

## Why local plant proteins fail to take off? (poster)

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### Abstract

This presentation describes the background for the poster that reports and reflects upon research findings from a study that examined the potential of local plant proteins in promoting more plant-based eating in public catering. The empirical case study was done by following and engaging in a 15-month local plant protein promotion project in Central Finland. Local plant protein cropping could provide a ‘win-win’ solution to support both dietary transition and local rural economies and agricultural livelihoods simultaneously. Thus, we sought to experiment and hoped that a project focused on introducing and broadening the use of local plant proteins in public catering could pave the way for the increased use of local plant proteins. However, plant proteins failed to take off during the project. The research attempted to understand reasons for this. This presentation summarizes how the public actor rationalities create barriers to the mainstreaming of plant proteins, even local ones, in public catering.

**Keywords:** dietary transition, food rationalities, local food, plant proteins, public catering, sustainability

### Introduction

There is a need to shift to more plant-based diets in Western countries due to environmental reasons (e.g., Poore and Nemecek, 2018) and public health issues. Public catering may play significant role in this change (Colombo *et al.*, 2020; Wahlen *et al.*, 2012) as sustainability thinking has been central to it especially in places where the public catering system provides free warm school meals.

However, promoting sustainability does not necessarily lead to promoting dietary transition. Different environmental and social sustainability and justice objectives are in tension and may contradict regarding their commonly interpreted implications (Kortetmäki, 2019). The most pressing tension concerns local food systems. They are worth endorsing for social sustainability and food justice reasons. Yet they are also often animal production dominated in the EU. Since environmental sustainability and health reasons urge a transition to more plant-based eating in Europe, many rural and semi-rural regions encounter a new challenge as their agricultural production is currently dominated by livestock-based production. Thus, calls for more plant-based eating may be seen as threatening local livelihoods and food production.

Public catering is particularly well-equipped to create stable demand base for new products to keep their producers going and growing until the mainstream consumers start to purchase the same products in greater volumes. Simultaneously, public catering can help eaters try new products and adopt new eating patterns. In Finland, public catering serves nutritionally adequate, free warm school meals every school day for all children aged 7–16 and all secondary education students. Studying the prospects of promoting local plant proteins via public catering also helps understand the currently dominant conceptions of normal, desirable, and acceptable food practices that public catering ‘mirrors’ by having to justify its use of public money.

The poster summarizes the results of a study that sought to understand the potential of local plant proteins in promoting dietary transition via public catering. It is based on research that took place

## Section 2

within a 15-month development project in collaboration with local hemp and faba bean producers and processors and public catering actors in three municipalities. Collaborative experiments included testing ingredients, developing new dishes, and serving the new dishes to test groups or whole school groups. The research used the analytical framework of Weberian rationalities, which provides an interesting lens for considering the relationship between empirical knowledge, ethical considerations, and institutional structures. The more comprehensive results have been published as a full journal article (Kortetmäki 2023).

### Results and reflections

Positive vibes surrounded the experiments around plant proteins in different municipalities, yet the upscaling did not happen: local plant proteins failed to take off and remained in the margin or a 'curiosity' product.

Research analysis was based on data collected from the events and from interaction between plant protein producers and catering actors. It used the analytical lens of Weberian rationalities helped understand how the rationalities of public catering prevent them from upscaling the use of local plant proteins. Rationalities in the Weberian sense (e.g., Weber 1958, 1978) are tools for making sense of the world and acting upon it, helping connect separate observations and events into comprehensible wholes (Kalberg, 2011). This way, rationalities are used in reasoning and justifying actions too. The nuanced framework of Weberian rationalities has four types (descriptions summarized from Kortetmäki, 2023):

1. Formal rationalities: regulative and formally institutionalized rationalities, beliefs, and values such as the 'effective use of taxpayers' money'.
2. Practical rationalities: heuristics and principles that help deal with daily challenges efficiently, without exposure to constant cognitive troubles.
3. Substantive (value) rationalities: values held by the actor, often determining the goals that practical rationalities should help reach more effectively.
4. Theoretical rationalities: means for making sense of and organizing factual and other information, and the ways of linking it to action.

The analysis revealed how the formal, practical, value, and theoretical rationalities are strongly linked to the ways in which public catering actors interpret, make sense of, and respond to sustainability demands. This also influences on the perceptions of local plant proteins and their potential in school catering. The essential implication of findings is that the failure of local plant proteins to appear as a particularly sustainable product can be rooted in the combination of institutional, practical and practice-related, value-related, and knowledge-related factors rather than any single aspect of these. Thus, measures that target single aspect such as knowledge provision or formal initiatives to promote their use are insufficient. The findings (Kortetmäki, 2023) are presented in the poster in greater detail but some highlights are below.

Formal rationalities make public catering actors reluctant to take action that could be seen as deviating from perceptions where meat is normal part of dishes (cf. Piazza et al. 2015). Also, sustainability measuring focused on food waste makes the introduction of plant-based dishes risky for actors. Practical rationalities discourage taking any risks that might undermine customer acceptance, such as introducing beans. Substantive (value) rationalities limit the acceptability of various solutions that could be used to overcome the barriers to more plant-based food provision. Theoretical rationalities make domestic and local meat appear as already very sustainable, due to which reasons for using plant-based products provide only a weak motivational incentive.

## **Conclusion and implications**

Results provide important lessons for the need to identify and address the ‘taken-for-granted’ beliefs and conceptions about sustainability and ‘normal eating’ to enable the broader incorporation of local plant proteins. Without addressing them, the win-win-potential of local plant proteins cannot realise. Policy and other measures need to go beyond promoting new products to address and reshape existing rationalities that support the status quo in ‘normal eating’.

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