

CITY FOOD POLICIES



Rome When school canteens become the biggest organic restaurant of the whole country.

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City	Rome
Country	Italy
Population: city area	2,9 millions
Surface area	1.287 sq. km
agricultural areas	517 sq. km

Despite a strong urbanization pressure caused a reduction of 42% of the utilised agricultural area (UAA) between 1990 and 2000, this trend was reverted back between 2000 and 2010, with an increase of the UAA of 14%. This positive trend is specific to the city of Rome, because during the same period, the UAA in the whole province of Rome dropped by 9%.

The remarkable effort of the city of Rome to improve school meals has certainly been a powerful driver to inspire and spin the civil society to engage in successful urban agriculture projects. Thus it would be very useful to assess more precisely what have been the fallouts of the municipality's calls for tender for school food services to foster local food supply chains and what will be the eventual consequences of the trend of backsliding witnessed since the last call for tenders for public Food Service.

Furthermore, this case history shows that it is possible to get large-scale results, by working steadily on specific axes despite there is not yet a comprehensive framework for city food policy. In such a case, Public Food Services on one hand and urban agriculture/local food production on the other hand, appear as two relevant areas of work to combine municipal and civil society efforts. Therefore, the case of Rome shows the importance of both politic and individual commitments to make changes that would seem impossible at a first glance. But it also shows how fragile can be even the best achievements, if long term food policies are not set up to frame the steps and results within a clear-cut line of action beyond electoral uncertainties.

A vivid Roman Agriculture ecosystem

Rome is the capital city of Italy, with 2,9 million residents in 1.285,3 km²; it is also the country's largest and most populated city, ranking fourth in the European Union. Its urban area extends beyond the administrative city limits, with a total amount of population around 3,8 million. Vatican City is just to the north of the city centre of Rome, an independent State within Rome boundaries, representing an example of a State within a city.

The municipality of Rome has a certain degree of autonomy, as a result of its demographic and economic weight and of its specific institutional arrangement, as being the Italian capital. It covers an area comparable to the entire provinces of Milan and Naples, also including considerable areas of abandoned marshland and places even suitable for agriculture and urban development.

Rome is made up by densely populated suburbs in alternation with green areas and important archaeological sites, which are not usable for urban agriculture.

A tradition of strong links between urban population and local agriculture characterized Rome throughout the various historical ages, until the last decades, when the industrialized long food chain has become dominant.

Nowadays, the relations between Rome and its surrounding countryside can be better understood with reference to the spatial distribution of the urban suburbs and settlements.

Among the peculiarities of the area it is worth mentioning:

- the presence of large green areas inside the city, close to the city centre, making the city as very different from classic compact urban settlements, characterizing a copious number of other large European cities;
- a relevant peri-urban historical heritage and environmental richness, with reference to agricultural land, urban and archaeological parks and protected areas, surely linked to the interest of the building sector having and often showing strong economic power and political role ([see more](#)).

Regarding the population, according to the latest statistics conducted by ISTAT approximately 9,5% of the population consists of foreigners, half of it with European origins (Romanian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Albanian) and the other half mainly Filipinos, Bangladeshis, and Chinese.

Tourism is considered to be an effective policy for urban development and for re-launching areas after industrial and post-industrial decline. Rome is indeed one of the most famous destinations worldwide, because of the high concentration of history and cultures combined with expositions, conferences and business (20). Tourism can actively contribute to the improvement of economic and social conditions of the citizenship, but it may also provoke an increase of the environmental stresses, with specific reference to the city food system, including waste management. Thus, public policies are supposed to be able to balance these two opposite trends.

Across the spectrum of Roman sustainable food projects

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To go further:

- INEA, Italian Agriculture 2008 – A bridge version of the “Annuario dell’agricoltura Italiana, Vol. LXII, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2008.

- Roma Capitale – U.O. Promozione Agricoltura: Censimento degli orti spontanei nel territorio del Comune di Roma dentro il G.R.A., 2006.

- Supurb Food. Sustainable urban and peri-urban food provision, Rome City Region Report, <http://www.supurbfood.eu/city-regions/metropolitan-area-rome-italy/>.

- Sustainable Food procurement for school in Rome, http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/pdf/news_alert/Issue14_Case_Study34_Rome_food.pdf.

Researchers from the Italian Institute of Agriculture Economics (INEA) have developed a methodology for mapping all the cultivated fields in the city by photo interpretation and by exploiting the features of the most used web-mapping services, a kind of spatial database concerning urban agriculture in the city of Rome¹. The current version of the database covers a total surface of about 35.000 hectares with a total farmed area of about 400 hectares. The geo-referenced database was realized by interpreting the high resolution images of Google Earth for the year 2007 and 2013, with the aim to allow further analysis on the temporal evolution of the initiative.

Rome is characterized by different forms of urban and peri-urban agriculture, as well as various forms of social agriculture, involving persons with disabilities, refugees, etc. Moreover, the urban area of Rome is characterized by forms of urban agriculture such as small scale semi-subsistence farming usually performed by single households and neighbourhood-based initiatives of collective gardening, mainly aiming at social or recreational purposes.

These initiatives may be grouped in three main typologies, which are represented by:

- small scale semi-subsistence farming and pastoral activities, performed by farmers;
- single households both in small plots of land (along the riverbanks or in other marginal areas) or in large agricultural areas;
- professional farming, mainly in suburban areas, usually led by group of farmers often inspired by social and political movements, mainly aiming to enhance the quality of life and with cultural and recreational purposes (21).

With specific regard to the issues of multifunctional use of land, various interesting activities have been and are still taking place within the borders of the Municipality, and innovative practices are being tested in the effort to find new useful ways for managing farm-based activities closely to the urban centre (22). It is important to underline that professional farming is practiced in various suburban green areas, and many others have a potential for it, even if, as stated, such areas are used to receive a continuous strong pressure from the building sector for the further edification of new suburbs. In various cases farming activities themselves play a role of strongholds for the preservation of the green areas, often because of their environmental and historical values.

In Italy, and so in Rome, local food networks and activities are mostly represented by local farmers-driven initiative and the consumers involvement is often lacking.

The cooperative Agricoltura Nuova is one of the most relevant and well-established initiatives of professional farming in Rome because of the wide range of the activities that it covers and also because it represents a relevant experience for using agriculture and food as a tool for building new forms of social cohesion. On 100 plots, 25 were given to an environmental association to create a green area preserved by urbanization; a social cooperative received part of the land for their pet-therapy activities for disable people and weak communities.

The project Orti Solidali – solidarity garden project – started in 2009, aiming to create a more sustainable way of food consumption, as the slogan clearly evidenced: “We do not sell vegetables, we grow up your garden”. The project's main attempt is to create a closer relation among consumers and producers, acting as a tool to take benefit of the current food climate, in order to encourage a more sustainable production with greater accountability to consumers and with fair returns for producers. Often, farm workers involved in the project are young refugees; this aspect clearly underlines a usage of the land as a tool for social inclusion. Each garden plot is allocated to a family or an individual, who is supposed to pay an annual subscription and receives a fixed amount of vegetables, every week. The yearly subscription is supposed to cover direct costs of the initiative (mainly seeds and tools) and the workers’ yearly salary in order to represent a self-financed activity (23).

Moreover, other famous UA projects with social and economic innovative features are known as Casale Vecchio (Old Farmhouse), Campagna Amica (Friendly Countryside) and Città dell’Altra Economia (City for a Different Economy).

- **Casale Vecchio** is an organic and also biodynamic farm settled in the countryside in the north of the city. The principal activity is represented by the horticulture, which is able to produce more than 30 different varieties of fruit and vegetables grown through biodynamic method. Other activities also include grazing, bee keeping, fruit trees and olive trees, about 250 egg laying chickens and some horses.

The farm was founded in 2006 by a group of families which became also owners of some hectares and was supposed to decide how to use them, according to the regulation of the Regional Park where the site was located. Their social beliefs led to the establishment of a farm aiming to become an inclusive tool for both socially disadvantaged and disabled people.

- **Campagna Amica** (Friendly Countryside) is a Foundation promoted since 2008 by Coldiretti a main Italian farmers' organization, which usually promotes Italian agriculture through a range of initiatives focused on direct selling, rural tourism, land multifunctionality and ecological sustainability. It has created a network of Farmers' Markets all over Italy, currently more than 700, between private actors promoting initiatives dedicated to short chains and local food.

- **Città dell'Altra Economia** (City for a Different economy) is a place, promoted by the City of Rome, where the positive effects of different/alternative kinds of economic initiatives are shown; in this place the most of these initiatives, mainly supported by Cooperatives Association, are linked to food chain and food policy.

Since 2009, the city of Rome saw the rising of urban gardens and allotments experiences, in which part of land are divided into smaller plots, farmed by group of pro-active citizens. Urban gardens may provide a range of services to the population basically leisure time, social and cultural activities, care of the territory, social cooperation and cohesion. The main beneficiaries are supposed to be the persons directly engaged in the activity, but there are also initiatives open to a wider usage such as special events.

These experiences shows the general care for the local public spaces that urban gardens provide and that the Municipality hardly affords, even if often politically sustains, mainly because of some budget inefficiencies that it has to face with.

The School Food Revolution

Regarding the public food service, one of the most important projects deserving to be presented is known as the Quality Revolution, concerned with school canteen service.

Almost 92% of the schools prepare their own meals on site in 645 different schools (for three up to fourteen 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 are not supposed to have lunch at school, since they use to return back home for lunch as for the rest of their day.

Nowadays, school meals represent 40% of public catering in Rome; they offer approximately 140.000 meals each day plus a mid-morning snack for all children (reaching a total amount of 150 tons of food per day, which are 190 day per year); of the total meals served, 4.000 are based on special recipes for medical, ethical or religious reasons.

The "Quality Revolution" project tried to use only organic food in school canteens; according to gathered data, it seemed to be a really complex project to be set up. In the last decade the concept of quality has been widely used to describe the dynamics that have been shaping the system of food and agriculture. The relationship between food safety and quality is discussed in the context of research on consumer risk perception, as a central issues in today's food economics, though many research questions remain to be addressed, (24). In order to understand the nature and implications of the relationship between quality and policy in the public food service sector, in Rome, it is fundamental to start from the analysis that Roberta Sonnino and Kevin Morgan produced in 2008 (25) and concerning the School Food Revolution started 10 years before. The survey shows that procurement policies such as those implemented in Rome share the willingness to create an 'economy of quality' able to deliver the economic, environmental, and social benefits of sustainable development.

When the Law 488/99, providing an incentive to the use of organic food in school restoration, was issued, Rome was governed by a Centre-Left administration and the Mayor, at this time, Francesco Rutelli, was interested in promoting organic within catering service in schools (25). This Finance Law explicitly promoted the link between organic and local food in public sector catering. Indeed, Rome has employed an incremental approach to designing its food and catering tenders and its food service, to gradually make these more sustainable and innovative, since 2001.

The strategy involved representatives from the organic certification bodies, to identify those products able to sustain the impact of Rome's public food service massive demand. Moreover, nutritionists indicated that fruit and vegetables needed to be prioritized as most beneficial food for pupils' health (26).

Accordingly, a new Roman food service model arose, based on the idea that food security and quality were linked to the meal, which needed to be considered as an educational experience as the enhancement of children's health and safety started to be as the paramount and fundamental goal of its school food revolution. As a consequence of this re-focussing, organic and 'bio-dedicated' products have been prioritized because of the absence of pesticide residues (25), thus being much more beneficial for pupils' health.

Considering the large market involved, contracted companies requested and obtained a dialogue with the Municipality authorities, in order to produce a shared willingness and direction (26). The Central Department of Education actively promoted and monitored the new initiative, also by performing autonomous inspections through its dieticians. Contractual change with the food companies and proactive monitoring to verify compliance clearly represented Rome's radical change.

In 2004- 2007, Rome public food service actively increased the organic ingredients in school meals from approximately 10% up to 70%, an important result that made of Rome's school canteens the biggest buyer of organic food at national level. Moreover the city's approach enhanced the market in terms of sustainability and quality and companies are now aware that they face a public administration which requires strict compliance in order to continuously improve their own performance. During this period, school menus changed every week and no course was supposed to be served to children more than once a month. Moreover, the range of organic food 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 replaced processed fish products, also, and fair trade chocolate and bananas were introduced. In parallel, according to the strong environmental impacts of meat production, in particular water consumption, meat has been served in Roman schools for a maximum of twice a week. It has been estimated that this reduced consumption of meat has contributed to save 5.783 m³ of water consumption on a yearly basis.

The most innovative call for tender concerning organic food distribution within school canteen service covers the period September 2007 – June 2012 and has a base value of approximately €355 million. In particular this call for tender used the criterion of guaranteed freshness for some of the vegetable and fruits: no more than three days between harvest and consumption, with the intent to combine food quality and local production.

Coherently with school meals achievements, no vending machine stocked with food and beverages is allowed in Roman schools; moreover instead of allowing children to bring (junk) food into school from home or from anywhere else into school, a mid-morning snack is offered by the school canteen service.

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