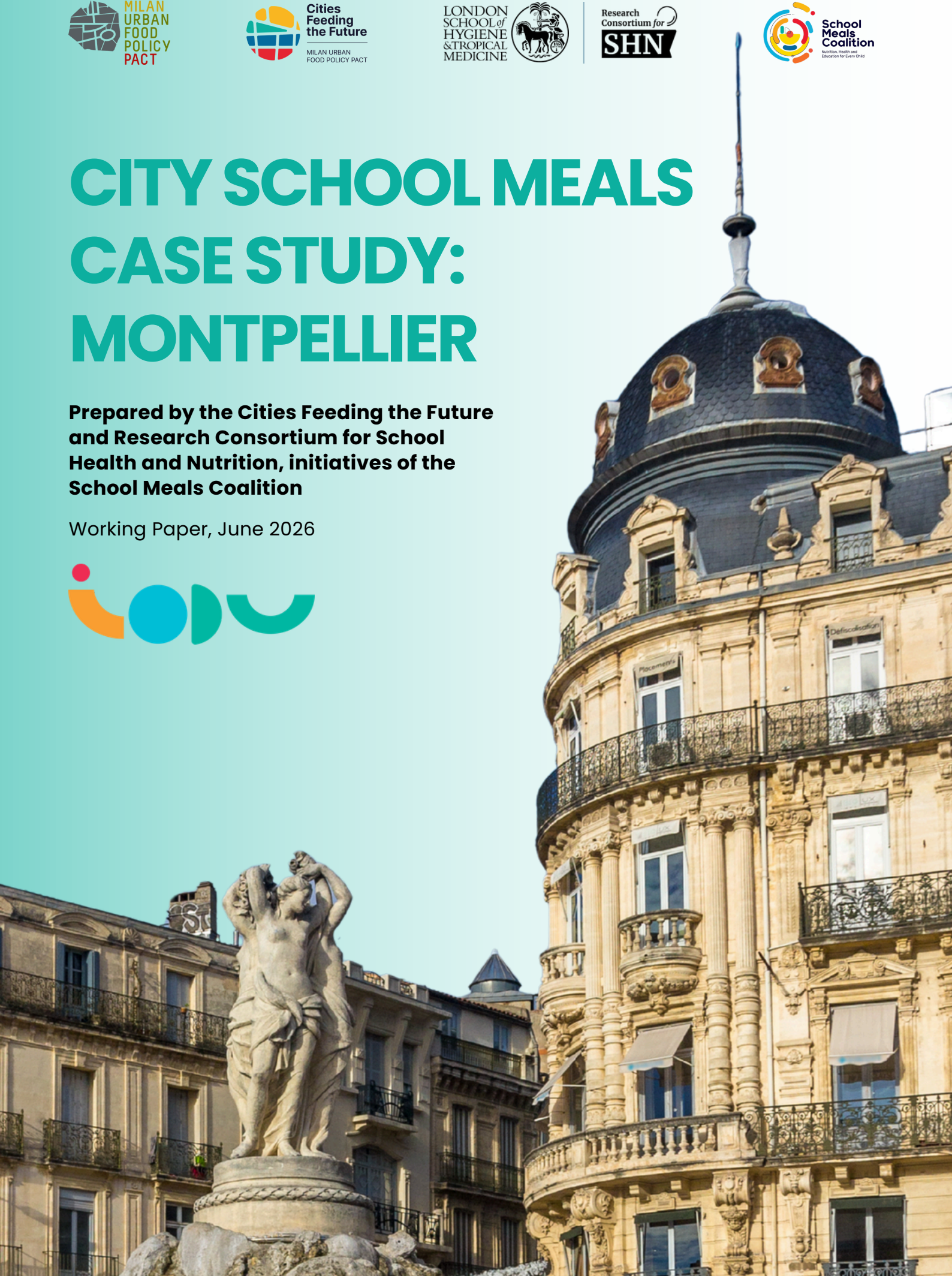


CITY SCHOOL MEALS CASE STUDY: MONTPELLIER

**Prepared by the Cities Feeding the Future
and Research Consortium for School
Health and Nutrition, initiatives of the
School Meals Coalition**

Working Paper, June 2026



Prepared by the Cities Feeding the Future and Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, initiatives of the School Meals Coalition

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Background

Montpellier was selected for this case study due to its leading role among major French cities: as the seventh-largest city in France by population, it was one of the first to engage in a multidimensional school meal policy, integrating environmental, educational and social objectives. In 2016, the city's Food Policy Department launched the *Ma Cantine Autrement* (MCA) programme (rethinking school meals programme), initially designed to improve the nutritional quality of school meals and to increase the proportion of organic and locally sourced products. Over time, the programme expanded through partnerships with local producers and the development of new supply chains, thereby strengthening the link between local agriculture and public procurement. Today, school meals in Montpellier is part of a sustainable food policy structured around three pillars:

- **Health**, through balanced meals, the reduction of ultra-processed foods and the introduction of organic products;
- **Environmental protection and climate action**, thanks to the use of seasonal and organic products that promote agroecology;
- **Social accessibility**, through fair pricing.

This strong commitment to sustainable food systems led Montpellier to host, in 2019, the 5th Annual Gathering of the Milan Pact. During this event, the city received a special mention in the "Food Supply and Distribution" category, in recognition of its efforts to promote sustainable food in school canteens through increasing the share of locally sourced and organic products.

This recognition underlines Montpellier's role in transforming school food systems and makes it a relevant case for analysing innovative approaches within the Cities Feeding the Future initiative and, more broadly, within the Milan Pact network.

City profile

Population and economics

Montpellier is a major urban centre in southern France and serves as the prefecture of the Hérault department. It is one of the fastest-growing cities in the country (+1.4% on average per year),¹ and covers an area of approximately 56 km². Montpellier is also a major economic, academic and cultural hub, hosting several higher education institutions and research centres.

- City population: 322,000 inhabitants in 2026.²
- Population aged 5 to 19: 52,573 individuals in 2020.³
- School population in 2021⁴:
 - Public primary education (schools): 25,903 pupils, including 9,759 in pre-primary education;
 - Secondary education (lower secondary schools): 12,048 pupils, including 2,716 in the private sector;
 - Secondary education (upper secondary schools): 8,124 students, including 1,143 in the private sector.
- Gross domestic product per capita: 34,843 € in the Occitanie region in 2023.⁵
- Urban poverty rate: 28% in 2021.⁶

Education

Primary education (first level of education) begins at the age of 3 with nursery school and continues at primary school until the age of 11. Pupils then progress to lower secondary school (collège) at 11, followed by upper secondary school (lycée) from the age of 15, where they choose between three baccalaureate pathways: general, technological or vocational.

Municipalities are responsible for primary school buildings within their territory, while departments oversee lower secondary schools and regions are in charge of upper secondary schools.

Additional information is available in the national case study.⁷

Urban food policy

Montpellier has implemented a structured local food policy, driven by a broad vision of sustainable food, social justice and education on healthy eating practices. This food policy is based on several pillars of action.

- **Supporting more sustainable and higher-quality food:** Montpellier is committed to providing more sustainable collective catering, increasing the share of home-made products and promoting products sourced from *Marché Gare* (the Montpellier wholesale market) and its producers. This approach goes beyond school meals by helping to structure local food supply chains across the city.
- **Promoting socially inclusive food access:** The creation of *Réseau des Maisons de l'Alimentation Solidaire* (community food hubs), developed in collaboration with residents and associations, constitutes a central pillar of this policy. These spaces will offer access to quality, affordable food products, as well as educational areas focused on cooking and dining spaces. The first opened in April 2026 in the Celleneuve neighbourhood, illustrating a place-based and inclusive approach.
- **Food education and environmental awareness:** Montpellier places strong emphasis on food education through the deployment of educational kits co-designed with teachers and school meal professionals (dietitians, cooks and quality managers). Among these tools, the city is finalising the prototype of a mobile kitchen designed to deliver cooking classes in schools, along with activities on sustainable food and agroecology. The aim is to strengthen links between the *Cité de l'Alimentation* (urban food hub), schools and local stakeholders.
- **Participatory governance and civil society engagement:** The school meal monitoring committee (COSUI), established in the early 2020s, provides a formal platform for dialogue bringing together stakeholders (local authorities, education actors, families and partners). It structures exchanges and supports coordination among those involved in school meals. This body thus contributes to the structured and inclusive nature of the local food policy.⁸

National framework of school meal programme

The national framework for school meals in France is robust and widely implemented across the country. As with the organisation of schooling, responsibility for primary-level meals lies with municipalities or inter-municipal bodies, while departments and regions are responsible for lower and upper secondary levels. Primary school pupils have access to school canteens, and around 65% eat lunch there at least four times a week.

The main objective of school meals is to meet children's nutritional needs in order to help them remain attentive throughout the day. Lunch accounts for an average of 40% of daily energy intake. School meals also pursue educational, cultural, economic and environmental objectives: developing taste, encouraging balanced eating habits, introducing culinary culture, and raising awareness about food waste and environmental protection.

Specific rules govern the nutritional quality of meals: they define menu composition and the frequency with which certain types of dishes must be served or limited. Across France, meals generally follow the same structure. They are served in dedicated spaces, usually canteens, where children eat seated at tables. A meal typically includes four or five components (starter, main course, side dish, dairy product and dessert), often with a choice for the starter or dessert. Bread is always available, and the lunch break must be long enough to allow pupils to eat in appropriate conditions.

Regarding procurement, since 1 January 2022, the EGALIM law has required (without strict enforcement) local authorities to provide at least 50% sustainable or quality-certified products, including at least 20% organic products. The French approach to dietary guidelines is specific: it is based on the frequency of dish categories served over a cycle of 20 consecutive meals to ensure overall balance over time. Several laws structure this framework, including nutritional standards, food waste monitoring, the introduction of vegetarian menus, and the progressive ban on plastic for cooking and serving. Implementation of this law is weakly monitored, non-compliance is not sanctioned, and its voluntary nature results in low reporting rates by local authorities.

More detailed information is available in the national framework case study.⁹

Description of the school meal programme

Objectives

Initial efforts began with a comprehensive assessment of food waste, followed by measures aimed at reducing it in order to create greater budgetary flexibility. This first phase laid the foundations for a gradual improvement in both the nutritional quality of meals and the quality of procurement. The city then strengthened its commitments, notably through the signing of agreements with local producers and the structuring of supply chains. In 2020, as this dynamic gained momentum, the modernisation of the central kitchen, originally built in 1982, was initiated to accommodate increasing production volumes.

This gradual development helped structure MCA, whose objective is to improve the overall quality of school meals by acting simultaneously on nutritional quality, the sustainability of procurement and the reduction of food inequalities. In this context, the city aims to increase the share of products from organic agriculture and short supply chains, while structuring local sourcing channels.

Since then, MCA has evolved into a systemic project, integrating environmental (food waste reduction), educational (awareness of sustainable food) and social (reduction of food inequalities) dimensions. Each year, the project is adjusted to respond to new expectations from citizens and institutions, with increasingly ambitious targets.⁸

Model of school meal programme

- Centralised management overseen by the municipality.

Types of infrastructures

- Number of Central kitchens (+10,000 meals): 1
- Number of Neighbourhood kitchens (2-10,000 meals): 0
- Number of Kitchens inside schools (500-2,000 meals): 0
- Number of Small Kitchens (<500 meals): 0
- Number of Central warehouses: 1 (integrated into the central kitchen)

Coverage

- **Type of school (private and/or public):** public
- **Children age range:** 3 to 11 years
- **Number of meals served per day:** 1
- **Number of children targeted per year:** 16,500 in 2024
- **Number of school canteens participating in the MCA programme:** 88
- **Number of teaching days per year in one academic year:** 138
- **Number of school meal days in one academic year:** 150

It should be noted that most primary schools are closed on Wednesdays. However, the MCA programme continues to provide meals on Wednesdays as well as during certain school holiday periods, particularly in the 42 leisure centres across the area. There are also 24 private schools and 108 public schools; among the latter, 88 participate in the MCA programme. However, due to insufficient production capacity at the central kitchen, some of the meals intended for schools not covered by the MCA programme are outsourced to private providers responsible for preparation and delivery.

Guidelines

Montpellier stands out for the particularly ambitious implementation of its food policy, which strengthens the sustainability of school meals through menus organised in seasonal cycles, a structured commitment to “home-made” preparation (i.e. meals prepared on-site in canteens), and a sourcing strategy that goes beyond the national thresholds set by the EGAlim law. The local authority also plans for the new central kitchen to produce 100% of meals using organic and/or locally sourced products.⁸

In terms of nutritional guidelines, food composition and food safety, the standards applied in Montpellier are identical to those defined at the national level; they are presented in the case study dedicated to France.⁹

Responsibilities and political commitment

The city’s Food Policy Department is responsible for defining strategic priorities, coordinating their implementation and ensuring consistency with other local public policies. Within this framework, the central kitchen serves as the main technical instrument of this policy, translating objectives related to food quality, sustainability and procurement into operational practice. It is responsible for food purchasing, meal production and delivery to school dining

facilities. It also conducts awareness-raising activities for children and is organised into three departments:

- **The Food Production Department** manages the reception and quality control of raw materials, their storage, recipe development, as well as the production, packaging and distribution of meals.
- **The Technical Department and *Cité de l'Alimentation* Project** oversees procurement and stock management, accounting, maintenance, and supports the development of the future *Cité de l'Alimentation* project.
- **The Quality and Dietetics Department** ensures food safety, nutritional balance of menus, and delivers educational activities in schools.

The Department of Education plays a complementary role in this system, overseeing meal reception, reheating where required, distribution in canteens, and pupil supervision during lunchtime.¹⁰

Types of meal

School meals represent an important component of pupils' educational experience, particularly in terms of taste education and the discovery of food. In this context, the City of Montpellier offers a diverse range of menus and pursues continuous improvement in the quality of meals provided. Between 2020 and 2022, the use of ultra-processed foods was significantly reduced in favour of preparations made on site from fresh ingredients. In addition, all menus are now designed according to seasonal availability, which requires advance planning with producers in order to align local production with the needs of the central kitchen.

Meals provided to pupils systematically include a main course, a side dish, a dairy product and, depending on choice, a starter and/or a dessert. On the basis of the meal plan, four menu options are developed:

- A flexitarian menu (alternating meat, fish, and plant-based proteins),
- A meat-free menu,
- A pork-free menu,
- A vegetarian menu.

In addition, the local authority has introduced six vegetarian menu days each month, served to all pupils without a meat or fish alternative, including two fully plant-based days. Beyond diversifying protein sources and adapting to evolving dietary practices, this measure reflects a deliberate effort to shape social norms aimed at influencing demand and reducing meat consumption for health and environmental reasons.

Each month, families receive a document presenting the menus served, their characteristics (including the origin of products and the presence of organic or locally sourced ingredients), as well as the main preparation methods. This system ensures transparent information on the food offer provided to pupils.⁸

Food procurement

The City of Montpellier implements a sustainable and local procurement policy for the 7 to 8 tonnes of goods processed daily, with the aim of supporting high-quality local production. The following are some of the concrete actions undertaken by the local authority:

- Conducting an assessment of local food supply and demand;

- Continuously identifying new direct producers through sourcing activities and meetings;
- Prioritising quality in public procurement specifications: 80% weighting for quality and 20% for price;
- Increasing the share of organic products: in 2022, the proportion of organic products used in school canteens reached 20%, up from previous years (15% in 2020);
- Increasing the share of locally sourced products: approximately 35% of products come from local producers, with the ambition to continue increasing this share each year. This includes fruit, vegetables, dairy products and meat. The City of Montpellier aims to reach 100% organic and/or locally sourced products by 2026;
- Structuring local supply chains by adopting a lotting strategy in public tenders to support local food systems, segmenting contracts by product and favouring local producers: in 2023, the MCA programme included 88 food product lots. This process is based on in-depth analysis of supplier identification and the definition of proximity, structured into four levels (proximate, local, national, distant). Supply chain mapping tools are used to assess available volumes and the feasibility of integrating these products into school menus. This approach facilitates the development of long-term partnerships, strengthens local supply chains, and progressively supports the introduction of organic and sustainable products;
- Labelling and traceability of organic and locally sourced products to ensure their origin and guarantee food quality.¹⁰

Costs

Table 1: Cost analysis of school meal.

Number of children in schools	21,903
Number of children eating at canteen	20,685
Average cost of a meal (€)	12
Cost of raw material (€)	2.1
Staff costs (€)	4.15
Delivery costs (€)	n/a
Family participation (€)	On average: 2.6€ (range: 0.5-6.55€)
Subsidization from the city per child and meal (€)	5.14
Subsidization from the national government per child and meal (%)	0
Number of teaching days per year	138
Number of school meal days per year	150

n/a: not available

Values given by the school canteen managers in Montpellier (2026).

Financing

Access to quality food for all is a priority for the city of Montpellier. To achieve this, the municipality is implementing a socially inclusive policy. Since September 2020, a €0.50 tariff has been introduced for single-parent families receiving RSA benefits and facing severe financial hardship. Since 3 January 2023, the city has implemented a more progressive and equitable pricing system for school meals in public schools. Under this reform, tariffs are now adjusted according to each family's income and situation. Prices are based on the family quotient calculated by the Family Allowance Fund and range from €1.35 to €6.55. This quotient depends on household income and size. The €0.50 per meal tariff remains in place, and the families benefiting from it have not seen any change to their pricing. The city continues to cover a significant share of the cost of this essential public service (€12 for the midday break, including the meal and supervision).⁸

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation of the MCA programme rely on qualitative mechanisms integrated into the project's governance. These mechanisms aim to ensure ongoing responsiveness to implementation challenges and evolving local needs. The COSUI serves as the central body for analysis and adjustment, enabling regular tracking of actions, cross-assessment of their effects, and the formulation of external opinions to inform decision-making. User feedback is complemented by contributions from the Children's Municipal Council, visits to the central kitchen, and shared meals in schools with parents, which make it possible to gather observations in real-life settings on meal quality and acceptability. All of these mechanisms contribute to continuous evaluation, based on feedback from the field, facilitating the identification of points of attention and the gradual adaptation of the programme.⁸

In addition, the city has administrative monitoring and management tools for school meals based on data on attendance, billing and pricing, analysed according to different user groups. These quantitative data provide a complementary evidence base to the qualitative insights gathered through participatory mechanisms. However, until recently, the municipality did not have a comprehensive and formalised evaluation of the budgetary and social impact of this policy.

In this context, the Occitanie Regional Court of Auditors conducted an evaluation of the social pricing system for school meals over the period 2019–2024. This highlights an increase in attendance, particularly among the most disadvantaged families, reflecting a positive social impact, while also identifying several areas of concern related to financial management, unpaid bills and the persistence of certain inequalities, calling for strengthened monitoring and social support measures.¹¹

At the same time, the city of Montpellier has launched a qualitative and participatory evaluation process, in partnership with research teams, based on the URBAL (Urban-Driven Innovations for Sustainable Food Systems) methodology. This approach aims to analyse the programme's impact pathways and the changes generated across nutritional, environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions.¹²

Good practices

- **Progressive shift towards plant-based menus:** Introduction of a daily vegetarian option, alongside two compulsory vegetarian meals per week and a bimonthly vegan menu, with the longer-term objective of offering a weekly vegan menu. This gradual transition reflects a structured effort to reshape eating habits over time while maintaining meal quality and acceptability.
- **Nutritional diversification of plant proteins:** Systematic combination of legumes with other food groups to ensure complementary nutrient intake, together with the integration of plant-based alternatives such as soy- or almond-based yoghurts. These practices are designed to maintain the nutritional adequacy of plant-based school meals while reducing reliance on animal proteins.
- **Capacity building for kitchen teams:** Implementation of targeted training programmes focused on the use of legumes and plant-based cooking techniques. These sessions aim to improve both the sensory quality of dishes and their acceptance among pupils, while strengthening staff expertise.
- **Reduction of animal and ultra-processed products:** Gradual removal of certain products, such as cured meats (e.g. saucisson), from public procurement contracts, combined with a broader effort to limit ultra-processed foods. The objective is to provide school meals that are lower in salt and sugar, based on clearly defined technical standards and controlled recipes.
- **Food waste reduction strategies:** Deployment of behavioural approaches (“nudges”) to encourage appropriate consumption, such as investing in fruit-cutting equipment to make fruit easier to eat. Surplus food is also redistributed for afternoon snacks or for meals served the following day, reducing waste while improving resource efficiency.
- **Investment in equipment and on-site cooking:** Development of appropriate facilities, including the *Cité de l’Alimentation* and kitchen kits for schools, enabling a wider range of preparations (such as savoury tarts and cakes) and reinforcing the use of freshly prepared, home-made meals.
- **Structured and responsible procurement practices:** Detailed segmentation of procurement lots, with strong emphasis on quality (80%) over price (20%). Procurement specifications incorporate criteria related to seasonality, freshness, product diversity, and animal welfare, while actively supporting local small and medium-sized enterprises.
- **Collaborative approach and stakeholder networking:** Organisation of working groups bringing together a range of public actors (schools, hospitals, universities/CROUS, and secondary education institutions) to share practices, exchange supplier information, strengthen sourcing strategies, and support the development of local supply chains.
- **Educational approach and transparency towards families:** Active explanation of menus to pupils by staff, systematic display of menus in school dining areas, use of clear signage (e.g. organic/local labels), QR codes linking to detailed information, and a dedicated FAQ available online, ensuring full transparency of school meal provision.
- **User involvement in governance:** Engagement of parents through monitoring committees, regular exchanges with suppliers, involvement of children via the

Municipal Children's Council, organisation of educational visits, and use of structured feedback tools completed by staff to continuously improve the programme.⁸

Challenges and learning needs

The MCA programme faces several internal and external challenges that directly affect its implementation, operational effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

Internal constraints

- The relatively recent integration of sustainability criteria into public food procurement, particularly following the EGAlim law and other voluntary initiatives, has significantly transformed purchasing and management practices in collective catering. This shift has brought an additional workload for the teams involved, who must deal with more complex procedures and a more diverse supplier base, while also requiring the development of specific expertise, particularly to manage local supply chains, which are often more fragmented than conventional ones. These constraints may slow down the implementation of changes, generate internal resistance and increase pressure on staff.
- The European legal framework, based on the principle of free competition, represents a major structural constraint. It does not allow explicit favouring of local producers, requiring public buyers to rely on indirect strategies such as quality criteria, seasonality, freshness, varietal selection or production methods in order to steer contracts towards more local supply. Although these practices are compliant, they require specific legal and technical expertise that teams do not always fully possess, thereby reinforcing the programme's operational challenges.

External risks

- Rising production costs for local producers, who have faced significant increases in their expenses since 2020, particularly due to tensions in international markets and higher energy and agricultural input costs. This situation creates economic vulnerability, which may affect their ability to sustainably meet the requirements of public contracts. It also places the local authority in a delicate position, having to balance fair remuneration for producers, budgetary constraints and the need to maintain socially acceptable prices for families. The programme evaluation thus highlights the risk that the city may have to absorb part of these additional costs to prevent passing them on to users or producers.
- The MCA programme relies on complex coordination between multiple stakeholders, including local producers, municipal services, catering teams, partner institutions and users. This coordination requires clear governance mechanisms, effective communication and sufficiently agile decision-making processes. Without these conditions, delays, misunderstandings or a lack of strategic alignment may arise, potentially undermining the overall coherence and effectiveness of the programme.¹⁰

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