profound changes that have been introduced.

Rome has a staff of 70 nutritionists (responsible to Sari) who help assure that menus, as planned, provide the Levels of Intake of Energy and Nutrients recommended by the Italian Society for Human Nutrition and follow the guidelines of the National Institute for Research on Food and Nutrition. Local Health Authorities monitor for health and hygiene concerns. Using a checklist designed by Sari's staff, an elected parent Canteen Commission with major responsibility to inform other parents about program quality (two parents per school) check how well the food conforms to the citywide menu, how it tastes and product expiration dates. The City contracts separately with a specialized company to carry out inspections (e.g., perform lab analyses, verify designations and certifications, conduct HACCP analysis, check hygiene of the rooms, examine organization of the work in compliance with contract and so on) – currently of which approximately 1,100 are conducted each year. Finally, the City itself is also responsible for financial controls. Information generated from any of these monitoring sources becomes the basis to impose sanctions on the food companies, as needed. Sari views all of this monitoring of equal importance to the reformed tendering (bidding) process itself.

Looking back to 2000, Sari describes the school meals at that time as being of poor quality. The food was mostly conventionally-produced, not much of it organic with little attention paid to seasonality, variety, and balance between caloric and nutritional content. She also viewed the monitoring system as ineffective. The cost of the meal, in terms of food and labor, was equivalent to \$4.81 at that time – just about double the reimbursement rate for school lunch in the United States. Sari believed that Rome could do much better by:

- being more specific in its tendering (bidding); and
- monitoring the food contracts more closely to assure compliance.

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<sup>6</sup> Most school systems in the US hire their own staff to prepare and serve school meals.

Her assessment led her to study all stages of the food chain – from its supply, to processing and packaging and through preparation. The new tendering process reflects her understanding of this more elongated food chain.

The cost of the lunch is born by the municipal government and, to some extent as in the United States, the families themselves. No money is handled at the individual school level.<sup>f</sup> Families paying the full monthly cost per child pay \$49.76 directly to the district office. This cost is reduced by 25% for families earning less than \$15,547.00 per year. Sari estimates that probably 30% to 40% of the families who should be paying, according to these guidelines, do not. Lunch is free for families who earn less than \$5,165.00.

## **A typical mid-morning snack and a typical school lunch in Rome in 2006**

### **Mid-morning snack**

Typical foods include a banana, jam tart, chocolate on bread, or yogurt (banana and chocolate are fair trade products).

### **Lunch**

- 1) *First course* – pasta, rice, soup or pizza – for example: primavera orzotto, parmigiana rice, vegetable soup with pearl barley, or pizza margherita
- 2) *Second course* – meat, fish, eggs, lentils, cheese or cured meats – for example: chicken breast with olives, cod fillet au gratin, omelette, mixed caciotta cheese, or tiny/thin slices of meat
- 3) Vegetables – cooked or raw
- 4) Fresh bread
- 5) Seasonal fruit
- 6) Water

## **ALL FOR QUALITY guiding principles of change**

Before looking at the specific changes introduced, it is helpful to consider some of the concepts that guided the overall change process in Rome. Sari found it essential to:

- Study the market capacity to accurately gauge the rate, type and extent of change possible.
- Strive for a gradual change that incorporates new elements and assesses the impact of these elements in order to make the appropriate corrections.
- Assume that making corrections is an inevitable part of the change process.
- Establish an ongoing contract monitoring process
- Use the monitoring process to impose real sanctions for all violations – large and small.
- Be transparent and consistent in approach.
- Be creative.

Contractual change with the food companies and proactive monitoring to verify compliance was the two-prong lever for Rome’s radical change. In Sari’s words: “It is easy enough to write the rules but it is very difficult to control that they are implemented. That is much more important.”

Different than in the US, the food companies are responsible for more than food in Rome. The contracts are based on a 100-point system to provide “best value,” not simply lowest purchase price. In this framework, the purchase price of the food accounts for 51 points, the single most important criteria. The other 49 points include a mixture of infrastructural

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<sup>f</sup> In this way, Rome bypasses all the paperwork at the school level – a major source of frustration and complaint in American schools.

support and changes in the type, or quality, of food made available. Support for the infrastructure includes:

- Improving the kitchens, canteens and furniture;
- Training course and informational campaigns; and
- Organizational features of the meal service – adequate staffing, hiring of qualified personnel, monthly debriefing meetings with food companies and so on.

In terms of the type or quality of food available, Rome aims for characteristics such as place of origin, organic production, products from bio-dedicated food chains, and fair trade.

Using the principle of gradual change, Sari weighted the three criteria (price, infrastructure and food quality) differently in the two three-year contracts she has led during her tenure to date. With price as a primary concern (51 points), she defined the rest of the criteria (49 points) according to the condition of the meal system as each contract began – the first running from 2002 through 2004; the second from 2004 through 2007. In this way, the specific criteria would continue to be adjusted over time to “fit” the needs at the school level, correcting trouble spots as they inevitably arise. Also, in light of the success and what was learned during the 2002-04 contract period, the City invested 166 million euros during the second contract period. For the most part, this investment has institutionalized the monitoring mechanisms now in place.

### **First contract period, 2002 through 2004**

The most significant change was the introduction of organic food, which had not been included in any tender prior to this. In 2001, the Environmental Section of the Health Agency reported on the amount of pesticide residue in conventionally-grown fruits and vegetables. Because of these data, the meals program initially sought only foods that were organically grown. Rome increased the organic ingredients in school meals from approximately 10% to 70%, an outcome initially viewed as an impossible by many food companies. To accomplish this, Sari studied the market well enough to know which organic foods could be introduced to the schools without a negative impact on the market.<sup>g</sup> Within this contract period, the school system steadily increased the organic foods along with an increase in meal price. In the 2002/03 school year, the cost was \$4.31; with the introduction of more organic foods in the 2003/04 school year, the cost increased to \$4.68.<sup>h</sup>

In addition to organic fruits and vegetables, the first “reform” tender called for:

- Balancing caloric and nutritional intake;
- Serving three different kinds of fruit each week;
- Prohibiting GMOs in any of the food;
- Compulsory inclusion of PDO products (Protected Denomination of Origin)<sup>i</sup> or PGI (Protected Geographical Indication)<sup>j</sup>;

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<sup>g</sup> The small size of the Italian organic farm sector relative to the new design of the school meal program (140,000 servings of specified foods each day) led Sari to work closely enough with organic producers to know that their supplying the city schools would not prohibit other potential market opportunities. She was assured by them that beginning with fruits and vegetables would certainly not cause any harm.

<sup>h</sup> Note that these costs are lower than those of the previous contract period even with the introduction of a significant amount of organic food. For example, by 2003, 70% of the foods in Rome’s school meals were organic.

<sup>i</sup> PDO indicates a product whose features and qualities essentially and exclusively depend on the place of origin. The current rules prescribe that all stuffs and processes must be carried out in the place of origin. (Taken from: [At school with more taste: The catering service in Rome’s schools](#))

<sup>j</sup> PGI distinguishes a product that has a link with the territory of production as well, but this link is not so tight. In fact, to be a PGI product, it is required that the origin of the product is from the place where it

- Forbidding the use of frozen vegetables except for peas, green beans and spinach;
- Replacing milk with water, which in Rome is naturally high in calcium coming from the Piedmont region; and
- Decreasing the amount of meat and increasing the amount of plant-based proteins.

During this period, Sari's team increased the number of monitoring visits (160 in the period prior to her arrival) to 1,200 which, in turn, led to the increase in fines/sanctions on the food companies from 7 to 450. Clearly, the city of Rome fully intended to hold the food companies accountable to the newly introduced standards.

### **Second contract period, 2004 through 2007**

With one successful contracting period accomplished and with the increased financial support of the City, the "100 points" tender process has continued to drive change in the system. In the second round, a seasonal "face" was introduced using summer and winter menus, shaped by 5-week menu cycles. Menus change every week and no dish is to be served to children more than once a month. The range of organic food has expanded beyond fruits and vegetables to include olive oil, canned tomatoes, cheese, bread, baked products, cereals and legumes, pasta, rice, flour and eggs. Frozen fish fillets have replaced processed fish products and fair trade chocolate and bananas have been introduced. Finally, contracting firms must guarantee that quality and safety are assured at all stages of the food chain – farming and breeding practices, transport, processing, packaging and preparation of food.

Significantly, the contracting companies also agreed to:

- Replace plastic knives and forks with silverware and dishwashers;
- Increase use of eco-friendly building materials;
- Increase recycling by distributing non-utilized foods to facilities that feed the poor;
- Increase recycling by distributing partially-utilized foods to animal shelters;
- Reduce production of waste throughout process;
- Decrease food miles to decrease pollution; and
- Replace rectangular tables with square tables to promote interaction during meals

These changes have led to an increase in the meal cost to \$5.09, along with an increase in the number of monitoring visits to approximately 3,500. Sari is pleased to report that the number of fines/sanctions for non-compliance have decreased to 107, the decline suggesting that the contracting firms now really "get what is expected of them".

### **Reflecting on issues of policy and program cost ...**

The participants in the technical seminar given by Sonnino and Sari in New York City could not help but reflect on what was so different and striking about schools meals in Rome and, at the same time, curiously, what was similar to American schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Certainly, there are lessons to be learned from becoming aware of how another country approaches the feeding of its children. We have tried to capture these reflections in the notes that follow.<sup>k</sup>

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receive the designation but, unlike the PDO, it is sufficient that only one step of production is carried out in the place of origin. (Taken from: [At school with more taste: The catering service in Rome's schools](#))

<sup>k</sup> Participants in technical seminar and others who shared reflections on the similarities and differences between the two school meals systems: JoAnne Berkenkamp (independent consultant); Siena Chrisman (World Hunger Year); Fern Estrow (independent consultant); Gail Feenstra (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, SAREP); Joan Gussow (Teachers College, Columbia University); Marion Kalb (Community Food Security Coalition); Kate MacKenzie (FoodChange); Lynn Parker (Food

The importance Italy places on food in its culture permeates everything about school meals, truly defying comparison (both similarities and differences) with the US. In Italy, long meals are central to any occasion. Recipes are discussed at length in everyday conversation. Menus are based on what is in season. Rather than asking one's child about what took place in school that day, a parent is more apt to ask about the food served at lunch. Italian food culture is passionate and self-righteous, embedded with an expectation and entitlement to good food at all times, including in school.

Still, we could not help but to reflect on ...

### **Some of the context that is similar for both Rome and the United States**

- (1) Both are experiencing an escalating problem with childhood obesity.
- (2) Although named differently, both offer two food programs during the school day –
  - In Rome, all children eat school lunch. In the US, 95% of public schools participate in the National School Lunch Program. While not mandatory as in Rome, approximately 29.5 million children participated in the 2004-05 school year.<sup>2</sup>
  - While Rome has no School Breakfast Program per se, it does offer a mid-morning snack to all students. In the US, approximately 9.2 million children participated in the School Breakfast Program in the 2004-05 school year.<sup>3</sup>
- (3) Both follow national nutritional guidelines and menu plan protocols that provide the framework for the amounts and types of food offered to children.
- (4) In both places, there is a convergence of aroused and activated “publics” from a variety of disciplines (public health, law, culinary, anti-hunger, environmental, etc.):
  - concerned about food quality – degree of processing, food safety, pesticides, amounts of fat and added sugars, the meaning of organic, regionally-grown foods, seasonality; and
  - interested in the potential power of public procurement to make a difference.
- (5) There is a common concern that funding is insufficient to change the quality of school meals. While food companies supplying Roman schools initially said that improvement would require additional money, Dr. Sari proved them wrong. US schools work with about half the funding available to Roman schools. Without a change in federal reimbursement rates, or support from local and/or state government, there is probably insufficient funding in the US to significantly change the quality of school meals.

### **Some key elements of difference when comparing school meals in Rome and the United States**

- (1) The contracting model is fundamentally different. Rome contracts with many smaller food companies – each responsible for everything needed in the schools to feed children (food, labor, infrastructure, equipment, etc.) within a specific geographic section of the city. In the US, most school districts operate their own school meals program, a tradition that started 60 years ago with the enactment of the NSLP. Some districts now “contract out” to a single, large food management company.

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Research and Action Center, FRAC); Jan Poppendieck (Hunter College); Leslie Robbins (National Conference of State Legislatures); Silvana Sari (City of Rome); Don Seville (Sustainability Institute); Roberta Sonnino (Cardiff University, Wales); John Turenne (Sustainable Food Systems, Inc.); and Jennifer Wilkins (Cornell University).

- (2) The US uses the “lowest cost bid” approach in an effort to operate within the constraints of federal reimbursement levels. This has led to a number of problems, including questions about the quality of the food served. Rome replaced the “lowest cost bid” approach with one stressing “best value”. In this approach, the school system uses a combination of criteria (purchase price, infrastructure needs and food quality) to award contracts.
- (3) In each round of tendering (bidding), Rome identifies the kitchens and cafeterias needing equipment or structural improvements along with the meals to be provided. Covering these “other-than-food” expenses (along with the cost of food and labor) leaves the \$5.08 meal cost incomparable with federal reimbursement rates in the US. While federal reimbursement had initially been intended to cover the full program cost (as in Italy), this funding has not kept up with actual program costs over time.
- (4) In Italy, government policy privileges locally-grown foods for public procurement. In 1999, the passage of Finance Law 488 explicitly promoted the link between organic AND local food AND public sector catering. Prior to its passage, some 70 schools used organic foods. By 2003, 561 schools reported the inclusion of organic foods in the school meals programs. In the US, federal regulations governing procurement prohibit “geographical preferences” for sourcing, and therefore, prohibit the preferencing of locally-grown foods. Ironically, Farm-To-School legislation is pending in Congress and the initial scope of the Department of Defense (DOD) Fresh Produce Program allowed for the sourcing of locally-grown foods.
- (5) There are no vending machines stocked with food and beverages in Roman schools. Unlike the US, children are not allowed to bring food into school from home or from anywhere else into school. Indeed, the only food available to children is the mid-morning snack and lunch.

**Lessons Learned ... What are some of the important features of change?**

- (1) Clarity of purpose – The two “drivers” of the ALL FOR QUALITY principles of school meals change in Rome are:
  - clear contractual language to describe exactly what was wanted; and
  - complementary monitoring to assure compliance.

Sari made both features transparent for all to see. For example, if food quality meant A, B, and C, then nothing less was acceptable or sanctions were imposed. It seems that Rome decides what it wants to do while in the US, we try to make the best of an NSLP that is not solely designed to support the health of our children.
- (2) Gradualism – Institutional change is difficult and does not take place easily or quickly. The larger the system, the more important it becomes to identify a specific series of steps that can be taken, over time, in a coordinated and incremental fashion transparent to all involved. Sari labeled this “gradualism”. As the steps are being taken, one can monitor the effects – both positive and negative – and continue to make changes as needed.
- (3) The right moment in time – Significant change in school meals programs is taking place in Rome, other cities and towns across the European Union and in the US. In Rome, the driving force for this change lay in the clear two-prong strategy implemented (above #1) along with the leadership of Silvana Sari, backed by the full support of city government (Mayor and Schools Chancellor). Who or what has the power to drive change in the US is an important question to consider. To date, concerns have been raised about the quality of school meals for decades. Only with the recent surge in interest about child health, obesity and diabetes has the question about the quality of school meals seemingly reached a tipping point. It will be interesting to see if the introduction of mandated school wellness policies have the potential to engage even more people in driving change forward.

- (4) Awareness of alternate models of school meals delivery – The basic structure of the Rome school meal system uses many food companies for limited service areas in one city as compared to the “one-big-company model” more common in US wherein school systems “contract out”. To date, this form of privatization has not led to system reform as in Rome.
- (5) Relationship between local and national education policy requires exploration – In spite of a tradition in the US of "local control" of education, most school food policy is made at the national level under the aegis of the Child Nutrition Programs. On the other hand, education about food and/or nutrition for school children slips between all levels of government – local, state and federal. Rather than a systemic approach, interested classroom teachers include food and nutrition education concepts or various (and changing) initiatives receive funding to introduce such concepts. At the least, the foods served in school ought to reflect the basic principles of food and nutrition that children need to understand. If the foods did model such principles, classroom teachers could build curricula around them as in the CookShop Program (New York City).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Morgan. (2004) School meals and sustainable food chains: The role of creative public procurement. The Carolyn Walker Lecture given at the Royal Society, London.

<sup>2</sup> Food Research and Action Center, Federal Food Programs, National School Lunch Program. Accessed August 1, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Food Research and Action Center, Federal Food Programs, National School Lunch Program. Accessed August 1, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> CookShop Curriculum (K-2), FoodChange, Inc., New York, NY.