

NATIONAL SEMINAR REPORT

School Food Service in a Changing Policy Landscape: From “The Green Deal” to “The Clean Industrial Plan”

April 10th, 2025

International University
College of Turin
Via Cigna 37, Torino



1. Introduction: A Transition That Challenges Public School Canteens

The seminar took place at the heart of the European debate on a just and ecological transition, in light of the shift from the “Green Deal” to the “Clean Industrial Plan”, which is redefining the EU’s priorities. While the Green Deal aimed to reconcile climate action with social justice, the Clean Industrial Plan focuses on strengthening European industrial competitiveness in a tense geopolitical context.

This shift risks undermining the consistency of public policies in key areas such as food, health, and education. In this framework, school catering assumes both symbolic and practical importance: it is one of the most widespread public services, reaching millions of children and families every day, and influencing food habits, environmental balances, local supply chains, and educational opportunities.

The seminar was structured around the Policy Paper “**From Policy to Plate**”, which proposes transforming public catering from a purely technical-administrative tool into **a strategic instrument of public policy**, oriented towards sustainability and social justice.

2. Intervention by Maurizio Mariani — Public Catering as a Systemic Lever

Maurizio Mariani, co-author of the Policy Paper and director of the international platform **Eating City**, opened the seminar with a broad reflection on the systemic role of public catering in today’s economy and society.

A Central but Undervalued Market

Mariani presented a detailed picture of the sector, highlighting impressive figures: over **85 million meals served daily in Europe**, a market worth more than **€81 billion annually, with 35% of it operated by large catering companies** under contract. While often considered just a budget line item, this sector is in fact a **key economic, social, and environmental lever**.

“If we consider the overall value of public procurement in Europe—over €2 trillion annually—and its impact on everyday life, it becomes clear that we must use it to steer the economy toward sustainability, justice, and public health.”

He emphasized how the **industrialization of collective catering**—as evidenced by data on revenue, costs, and employment—has led to reduced economic margins, loss of skilled jobs, and the marginalization of local producers, replaced by logistical platforms and long, opaque supply chains.

Three Pillars for a New Vision

Mariani proposed a paradigm shift based on three essential pillars:

- 1. Environmental** — Reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote seasonality and organic products, combat food waste and excessive packaging.
- 2. Social and Economic** — Promote decent work, relocalize food production, and ensure social inclusion in the supply chain.
- 3. Nutritional and Health** — Provide unprocessed, plant-based, and freshly prepared meals with a focus on nutritional quality.

“We cannot talk about ecological transition without rethinking what we put on children’s plates every day in every school across Europe.”

Tools and Governance for Change

Mariani stressed the urgency of moving beyond the logic of “lowest price wins” in public procurement and called for empowering public administrations with effective and innovative tools:

- **Artificial Intelligence** to assess impacts and performance;
- **Blockchain** for transparency and traceability;
- **Joint training** of cooks, technical staff, and public buyers to ensure consistency in tenders;
- **European digital platforms** for monitoring and benchmarking between cities.

He closed his intervention with a direct appeal to local governments, the European Commission, and civil society:

“We must transform public school meals from a mere service into a political project. Let’s build together a Europe where public food is healthy, local, fair—and accessible to all. Courage is needed. But now, more than ever, is the time to act.”



3. Intervention by Dr. Alberto Ritucci — The Experience of Turin: Between Constitutional Principles and Operational Complexity

Dr. Alberto Ritucci, Director of School Catering for the City of Turin, began his intervention by quoting Article 41 of the Italian Constitution, which states:

“Private economic initiative is free. It may not be carried out in conflict with social utility or in a manner that could harm health, the environment, safety, liberty, or human dignity. The law shall determine appropriate planning and controls so that public and private economic activity may be directed and coordinated toward social and environmental purposes.”

Based on this principle, Ritucci argued that **public procurement should be designed in alignment with constitutional values**, aiming at public health, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and dignified work.

He emphasized that school catering—if managed with purpose—can become a **powerful public policy** tool. Its objective goes far beyond serving a meal: it positively affects **health, education, environmental protection, local economies, and job quality**.

The Evolving Role of School Meals

He outlined how the function of school meals has evolved:

- Originally supporting full-time labor during the industrial revolution;
- Later, as a tool to fight food poverty;
- Then supporting women’s emancipation and redistributing family responsibilities;
- Recently taking on a pedagogical role in promoting health and developing lifelong food habits;
- And more recently, contributing to environmental goals, short food chains, and dignified employment.

Local Supply and Procurement Challenges

To meet these evolving objectives, it is essential to **strengthen the link between collective catering and local agricultural systems**. A key issue identified by the City of Turin is the **need for small and medium producers to organize collectively**, in order to meet the processing and quality requirements of school catering (e.g., deboning, visual sorting).

Producers’ cooperatives are crucial not only to meet volume demands but also to ensure a degree of **homogeneity across different schools**. Alternatively, increased differentiation in supply between schools could be acceptable, provided it is paired with **transparent communication** with families, to overcome prejudice and explain public choices.

Tools for Fair and Sustainable Procurement

In the case of **service procurement rather than raw ingredients**, Ritucci highlighted the **possibility of introducing incentive-based award criteria** in tenders to encourage catering companies to source from diverse-sized suppliers. Such mechanisms—while political in nature—can foster a truly competitive market, reduce concentration, and promote food sovereignty and community resilience.

Another key issue is **fair remuneration for quality**: without an adequate price for sustainable products, companies may submit unrealistic bids, compromising service quality. Moreover, **organic producers may choose not to align their supply** with the demand coming from collective catering channels, instead favoring more profitable markets.

Thus, it is necessary to **set appropriate tender thresholds** and introduce incentives for short supply chains and organic products.

Flexibility, Transparency, and Forward Planning

Ritucci also emphasized the need for **menu flexibility**, with **seasonal product** ranges that can be substituted when supply is limited. He stressed the value of early market communication, to clarify tender objectives and assess supplier capacity. Multi-year contracts also bring greater stability and encourage investment and transformation.

A notable good practice mentioned was the **early publication of municipal resolutions**—even 1–2 years in advance—indicating the strategic direction of future tenders.

He also cited the importance of **early dialogue with transport companies** involved in meal delivery: certain technical requirements (e.g., low-cost hydrogen vehicles or very tight delivery times) can be unfeasible, leading to negative environmental and operational impacts.



Co-Design and Trust

Ritucci concluded by reaffirming the value of co-design, already integrated into Turin's catering contract, as a method for service improvement over time. However, he warned that:

“Co-design is only effective when supported by a climate of trust, and it must be backed by monitoring tools and balanced penalties. Without accountability, promises remain empty.”

4. Open Dialogue with Civil Society and Students

The final part of the seminar featured an **open Q&A session**, with wide and lively participation from the audience. Speakers included members of **civil society organizations, university students, Eating City ambassadors, public foodservice professionals, and institutional stakeholders**.

Participants raised a number of key themes, including:

- the need to **strengthen food education** in school curricula from an early age;
- the **recognition and protection of kitchen and service staff**, as essential contributors to the educational mission;
- the importance of **family and student participation** in the design and evaluation of catering services;
- ensuring greater **consistency between environmental, health, and procurement policies at the municipal level**;
- the need to **rethink food logistics**, both upstream and downstream of the kitchens.

Everyone present had the opportunity to speak, ask questions, and offer proposals, making for a rich and constructive exchange. The **plurality of voices** confirmed that school catering is not merely a technical service but a **cultural, educational, and political issue**—capable of **uniting diverse sectors** around a shared goal: transforming the school canteen into a **space of food citizenship**.



**Funded by
the European Union**



GreenPaths

EUROPEAN KNOWLEDGE HUB ON
JUST TRANSITION PATHWAYS



**International University
College of Turin**



The GreenPaths project is funded by the EU's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement 101112305. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.