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Innovating Public Food Procurement: A Case Study of Dordogne's Path to Sustainability

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关键词: 公共采购 | 可持续公共食品采购 | 学校餐饮 | 政策创新 | 多尔多涅省

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how an innovative mix of policy instruments can drive sustainable public food procurement (SPFP) in public institutions. Using the Dordogne Department in France as a case study, it explores the role of governance, capacity-building, stakeholder collaboration, digitalization, and cost management in transforming school food provision. Based on participant observation and interviews, the research highlights how these instruments interact to overcome common barriers and create a resilient, effective procurement system. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers aiming to enhance the sustainability and impact of public food procurement.

1 | Introduction

Sustainability in public administration is integral to strategic long-term planning, risk management, social and economic equity promotion, and resource conservation (Bebbington and Unerman 2018). Sustainable public procurement (SPP) integrates environmental and social considerations into public purchasing decisions, extending beyond mere economic efficiency (Edman and Nohrstedt 2017; Caranta 2022). Defined as the pursuit of balance across the three pillars of sustainable development—economic, social, and environmental (Andhov et al. 2020), SPP builds on concepts like green public procurement (GPP), which focuses on minimizing environmental impacts (European Commission 2016), and socially responsible public procurement (SRPP), which emphasizes fair trade, support for marginalized groups and SMEs, and accessibility (European Commission 2021). Public procurement, accounting for 14% of the EU's GDP, holds significant potential to advance secondary policy objectives (Fregonara et al. 2022).

The multifaceted perspective of SPP is particularly important in food procurement. In the context of food systems, the different pillars of sustainability are deeply intertwined. Activities related to food production and consumption account for about 23% of anthropogenic GHG emissions, making food systems one of the main contributors to climate change (IPCC 2019). Modern agri-food supply chains place significant strains on ecosystems, affecting soil health and biodiversity (IPBES 2019), and contribute to economic inequalities among producers, widening the gap between small local farmers and large agribusinesses (Clapp 2021). Sustainability in food systems is equally important for other socio-economic aspects, such as job creation, support for local economies, transparency and compliance across supply chains, and the health and

well-being of consumers (Johnston et al. 2014). Sustainable practices in food procurement not only directly impact the quality of nutrition but can also lead to overall improvements in dietary habits and reduce the prevalence of diet-related diseases, which pose a greater risk to human morbidity and mortality than substance abuse (Willett et al. 2019).

Food procurement constitutes a significant portion of public procurement budgets (Smith et al. 2016; Neto et al. 2016) and can, therefore, be leveraged by regulators and governments to promote sustainability across all its pillars. However, the successful implementation of sustainable food procurement requires navigating complex institutional, financial, logistical, and relational barriers (Molin et al. 2024; Djojosoeparto et al. 2024). This necessitates an innovative mix of policy instruments that go beyond standard supply chain management practices (Parsons and Barling 2022).

This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of how policy innovation, in terms of creating a synergetic policy instrument mix, can facilitate sustainable public food procurement (SPFP) in public institutions. Using the exceptional Dordogne Department in France as a case study, it examines the inventive use of various types of policy instruments and their positive interactions to achieve ambitious sustainability outcomes in secondary school food provision and catering in the Dordogne region. The central research question guiding this study is "*What are the key policy instruments employed by the Dordogne Department in sustainable public food procurement, and how do these instruments work together to achieve the department's sustainability objectives*?"

Despite increasing SPP research, questions remain about the most effective policy design for overcoming systemic barriers (Deslatte et al. 2024; Mukherjee 2022; Green and Koebele 2024). By analyzing Dordogne's experience, this paper highlights replicable strategies for instrument mix and practical insights for policymakers and stakeholders, illustrating how localized solutions contribute to broader sustainability objectives.

2 | Theoretical and Conceptual Context

2.1 | Literature Review on Policy Instruments in Sustainable Public Food Procurement

SPFP has gained significant attention in academic research in recent years as a critical tool for addressing environmental, social, and economic sustainability challenges within public sector institutions. However, much of the research reduces SPFP's scope to the promotion of purchasing local and organic food, often overlooking the broader systemic changes required for a more sustainable food system (Molin et al. 2021).

The effectiveness of SPFP initiatives seems to depend heavily on the development of robust policy frameworks that establish clear objectives, guidelines, and appropriate policy instrument mixes. Shifting from a single policy instrument to a more nuanced mix has been shown to enhance implementation outcomes (Parsons and Barling 2022). While research shows that the absence of clear policies or guidance often hampers progress (Lassen et al. 2023), Lindström et al. (2022) highlight the role of political commitment in driving SPFP success, noting that municipalities with explicit goals and strong political backing achieve higher uptake of organic food procurement. These findings underscore the need for an integrated approach where policy design, political will, and practical mechanisms align to support SPFP.

While strong policy frameworks are essential, they alone cannot guarantee the successful implementation of SPFP. Comprehensive training and capacity-building programs for procurement officers and catering staff are equally critical. Procurement officers require tools and knowledge to navigate the complexities of sustainability integration, legal requirements, and stakeholder engagement (Sönnichsen and Clement 2020; Testa et al. 2012; Cheng et al. 2018). Additionally, catering staff play a pivotal role in aligning menus, food quality standards, and waste reduction with sustainability goals (Kimberlee et al. 2013; Risku-Norja and Mikkola 2014). Studies demonstrate that the empowerment and valorization of catering staff through training and enhanced status contribute significantly to a more sustainable menu planning (Tregear et al. 2022).

Digital technologies provide additional opportunities to improve the effectiveness of SPFP. E-procurement platforms with integrated sustainability metrics simplify the evaluation of bids against environmental and social criteria (OECD 2019; Ragin-Skorecka and Hadaś 2024). These tools also strengthen communication between institutions and suppliers, ensuring sustainability requirements are met all along the supply chain (Mavidis and Folinas 2022). The municipality of Słupsk, Poland, for instance, utilized digital tools to streamline procurement processes and improve information sharing among stakeholders (Suchomska et al. 2024). Digital innovation not only improves operational efficiency but also addresses challenges related to the decentralization of public procurement (Patrucco et al. 2021).

Multi-stakeholder networks have been shown to address logistical challenges associated with sourcing local food and to improve the availability of sustainable agricultural products (Galloway et al. 2023; Kraljevic and Zanasi 2023; Retière and Darly 2023). Strong partnerships between public institutions and local suppliers create flexible procurement models that support small producers while prioritizing sustainability aspects (Morley 2021). Some studies question the role of parental engagement in food procurement decisions, suggesting instead that parents may contribute more effectively through food education initiatives (Pagliarino et al. 2021).

Although the existing literature on SPFP highlights various instruments and mechanisms, it often fails to account for the complexity of policy instrument mixes in driving sustainable procurement outcomes. Much of the current research focuses narrowly on individual instruments or isolated aspects of SPFP, such as the promotion of local and organic food, stakeholder engagement, or training programs. However, studies that examine how a combination of instruments (such as regulations, economic incentives, capacity-building measures, and informational tools) can interact to overcome implementation barriers are scarce (Parsons and Barling 2022).

2.2 | Policy Innovation and Policy Instrument Mix

Sustainability-oriented policies, such as ones that promote more sustainable food systems, often require transformative approaches to achieve their objectives, as they tackle what Rittel and Webber (1973) famously described as "wicked problems"—issues characterized by high complexity, multiple stakeholders, and no definitive solutions. In this context, policy innovation provides a pathway for crafting and implementing novel solutions that respond to the pressing needs of contemporary societies (Goyal and Howlett 2024). The innovative character of a policy, as explained by Jordan and Huitema (2014), may stem from the inventiveness of its elements, its broader adoption and diffusion, or its evaluated impacts.

This paper focuses on the policy invention arising from the unique configuration of goals, instruments, and calibrations (Hall 1993) employed in the Dordogne case. When analyzing a successful policy design that achieves its intended outcomes, it becomes essential to examine the instrumental mix at its core. Policy instruments are rarely used in isolation (Kern and Howlett 2009). They are more often found in so-called instrument mixes that comprise a combination of various policy tools that work together to operationalize policy objectives (Maor and Howlett 2021; Flanagan et al. 2011). Therefore, rather than focusing on individual instruments, attention must be paid to how these instruments interact, complement, and sometimes counteract one another (Capano and Howlett 2020; Parsons and Barling 2022). Understanding this interplay provides valuable insights into the mechanisms driving the policy's success and its capacity for innovation.

In this paper, we adopt a broad and inclusive definition of policy instruments beyond the traditional categorization of regulatory measures, such as laws and standards, financial incentives, informational campaigns, and voluntary agreements (Bengtsson et al. 2010). As Parsons and Barling (2022) note, the reality of public procurement often calls for a more hybrid range of instruments, which might fall under a single "parent policy" or come with various accompanying distinctive policy interventions that support the achievement of the pre-defined policy objectives.

In our research, we include all instruments actively employed and propagated by the Dordogne Department, regardless of whether they have been explicitly formalized within its procurement policy framework. For the theoretical scope of this section, we also emphasize that instruments may not only target direct outcomes but also shape policy-making processes, stakeholder relationships, and long-term capabilities (Bali et al. 2021; Cejudo and Michel 2021).

The present case study addresses a gap in the SPFP literature, which often lacks grounded examples of how local-level actors translate broad sustainability goals into effective procurement systems. By illustrating how Dordogne overcame typical structural barriers such as fragmented governance, limited procurement capacity, and challenges in supplier availability, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how coherent mixes of policy instruments and institutional arrangements can help overcome these obstacles in practice.

3 | Methods

Case studies are a widely utilized research methodology across disciplines such as social sciences, education, business, law, and health (Simons 2009; Stake 2006; Stewart 2014). They are particularly valuable for exploring complex phenomena (Merriam 2009; Stake 2006; Yin 2014) and generating insights with managerial and policy relevance (Amabile et al. 2001; Leonard-Barton 1990). In this study, we employed a case study approach to investigate the instrument mix of the SPFP policy in Dordogne, with the aim of understanding how a combination of policy instruments supports the ambitious goal of achieving 100% organic, local, and homemade food service in the secondary school canteens.

This case study was conducted within the framework of an EU-funded H2020 research project investigating legal and economic aspects of SPFP at the European level and in selected national jurisdictions.

3.1 | Data Collection

To gain a comprehensive understanding of Dordogne's approach to SPFP, we used ethnographic methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

3.1.1 | Participant Observation

The study involved a 2-month secondment (September 12, 22 to November 11, 2022) of one researcher to the Education Division of the Dordogne Departmental Council in Périgueux, which is responsible for organizing the *Dordogne's 100% Organic, Local, and Homemade School Food Project*, where the researcher worked as an assistant to the Food Procurement Office. Observation visits to three secondary schools were made alongside school managers, catering staff, nutritionists, and public officials. Additionally, the researcher assisted in preparing for the *ECOCERT* audit at one of the schools. This role allowed for active participation in daily activities and close interaction with stakeholders, providing access to rich, context-specific data on how the instrument mix was designed and operationalized.

The researcher also engaged with various institutions and stakeholders involved in agricultural practices and public food procurement to collect data. Visits to the Manger Bio Périgord, a logistical and administrative platform for marketing organic produce from local producers, provided insights into logistics, governance, and tender processes. Meetings with the Agriculture Department covered organic farming support, challenges faced by small farmers, and use of the *Agrilocal* platform, which connects public buyers of food products directly to local farmers and suppliers. Discussions with Agrobio Périgord, a departmental association for the development of organic agriculture, focused on organic supply chains, educational initiatives, and regional seed self-sufficiency. Participation in Farmers' Seeds Day highlighted agroecological practices and native seed cultivation. The researcher also collaborated with the department's Public Procurement

Division and the Lot-et-Garonne Department to examine legal frameworks, procurement strategies, and shared challenges in school catering.

The primary data sources included policy and legal documents, tender documentation from schools, direct observations in public schools, agri-food associations, producer logistical platforms, and farmer sites, along with semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved at different stages of the food procurement process. These sources enabled us to identify the range of policy instruments in use and examine how they were applied to address specific challenges and goals within the Dordogne context.

Following the secondment, three online meetings in March 2023 provided updated data through continued collaboration with the department's staff.

3.1.2 | Interviews

The researcher conducted numerous semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of project participants. Interviewees included kitchen staff (such as cooks and catering personnel), school managers, teaching staff, public procurement officials, members of the departmental divisions of education, agriculture, and public procurement, representatives from local producer associations (e.g., Agrobio Périgord and Manger Bio Périgord), and *ECOCERT* auditors.

The interviews covered key themes, including the policy goals of the project and the role and involvement of stakeholders, highlighting collaboration among local authorities, schools, farmers, and suppliers. Operational challenges and feasibility were addressed, along with the importance of training and capacity building. The discussions also examined the public procurement cycle, supplier relationships, and compliance with regulations. Community perceptions, environmental and social impacts, and ideas for future improvements and recommendations rounded out the insights gathered.

The notes from observations, information from semi-structured interviews, and internal documents, triangulated to enhance the validity of findings, were manually coded using a systematic, iterative approach. This process involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and categories relevant to the research objective of instrument mix identification. The manual coding method allowed for a deeper engagement with the data. To mitigate biases, such as self-selection bias, data interpretations were discussed and cross-checked within the research team.

This study's limitations mainly lie in its context-specific findings, which may not be fully generalizable to other differentiated institutional settings or regions. Although ethnographic methods often pose challenges to replicability because of their reliance on context-specific interactions and subjective insights, this study's documentation of data collection processes and coding strategies strengthens the potential for replication. As Torfing et al. (2024, 1715) and Levy (2008) pointed out, a case study can "facilitate a 'reverse Sinatra' inference—'if it doesn't work here, it may not work anywhere'—at least if the project as a whole appears to be well-designed." It should also be noted that despite all efforts, the risk of subjective bias in the results cannot be eliminated.

3.2 | Information About the Case Study Subject

The French Department of Dordogne has served as an example of good practice for the SPFP of school canteens since 2016. The conscious policy choice of transforming school diets with a vision of healthy, local, and sustainable meals has been brought on by the election of Germinal Peiro as President of the Dordogne Departmental Council (Falvo 2023). He developed the idea of the *100% Organic, Local, and Homemade School Food Project* as part of a broader strategy for the department's sustainable transformation. Dordogne's approach to SPFP stands out among numerous national and regional school food programs (European Committee of the Regions 2018) due to achieving impressive policy outcomes. As of December 2024, all the schools in the department gained *ECOCERT* certifications, with a number of these serving 100% organic meals. Such achievement of meal programs in public institutions is exceptionally rare.

In France, school catering is an optional public service provided and managed at different administrative levels. Municipalities and inter-municipalities are responsible for nurseries (3–6 years) and primary schools (6–11 years), departments for secondary schools (11–15 years), and regions for high schools (15–18 years). Once the service is in place, the local authority must ensure non-discriminatory access for all enrolled children. The local authority owns the school premises, assigns staff, sets the objectives and operating conditions of the catering service, and allocates the necessary resources. Local public employees report to the school director, who acts as the local authority's direct interlocutor responsible for managing the catering service in accordance with the established operating conditions and objectives.

The French policy and regulatory framework for public food procurement has recently seen significant changes with 2019–2023 policies coordinated under the National Food and Nutrition Programme (PNAN). This program includes the National Food Programme and the National Nutrition Health Programme, which prioritize public catering and food education in schools to promote safe, high-quality food. Key laws, including the Public Procurement Code from 2019, the Law on Agriculture and Food (EGalim) from 2018, the Law on Anti-waste and Circular Economy (AGEC) from 2020, and the Climate and Resilience Law from 2021, all require public buyers to integrate sustainability into food and catering procurement processes (Hasquenoph 2024).

Public canteens in France must comply with nutritional, diversity, and sustainability requirements under the EGalim law, which mandates that at least 50% of food purchases (by value) come from quality or sustainable sources, including 20% organic. These include products considering environmental externalities, short supply chains, and fair trade, with an emphasis on territorial food projects. Managers must also prioritize freshness, seasonality, and minimal processing

while addressing protein diversification, vegetarian options, food waste reduction, and plastic replacement. The Public Procurement Code further requires revisable pricing for agricultural goods and emphasizes fair producer remuneration and environmental protection in tender evaluations (Falvo 2023).

The Dordogne Department is located in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region, with its capital in Périgueux. It is the third largest department in France and is responsible for 35 secondary schools with approximately 14,500 students. The department maintains the public catering service and delegates its management to each school rather than outsourcing it to a private company. Internal kitchens prepare meals on-site at the schools, averaging about 10,400 meals per day for the entire department. The schools employ around 360 departmental employees, of which about half focus on the catering service. In terms of the locality and seasonality of procured food products, it is important to note that the department's agriculture and agri-food sectors are key drivers of the local economy (for recent data on these sectors, see DRAAF 2020).

4 | Findings

The Dordogne Department launched its new food procurement strategy in 2016 and defined the following policy objectives for the project labeled the *100% Organic, Local, and Homemade School Food Project* (Falvo 2023, 7):

1. "To serve quality food, using organic, fresh, seasonal, and raw ingredients to prepare meals from scratch and phasing out ultra-processed foods.
2. To provide market opportunities to SMEs and local producers.
3. To recover the social role of the school canteen and build a food community among school stakeholders (public administrators, kitchen staff, teachers, students, parents, local producers, and community members) by reconnecting the actors and putting value on everyone's work.
4. To ensure transparency in the food purchasing process and compliance with public procurement rules, including the mandatory minimum targets for school catering."

Remarkably, the department aimed to achieve these goals without incurring significant additional costs. At the time of the final online meetings with the Dordogne representatives in March 2023, 20 schools had been certified *ECOCERT en Cuisine* at different levels: nine were certified 100% organic, one at Level 3 (> 80% organic), two at Level 2 (> 40% organic), and eight at Level 1 (> 20% organic) (Conseil Départemental de la Dordogne 2023), with more in the process of preparing for their certification. The *ECOCERT en Cuisine* certification rewards the inclusion of organic produce in catering, progressive targets for local, fair trade, and raw or minimally processed products, anti-waste measures, educational activities, ecological management of waste, water, and energy, limitation of plastics and toxic detergents, and optimization of delivery rounds (Groupe ECOCERT 2022).

While numerous institutions have made significant strides toward incorporating organic and sustainable food options, reaching the 100% threshold involves overcoming challenges related to cost, supply chain logistics, and infrastructure. The Dordogne Department remains one of the few documented cases to have successfully implemented a fully organic meal program in public schools. The President of the Dordogne Department and the local media attend the certification ceremonies, giving schools public visibility, and acknowledgment of their efforts. The Dordogne SPFP strategy made use of the following instruments.

4.1 | Commitment and Strategic Approach

The Department of Dordogne started the project off with clear policy objectives and immediately assumed the role of a guide and a coordinator of activities that will help schools achieve them while navigating the challenges of complying with legislative requirements, maintaining transparency, and accomplishing efficiency in public spending.

The department made a strategic decision to directly manage (i.e., centralize) the procurement of specific categories of supplies, such as kitchen equipment, technical work clothing, cleaning products, and IT tools, which provides economies of scale, as well as uniformity of use and maintenance. On the other hand, to allow smaller producers to access tenders, both due to the lower volumes and the simplified nature of below-threshold procurement procedures, leading to the development of direct supply chains and increased transparency and traceability, the department decentralized the procurement of food supplies to each secondary school, taking into account their context-specific needs. This choice, together with the transversal cost management methodology, has made it possible to strike a balance between high-quality food (raw, fresh, seasonal, and varied), financial accessibility, and fair remuneration for producers, even in a context of inflation. Current food costs range from €1.80 to €2.10 per meal, with some schools serving organic meals at even a lower cost than comparable conventional meals.

The department has also put in place financial support and reward mechanisms. First, it covers the full costs of the progressive *ECOCERT* certification process and helps school staff prepare for their audits. Second, the department provides economic incentives to schools that demonstrate having purchased a minimum percentage of local and organic products from direct supply chains. Finally, the department reimburses the additional food costs incurred by schools that achieve 100% organic meals for the first 3 months of operation.

4.2 | Professionalization and Capacity Building

Another notable achievement is the professionalization and capacity-building of human resources, both internal and external to the department, which undoubtedly contributes to the region's comprehensive sustainable development. The Departmental Council decided to invest in recruiting specialized staff—including a nutritionist, two chef-trainers with expertise in public catering, and an agronomist who, together with other departmental officials trained in areas such as public procurement, food safety, and waste management—make up the

project task force and are formally assigned to the Education or the Agriculture Departmental Divisions. The task force first presents the project to the school board and kitchen staff and then provides technical support and training, particularly in nutrition, culinary techniques, public procurement, use of digital tools, structuring of production chains, and preparation for certification audits.

Once a new school is "on board," an immersion week is spent in the school's kitchen testing the 100% organic, local, and homemade methodology under the supervision of the chef-trainer. The immersion test is important to appreciate the work of the kitchen staff and assure them of the project's feasibility. This step also consists of several organizational, technical, nutritional, safety, and food supply audits, leading to a diagnosis of the available resources and necessary investments. As a multi-area project, it requires the cross-functional work of officials from the department's Human Resources, Building Management, Education, Agriculture, Green Spaces, Public Procurement, and Communication divisions. The trainer-chef helps identify the necessary investments in kitchen equipment (e.g., vacuum packing and refrigeration, contributing to cost management) and renovation of the premises, which are taken care of by the Building Management Division under a specific procurement. They also draw up the training plan, covering training needs in cooking techniques. The departmental HR manager works with school staff to optimize the schedules and, if necessary, recruit additional staff. The Green Spaces Division provides for the installation of herb, fruit, and vegetable gardens in the schools, as well as composting stations for the use of cooking staff and for educational activities. In terms of food procurement, the departmental nutritionist designs a dietary plan that combines respect for nutritional requirements with the specificity and diversity of local production. This is based on the use of raw, organic, fresh, and seasonal ingredients to prepare meals from scratch, hence phasing out ultra-processed foods. Given that organic food generally costs more than conventional food, menus are specifically designed to allow for budget invariance for the same organoleptic contribution (for instance, replacing meat with legumes or using efficiently the edible parts of food products). To empower the key actors to make the change (public administrators, school administrative staff and teachers, kitchen and catering staff, students, families, and local suppliers), training opportunities are provided in key areas (supply chain management, public procurement, cooking and nutrition, digitalization, communication, and education). Numerous awareness-raising and food education activities aimed not only at children but also at parents and different actors in the food system contribute to its long-term sustainable transformation.

4.3 | Networks and Stakeholder Collaborations

To study the local supply, sourcing and market dialog activities are carried out in collaboration with the Agriculture Division and organic farming associations, such as *AgroBio Perigord*. These partners also provide training for local producers on how to convert to organic farming, organize themselves to supply public catering, and participate in tenders. Other strategic measures to facilitate small producers' access to tenders are the use of multi-supplier framework agreements where several suppliers can supply the total quantities required, divided into specific lots, thus responding to a production logic (i.e., to which an average producer can fully respond), rather than to a distribution logic (i.e., large multi-product lots suitable only for wholesalers). The technical specifications require, for example, organically grown food, freshness, the absence of certain additives, and compulsory information on nutritional quality and traceability in datasheets. The most economically advantageous tender is assessed on the basis of the award criteria of quality, delivery, price, and sustainable development. Sub-criteria reward responsiveness and flexibility in delivery times, direct supply chains, fair trade, animal welfare, packaging reduction, and the variety of products proposed.

Each secondary school is responsible for purchasing food supplies. Therefore, to ensure that tenders comply with the law and meet the project's objectives, the department must act as a coordinator and facilitator, engaging with multiple stakeholders and building the necessary capacity in the various areas involved.

The project also encourages the formation of new collaborative networks among stakeholders, such as partnerships between schools for joint food purchasing/logistics, or between schools, technical partners, and local producers for separate waste collection and composting, and between agricultural organizations and schools for educational activities on local agro-biodiversity and the benefits of organic food. Not least, contracts are often awarded to an administrative and logistics platform grouping local organic producers, like Manger Bio Périgord, which markets their products to the public catering sector and places a strong emphasis on the governance of member producers themselves and their fair remuneration.

4.4 | Digitalization

Throughout the different stages of the food procurement cycle, the department uses ad hoc digital tools designed to be user-friendly for small suppliers, public buyers (school staff), and the administration itself. During the planning stage, the nutritionist developed specific software to estimate the food needs, both in volume and value, for each new school adhering to the project, in accordance with the number of users, the departmental food plan, and market prices at the local level. Determining food needs is very important not only for accurate procurement through the appropriate procedure but also to prevent food waste and match demand and supply through crop planning and more efficient supply logistics. For example, some schools have decided to collectively purchase and share whole carcasses.

The platform on which the tenders are published is usually determined by the value of the contract and the local availability of the food products to be purchased. For example, contracts worth less than €90.000, for which the law allows simplified procedures, are published on a French e-procurement platform, *Agrilocal*, that directly connects agri-food producers and public buyers, such as secondary schools. This digital tool is simple and free to use and provides a snapshot of available products thanks to a geo-referenced database of suppliers. Departments can also register and monitor the purchasing

and supply activities in their area. In accordance with the law, competition is open to all registered suppliers, regardless of their location. Contracts involving imported food products or amounts over €90.000 but less than €215.000 are often published on a portal for school administrations to comply with the stricter formalities required by these thresholds. For these contracts, the department provides schools with technical assistance in the form of tender document models to streamline the procedure. Finally, to monitor the performance of contracts, the department requires all 35 schools to use a specific software, initially piloted in five schools, the cost of which is borne by the department. The digital software *Webgerest* eases the management of school catering and allows issuing purchase orders within the framework agreements and then monitoring the execution of the contracts. It provides further opportunities for dialog, especially with schools that have not yet fully engaged in the project. *Webgerest* has several practical benefits for both the schools and the department. The tool allows checking that deliveries match orders, increasing transparency by enabling monitoring of each school's procurement, stock management, and financial activities. It also allows data to be stored to track the evolution of the procurement strategy over time and refine food needs for future tenders. In addition, by including a section for recording food waste and direct data flow to the French national platform *Ma Cantine*, it enables evaluating legal compliance and collecting data on sustainable and quality product targets.

4.5 | Optimization

To navigate the challenges posed by increasing food prices and ensure a successful, sustainable transition, it's essential to focus on optimizing organizational processes. The department implemented a comprehensive approach to manage food costs, which encompassed menu planning, cooking techniques, meal distribution strategies, and minimizing waste. Rather than engaging in aggressive cost-cutting in supply and procurement, the project highlights the crucial role of kitchen staff in maintaining cost efficiency. Several optimizing measures have been adopted. These include cooking from scratch using raw ingredients, making efficient use of ingredients and leftovers by considering seasonality, adapting formats for public catering, mastering the durability and storage of ingredients, diversifying protein sources and meat cuts, and utilizing unconventional parts such as whole carcasses and peels. Additionally, aromatic herbs are grown onsite. Culinary training is provided to prepare tasty and appealing dishes. When serving meals, nudging techniques are employed, such as offering reduced portions with the option of a second serving, placing bread at the bottom of the buffet, and making a “little-appetite plate” available upon request. Taste education workshops are conducted for children, and the importance of the meal's time and environment is emphasized, including the duration, decorations, posters, and training of catering staff to effectively communicate with children (Falvo 2023).

Table 1 presents an overview of the policy instruments employed for successful sustainable food procurement in Dordogne.

To achieve successful implementation of SPFP, the procurement process must extend beyond traditional supply chain management. It requires consideration of various organizational processes, as illustrated in Scheme 1.

Implementing sustainable food procurement is a complex process that requires overcoming multiple barriers and utilizing various policy instruments. Public commitment and strategic decisions precede and dictate the use of other instruments within the conceptualized policy design. Key instruments at the strategic level fundamentally influence the implementation process. In the case of Dordogne, the strategic decision was to centralize part of the procurement process (e.g., kitchen equipment, uniforms, cleaning products) while decentralizing the actual food product procurement and capacity building based on different forms of partnerships, stakeholder approaches, and commitment of individual actors.

A typical example of this complexity is digitalization. Usually, digitalization is associated with competing through electronic platforms within an already-running procurement process. However, in Dordogne, digitalization began at the level of food consumption planning for individual kitchens. The actual competition through e-platforms is only part of the entire management system being digitized. Similarly, the issue of competing for food at the lowest price was addressed. Savings are achieved not by buying the cheapest food but through the efficiency of the entire system, which starts with planning, menu design, and optimizing kitchen processes. This approach allows the system to be highly efficient without being forced into cost-cutting measures for food purchases. Collaboration and stakeholder involvement are also key components of most policy instruments mentioned.

Although the project can be described as a success, it is necessary to address the remaining challenges. This implies the need to implement a loop learning policy, where the implementation is evaluated retrospectively, and policy instruments are updated based on the results. The difficulties currently facing the department are related to both internal and external factors. Internally, the need for transversal work remains a challenge, as communication and collaboration across different sectors need improvement. Externally, the project faces resistance and preconceptions from various stakeholders. For example, some families confuse organic food with a vegetarian diet or fear too-small portions; conventional farmers complain about market losses and are reluctant to convert to organic farming, and some school staff and local authorities are hesitant to transition due to fears of interference, loss of autonomy in purchasing, and the need to deploy excessive resources.

To overcome these obstacles and enhance the project's legitimacy, the department needs to improve the measurement and reporting of results and benefits. Establishing key performance indicators to measure health and environmental benefits, such as carbon emission savings or efficiency in the use of natural resources, as well as the social return on investment to the local community, is essential. For example, an initial assessment of food waste revealed rates below the national average in secondary schools (ADEME 2018). Another significant challenge is ensuring the project's long-term viability in the face of changes in human resources and its expansion into other environments, such as primary schools, high schools, universities, and

TABLE 1 | Overview of policy instruments.

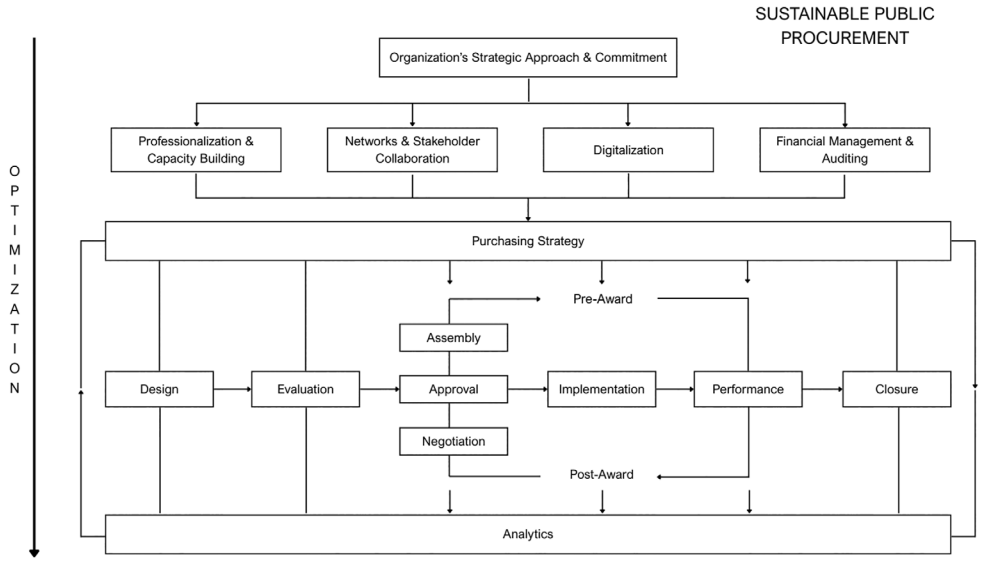
Category	Policy instrument	Description
Commitment & Strategic Approach	Commitment	The Dordogne Department made clear commitments and facilitated involvement of schools and other key stakeholders signed at the beginning of the project
	Goal setting	In addition to the main objective, for example, the share of organic, local, and homemade food in school catering, sub-objectives have been set in the area of procurement, for example, involving local companies, quality of food, network building etc
	Procurement centralization and decentralization	Key decisions for securing procurement in terms of capacity, professional assurance and efficiency in connecting targets. Centralization of common unified product areas allowed scale of economies while decentralization of food product purchases enabled greater involvement of local producers
	Transparency and accountability	Requirement to use digital software to monitor the contracts and their execution allows increased transparency and accountability
	Incentivization	The department provides economic incentives to schools that demonstrate having purchased a minimum percentage of local and organic products from direct supply chains. Department also reimburses the cost of the audit and certification
Professionalization and capacity building	Recruiting specialized staff	New staff have been recruited with specific know-how in nutrition counseling, procurement, etc. The aim was to support the existing team and pass on specific knowledge
	Interdisciplinary training for existing staff	The training was aimed not only at key management but also at kitchen staff. Participants gained knowledge in the areas of nutritional value of food, culinary techniques, IT, public procurement, and economics
	Interdisciplinary task force	The interdisciplinary task force served to support existing staff and transfer knowledge and experience. The aim was to create sufficient capacity to implement the project
	Initial training and increasing the awareness	All new stakeholders involved received the necessary training in nutritional advice, culinary techniques, law, economics, public procurement, and the use of digital tools
Networks and stakeholders collaborations	Market dialog activities	Used for analyzing local supply and identifying potential buyers, delivering training for local supply how to convert to organic farming and participate in tenders
	New networks and partnership with farming associations, technical partners, waste management and logistics firm, agricultural associations, and schools	The main objective was to increase capacity and mutual sharing of information and know-how
Digitalization	Software for food consumption planning	Determining food needs is very important not only for accurate procurement through appropriate procedures, but also to prevent food waste and match demand and supply through crop planning and more efficient supply logistics.
	E-procurement platforms	Directly connects agri-food producers and public buyers. This digital tool is simple and free to use and provides a snapshot of available products thanks to a geo-referenced database of suppliers.
	Software for management of school catering	Software helps to evaluate the performance of contracts, which increases the transparency and accountability of the entire project.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Category	Policy instrument	Description
Optimization	Menu design, cooking techniques, how meals are served, and waste minimization	The entire catering process has been optimized so that savings are achieved through greater efficiency rather than buying at the lowest price.

Source: Authors.



SCHEME 1 | Sustainable public procurement. *Source:* Adapted by the authors based on the "Contracting Lifecycle" model from World Commerce & Contracting's report (2023), "The ROI of Contracting Excellence."

hospitals. Finally, to overcome resistance and disseminate good practices, dialog and communities of practice are needed among kitchen, education, and administrative staff, as well as between different departments, to share knowledge and develop common solutions.

5 | Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Dordogne's success in SPFP is a result of a deliberate, strategic combination of policy instruments. The study confirms that effective SPFP requires more than just relying on national regulatory requirements mandating a more sustainable approach to food procurement. Its success relies on the interplay of policy instruments, ensuring the stability of the system, financial feasibility, and behavioral change of involved stakeholders (Molin et al. 2024). While existing literature highlights the need for complex procurement approaches (Parsons and Barling 2022), the Dordogne case provides empirical evidence of how specific instrument synergies can overcome logistical, financial, and stakeholder-related barriers.

A key finding is that governance structures significantly shape SPFP implementation. Dordogne's hybrid approach of centralizing non-food procurement while decentralizing food purchasing facilitated both cost efficiency and supplier accessibility. This contrasts with top-down procurement policies that struggle to integrate smaller producers due to rigid procurement rules (Andhov et al. 2024; Morley 2021). The study suggests that hybrid procurement models may be more effective than purely centralized or decentralized approaches, as they allow for flexibility while ensuring accountability and coordination (Plaček et al. 2021; Geropoulos et al. 2024).

Another critical finding is the role of professionalization in procurement policy success. Training programs for procurement officers and kitchen staff were essential enablers of implementation, ensuring that policy objectives were translated into daily food purchase and preparation practices while positively influencing the actors' perceptions of the changes to their routines (Tregear et al. 2022; Grandia 2015). This finding reinforces existing research on capacity building as a determinant of policy uptake (Testa et al. 2016) but also highlights a gap that many procurement initiatives lack the necessary investment in human resources, which may explain their limited impact.

Beyond individual policy instruments, the study emphasizes the need to integrate them throughout the entire procurement process, before, during, and after the purchasing phase. The scheme in this article illustrates how Dordogne's approach goes beyond just contract awarding, treating procurement as an ongoing process rather than a one-time transaction. A well-defined strategy, preparation, and follow-up mechanisms are essential to ensuring long-term success (Hall et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2016). Before procurement, capacity-building efforts, stakeholder

engagement, and market dialog with producers help schools and suppliers align with sustainability criteria (Gaitán-Cremaschi et al. 2024). During procurement, carefully designed tenders and digital monitoring tools support the implementation (Mavidis and Folinas 2022; Sanchez-Graells 2024). After procurement, ongoing evaluation, compliance tracking, and adjustments allow for continuous improvement and long-term feasibility (Grandia and Volker 2023). Taking this broader view of procurement highlights that successful SPFP is not just about enforcing regulations but about creating a system of connected measures that support implementation at every stage of the process.

However, the study does not imply that policy instrument mixes alone are sufficient for SPFP success. While Dordogne's approach has been highly effective, its sustainability heavily depends on external conditions such as political will, budget allocations, and supply chain resilience and capacities (Lee and Koski 2012; Filippini et al. 2018). The department benefited from strong local agricultural networks and institutional support. These factors may not be present in all regions worldwide, which raises the question of whether Dordogne's model can be replicated in contexts with weaker governance structures or less developed organic supply chains.

6 | Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research

This study examined the key policy instruments employed by the Dordogne Department in SPFP for secondary schools and how these instruments interact to achieve the department's sustainability objectives. The findings show that Dordogne's success is not a result of isolated policy measures but a strategic and well-structured policy instrument mix comprising commitment and strategic approach, professionalization and capacity building, stakeholder collaboration, digitalization, and optimization.

The Dordogne case highlights the importance of strategic coordination in public food procurement, where sustainability goals must be fully embedded into procurement frameworks rather than treated as add-ons in traditional supply chain management. It shows that flexibility in governance, balancing both centralized and decentralized procurement mechanisms, can enhance efficiency while ensuring inclusivity for local producers. Crucially, the case represents a policy innovation in SPFP, showing how a novel combination and strategic alignment of policy instruments can drive systemic change at the subnational level. Rather than applying isolated measures within the procurement process, Dordogne implemented an adaptive, multi-instrument strategy that integrates sustainability principles beyond conventional procurement practices. The integration of digital tools exemplifies how technology can enhance transparency, efficiency, and accountability, provided that adequate training and institutional support are in place. Ultimately, the Dordogne experience highlights that policy innovation in SPFP is not only about introducing new instruments but also about reconfiguring and aligning existing tools to maximize impact (Jordan and Huitema 2014).

Despite these achievements, key challenges remain, particularly regarding scalability and long-term institutionalization. Stakeholder resistance, whether from school staff adapting to new processes, parental concern over menus, or conventional farmers facing market shifts, demonstrates the need for stronger engagement and clearer communication about the long-term benefits of sustainable food procurement. Moreover, the success of the Dordogne case cannot be entirely separated from its specific context, which includes long-standing political commitment, administrative continuity, and a supportive institutional culture. These enabling conditions may not be easily replicated elsewhere and should be carefully considered when assessing the transferability of Dordogne's approach.

Still, the experience offers valuable lessons for other local governments aiming to improve the sustainability of their food procurement systems. These include the importance of building internal capacity, ensuring continuity in implementation, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and using digital tools to increase transparency and control. Rather than focusing on isolated measures, local actors should consider strategically aligning existing instruments within the institutional structure to reinforce one another and support long-term change.

Future research should explore how similar policy instrument mixes perform in different governance contexts and assess their long-term economic and social impacts. More empirical research is needed to quantify the actual environmental, social, and economic benefits of SPFP, providing stronger evidence to support policy decisions at all government levels. As governments increasingly turn to procurement as a tool for reaching secondary policy objectives, further innovation and research will be essential to ensuring that SPFP moves from isolated success stories to a scalable and widely adopted policy approach.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

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