



# Determinants of citizen acceptance of environmental policy regulating consumption in public settings: Organic food in public institutions



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 22 August 2016

Received in revised form

19 January 2017

Accepted 25 January 2017

Available online 30 January 2017

### Keywords:

Policy acceptance

Organic food consumption

Institutional catering

Spillover

## ABSTRACT

Increasingly, providers of institutional catering consider moving to the procurement of organic food. Although ample research has investigated the determinants of consumption of organic foods in private households, such consumption in institutional settings raises questions of citizen support rather than consumer choice. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to analyse the determinants of citizen support with regard to increasing the share of organic produce in public catering. A model is proposed that explains attitude to the procurement of organic produce in public kitchens by life values, attitudes to the environment, personal and social norms, and the use of organic produce for private household consumption. Data were collected by an online survey representative of the overall population in terms of major demographics in Denmark ( $n = 978$ ). Results indicate that personal norms regarding the use of organic food affect attitudes toward the use of organic produce in institutional settings, and that this effect is partly mediated by own purchase of organic products, indicating a spillover effect from private to public practices. Collectivistic values and, to a lesser extent, individualistic values affect personal and social norms on using organic produce, partly mediated by attitude to the environment. The authors add a new aspect to the discussion of spillover effects among different forms of pro-environmental behaviours and suggest that measures to promote sustainable behaviours in the public and private sector may reinforce each other.

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## 1. Background and objectives

Promoting consumption of organic food is often viewed as one means towards achieving a transition to a more sustainable food provisioning system (e.g., [Vittersø and Tangeland, 2015](#)).<sup>1</sup> Organic food, while still a niche in relation to conventional production, has been growing on a worldwide basis, a development that has been driven by consumer demand which in turn has been stimulated by a range of governmental measures like campaigns promoting organic food and organic labelling schemes as well as by initiatives by other food chain actors, especially retailers ([Thøgersen, 2010](#)).

More recently, and on a smaller scale, there have been attempts to increase use of organic produce in public procurement for food provisioning in public canteens (see [Smith et al., 2016](#); for a review

of some cases). In many countries, public catering is a sizable sector in the overall food provisioning system, and using organic produce in public catering could be a major factor contributing to additional growth in the organic sector.

Use of organic food in private households, and the growth of the organic sector resulting from it, are obviously linked to the determinants of consumer demand for organic food, and consequently determinants of consumption of organic food in private households have been the subject of a large body of research (e.g., [Aertsens et al., 2009](#); [Andersen, 2011](#); [Baker et al., 2004](#); [Hjelmar, 2011](#); [Hughner et al., 2007](#); [Paul and Rana, 2012](#); [Pino et al., 2012](#); [Schrock, 2010](#)). In contrast, we know very little about people's reaction to the use of organic food in public catering. Whereas organic growth based on demand from private households can be viewed as a market-driven form of change towards more sustainability, this is much less so the case in public catering. The provision of organic food in public institutions constitutes a public or semi-public good. Depending on the type of institution, users will have no or only limited possibilities to react to such a measure by opting out or eating elsewhere. To the extent people's choice of public catering is limited, market demand cannot be used as an indicator of whether

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<sup>1</sup> We are aware of the fact that there is a debate on whether organic production is indeed always more sustainable. We do not address this debate in this paper, which deals with the issue of citizen/consumer acceptance of a proposed policy aimed at more sustainability.

such increased provisioning of organic food in public institutions is in accord with public preferences, although catering users may voice their views in direct interaction with the caterer. While people thus do not have many possibilities for providing or withholding support to increased use of organic product in their role as consumers, they still have a role to play as citizens (Spaargaren and Oosterveer, 2010). Measures aimed at furthering organic consumption that do not function via promoting individual consumer demand will still need to rely on citizen support as a facilitator in policy development.

In this paper we will analyse the determinants of citizen support for a government policy aiming at increased use of organic produce in public catering in Denmark, where the government had set forth such a policy (Fødevarerministeriet, 2012), stipulating that 60% of the food consumed in public catering should be based on organic food by 2020. This covers food served in hospitals, day care institutions, nursing homes, schools and prisons. Catering in these institutions is governed by different funding schemes, where the food can be free for users or included in an overall service fee, but would usually have some kind of state subsidy. For users, choices are usually limited, and they would normally have no possibility to influence the use or non-use of organic produce directly by their food choices when eating in these places. Any influence that people may have on the use of organic produce in these kitchens would therefore be indirectly via their role as citizens.

In analysing the determinants of citizen support, we are especially interested in the possible relationship between own private consumption of organic food and support for use of such food in public catering. To citizens, the use of organic produce in public kitchens, though a nonmarket good, may be reminiscent of choices they make themselves in their role as consumers - namely, deciding whether to use organic produce in their own households. Therefore, use of organic produce in public kitchens is an appropriate case for investigating whether support for a public policy measure is stronger when this measure resembles a similar decision people already make for themselves in their own households. In other words, we examine whether a spillover effect occurs from the private to the public domain.<sup>2</sup>

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: We derive a theoretical framework that identifies possible determinants of support for the public policy measure of increasing the share of organic produce in public catering, including the possible spillover from the private to the public domain. Then, we describe a study in which we test this model using survey data obtained from a representative sample of Danish consumers. We conclude with a discussion of the determinants of support for public policy measures aimed at changes in consumption in public settings.

## 2. Determinants of citizen support for use of organic produce in public kitchens: conceptual model

### 2.1. Approaches to assessing support for the provision of public goods

Two prominent streams of research have dealt with measuring and explaining public support for the provision of public and semi-public goods by governmental institutions. The first stream, rooted in economics, attempts to place a monetary value on the provisioning of such goods. Because there is no market for public goods

<sup>2</sup> One reviewer has pointed out that buying organic food for use in a private household can contain elements of a public good as well, as positive environmental consequences of organic production accrue to society at large, not just the household buying the goods.

and thus people's preferences are not revealed by the prices they pay, economists have turned to stated preferences instead (for a review of methods, see Caswell, 1998), most notably the contingent valuation method. Contingent valuation, though widely used, has also received severe criticism (e.g., Hausman, 2012; Kling et al., 2012). The two main criticisms refer to hypothetical bias and context dependency, both of which indicate a violation from the central assumption in neoclassical economics that people have stable and consistent preferences.

The second research stream is attitude measurement, which has a long research tradition in social psychology (in explaining consumer and citizen behaviour, the most popular theories have been the Theory of Reasoned Action, Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, and its successor, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ajzen, 1991). In modern attitude research, and in contrast with the economic approach, it is not usually assumed that people have stable and consistent attitudes toward any conceivable attitude object. Although some people may have strong and well-established attitudes toward organic food production or the use of organic produce, this will not be the case for all people, and most people will not have pre-established attitudes toward something such as the provisioning of organic food in public institutions. Rather, people are likely to form attitudes in response to the questioning (Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2006; Schwarz, 2007). Thus, attitudes are constructed in the measurement situation, rather than unearthed by the measurement device. In the same way, various researchers have tried to promote the concept of constructed preferences (e.g., Payne et al., 1999).

If attitudes are constructed by respondents at the time of measurement, to what extent are such attitudes affected by random factors that make the attitude measures useless? Attitude measurements are of diagnostic value only to the extent that we can show that they are embedded in a nomological network of antecedents and/or consequences. Although attitudes may be constructed on the spot, this is usually not a random process; the newly formed attitude will be affected by pre-existing attitudes toward related subjects, especially by attitudes toward more general attitude objects, and by life values, which we consider the most abstract form of attitudes (Homer and Kahle, 1988; Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987). Attitudes are also affected by beliefs about the attitude object (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), as well as by past behaviours that the respondent perceives as being consistent with the attitude (Ouellette and Wood, 1998).

In this research, we adopt the attitude theory approach to measuring support for the public good provisioning of organic food in public institutions. We view attitudes toward this public good as something the respondents will construct ad hoc when being questioned, though these attitudes will be consistent with their pre-existing values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Therefore, we specify in the following section a conceptual model where we embed our focal attitude into these other constructs, and we collect data and estimate a model in which the attitude measured is related to these other constructs.

### 2.2. An attitude model for explaining citizen support for use of organic produce in public kitchens

Lacking previous attempts to explain attitudes toward the use of organic produce in public kitchens, we begin by examining the determinants of household consumption of organic foods, as well as at the determinants of other pro-environmental behaviours. Our approach is informed by two concepts deemed especially useful in the present context: the existence of spillover effects between different forms of pro-environmental behaviour and the value-attitude-behaviour hierarchy.

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