

# 11

## DIRECT URBAN-RURAL SUPPLY CHAINS FOR SOUTH KOREAN COMMUNITIES

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A morning chill fills the air inside a district-level public meal center in Seoul, South Korea. Workers are preparing to ship fresh local produce, collected from rural towns overnight, to early childhood education centers in the city. Seoul has twenty-five such districts, and to date, twelve of them have public-meal centers like this one. Each one is partnered with a distinct rural town, where farmers—the majority of whom are small- and mid-sized or family farmers committed to sustainable agriculture practices—supply meat, vegetables, grains, fruits, dairy, and minimally processed foods to local food hubs, primarily supported by local governments. Each day, food is transported from these rural towns' hubs to the public meal centers in Seoul that serve as urban food distribution centers. Administrators at participating urban institutions place orders one week ahead of delivery based on a standardized meal plan shared with key actors in rural areas.

Seoul's public meal centers are the daily point of contact for rural producers and urban consumers, who work together to support the preparation of scratch-cooked meals for South Korean children and targeted urban institutions, including daycare centers, welfare facilities, hospitals, and government buildings. These meal centers were developed under the auspices of the Urban-rural Coexistence Public Meal Service Program (UCPM), a public food procurement program that emerged from the Universal, Free,

and Eco-Friendly School Lunch Program (UFEF). Together, these programs are helping transform food systems in South Korea by re-localizing production, shortening agricultural food chains at the regional level, and expanding just and sustainable food economies.

Concentration of corporate power has created innumerable problems within food systems, with only a handful of transnational food businesses controlling over 40 percent of the global retail industry.<sup>1</sup> Profit-driven food systems contribute to biodiversity loss, disparities in healthy food access, exploitation of farmers and other food workers, and dietary diseases such as obesity and diabetes.<sup>2</sup> Alternative food movements have evolved globally over the last decades as various stakeholders have worked to challenge the dominant market-based system and build new models for food production and consumption.<sup>3</sup> The majority of these initiatives are supported by the private sector or nonprofit organizations. Few efforts to re-localize and shorten supply chains have been led by the public sector using mandatory, effective policy toolsets. A notable exception is the public food system in the Brazilian state of Belo Horizonte and Brazil's Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE).<sup>4</sup>

Governments have mandates and regulations at their disposal, as well as considerable purchasing power, that they can use to re-embed local food systems that are attuned to environmental and sociocultural concerns.<sup>5</sup> Thus far, public procurement has played a limited role in affecting mainstream food policy,<sup>6</sup> but many countries are experimenting with new models such as voluntary values-based purchasing programs (e.g., the US-based Good Food Purchasing Program), state-sponsored purchasing subsidies (e.g., 10 Cents A Meal Program in Michigan, US), or innovating within the context of the United Nations Home Grown School Feeding Program. The case of South Korea's UCPM demonstrates that municipal-level governments can play an important role in reestablishing local food chains and reforming conventional food systems, beginning with school meals.

Cities provide fruitful sites for innovation when policies are designed to address the ecological and political dimensions of complex socioecological systems.<sup>7</sup> Global and local policymakers are increasingly recognizing the need to focus their efforts on food *systems* to solve both chronic and new food challenges such as food security, food safety, and food justice. Food systems encompass “the entire range of actors and their interlinked

value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry, or fisheries, and parts of the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded,"<sup>8</sup> as well as the ramifications for the environment, health, and society.<sup>9</sup> Thinking of food as a "system" requires shifting from thinking about structure to thinking about process, grasping interrelationships between components and agents within the system, and understanding the multiple foundations of knowledge construction.<sup>10</sup> Thus, applying systems thinking to food enables researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to take a holistic approach to addressing food issues by evaluating food practices as either a process or a result of interactions between multiple elements, especially local and regional actors, throughout the system.

Public-led food initiatives like Seoul's UFEF and UCPM suggest one way that public policy and public procurement can be leveraged to support alternative food economies and shortened supply chains through government-sponsored food programs. Seoul, the capital of South Korea, is one of the world's largest metropolises with a population of almost ten million. The city serves as the country's economic, political, and cultural hub. The annual budget of the Seoul Metropolitan Government is equivalent to more than 7 percent of the national government budget, demonstrating the importance of Seoul's weight in national policy formulation. According to the Seoul Food Master Plan 2020, the first comprehensive city-level food plan in Seoul, 1.83 million people eat a daily meal through the city's public food programs, accounting for 18.3 percent of the city's population. The number of students who benefit from the UFEF is 1.28 million (70 percent), while daycare centers and welfare facilities account for 490,000 consumers of publicly provided food (27 percent). The extent of public meal service in Seoul demonstrates the impact that urban food procurement policy can have on reshaping regional food systems, altering consumer behavior, and improving public health via its purchasing power and education programs. The nationwide UFEF and the Seoul Food Master Plan 2020 laid the basis for the UCPM to become a public food system that benefits a broad spectrum of food systems stakeholders across urban and rural areas.

## ORIGINS OF SOUTH KOREA'S UNIVERSAL, FREE, ECO-FRIENDLY SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

The origin of South Korea's public school food system stretches back to the 1950s, when foreign food aid expanded after the Korean War. Canada, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) donated milk powder, wheat flour, and corn flour, which the South Korean government used to manufacture porridge or bread for school lunches. Elementary school students received free school meals, which were mostly bread, for the following two decades, while the dictatorship curtailed the scope of national-level social welfare programs. When foreign food aid ended in 1972, the government shifted financial responsibility for school lunches to parents by requiring them to pay a portion of the cost of school bread. This school lunch program entirely ceased in 1977, however, after a massive outbreak of food poisoning caused a fatality.<sup>11</sup>

Following democratization in South Korea in the late 1980s, a self-governing local administrative system was established in 1995 in which the national government devolved much of its authority to local governments. The delegation of state power to local governments created a window for bottom-up initiatives to gain influence. Social movement activists pushed back against the influence of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and other global actors on the South Korean food system; meanwhile, public demand for locally administered school food programs was increasing. In response, the fifth amendment of the National School Meals Act in 1996 authorized the establishment of *witak-geubsik*, which subcontracts the operation of school food canteens to private enterprises. During the presidency of Daejoong Kim (1998–2002), the government expanded its school lunch program to include elementary, middle, and high schools.

The prevalence of food poisoning and managerial corruption under *witak-geubsik* in the early 2000s prompted policy protagonists within the national school food movement to shift their focus from quantity to quality. For instance, the Nationwide School Lunch Network, one of the largest civic organizations committed to improving the public school food system, asserted that school lunches should “a) be school-managed, b) be

available free to all students, and c) use organically grown local foods.”<sup>12</sup> To enhance food safety and transparency of the school food system, an extensive reform of the National School Meals Act in 2006 mandated *jikyoungeubsik*, which features the direct operation and monitoring of school food canteens by schools. Overall, in response to bottom up initiatives, South Korea’s school food policies evolved to stress both the nutritional and educational components of school lunch. The national- and local-level governments also increased administrative and financial support to expand school lunch programs.

Years of continuous grassroots campaigning led to a critical political realignment of the school food landscape in the early 2010s, with the progressive party winning numerous local elections. These politicians and superintendents of education<sup>13</sup> backed the broad expansion of universal, free, and eco-friendly school meal programs that had been spearheaded by certain local governments. For example, the city of Gwacheon launched the first universally free school meal program for elementary school students in 2001, and in 2003, the city of Naju passed the first local ordinance mandating local government assistance for the use of environmentally friendly local food. In 2010, Jeongseon County started the first universally free *and* eco-friendly school program for all students from kindergarten to high school. Drawing on a decade of local efforts, many municipalities have actively implemented universally free and eco-friendly school lunch programs since then. According to the Ministry of Education, 97.4 percent of the students in elementary, middle, high, and special-education schools benefited from free school meals (but not necessarily environment friendly yet) in South Korea as of March 2020.

Seoul has had the most impressive track record of implementing a universal, free, and eco-friendly school food program by rapidly expanding the UFEF at the municipal level. To demonstrate, Seongbuk District, one of Seoul’s twenty-five districts, was the first in the city to launch its UFEF in 2010 by subsidizing the cost rather than relying on the funding model used by other municipalities. The Seoul Metropolitan Government approaches school food as a basic human right tied closely to the right to an education.<sup>14</sup> Since 2021, all public school students in the city have had access to free eco-friendly school meals. This expansion happened in three stages: (1) Phase 1 in 2011 for partial implementation in

elementary schools, (2) Phase 2 from 2012 to 2014 for the entire elementary and middle school populations, and (3) Phase 3 from 2019 to 2021 for expanding the UFEF into high schools.<sup>15</sup> Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, Seoul Metropolitan Government, and district-level local governments each contribute 50 percent, 30 percent, and 20 percent, respectively, of the total budget to operate the UFEF.<sup>16</sup>

By establishing alternative food distribution channels, Seoul's UFEF, like other UFEF initiatives in various municipalities, aims to boost local food economies as well as provide nutritious food to all students regardless of socioeconomic position. According to the Seoul Metropolitan Government, *Orbon*, a public-funded distribution hub for eco-friendly food founded by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, supplies ingredients to 75 percent of the city's schools.<sup>17</sup> As part of Seoul's efforts to localize and shorten supply chains and establish a more transparent school food system, *Orbon* was introduced in 2010 to help schools procure certified organic or sustainably grown foods via the shared distribution center.<sup>18</sup> By incentivizing public food purchases of environmentally friendly foods through *Orbon*, the municipal government aims to create short, direct distribution routes that will enable contract farming on local farms based on stable demand from urban schools, which will, in turn, help promote a transition to sustainable agriculture.

## SEOUL FOOD MASTERPLAN 2020—A VISION TOWARD SUSTAINABLE URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS

In the late 2000s, South Korea was hit by a series of food scandals, including an amendment of the Free Trade Agreement with the US that obliged the country to open its agriculture and livestock industries. Concerns about failing domestic food systems, including dwindling rural economies, a high reliance on food imports, and the westernization of South Korean diets, were voiced by farmers and grassroots activists coordinating nationwide food sovereignty movements. The public's increased awareness of food safety and food security led to a substantial increase in the demand for organic food and interest in urban agriculture as a means of achieving self-sufficiency. As such, both the national government and

local governments developed food policies to support and scale up alternative food initiatives.

In 2015, Seoul joined over one hundred other cities from around the world to sign the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, a promise to create “sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework.”<sup>19</sup> Two years later, the Seoul Metropolitan Government launched the Seoul Food Master Plan 2020, its first comprehensive city-level food plan, with a particular emphasis on citizens’ well-being, public health, social welfare, and the environment.<sup>20</sup> To incorporate diverse perspectives into the plan, feedback was gathered at both public hearings and at regular meetings of a task-force team made up of fifteen members across the city government and the civic sector.

The Seoul Food Master Plan 2020 focuses on five key areas: (1) healthy food, (2) food security, (3) urban-rural coexistence, (4) food safety, and (5) governance building. The first aim, for healthy food, will be advanced through educational programs and revised nutrition standards that can improve general knowledge about healthy diets and the urban food environment. The second aim, food security, concentrates on urban populations that are food insecure, such as seniors or children from low-income households. From 2013 to 2014, 5.1 percent of households in Seoul (approximately 180,000 households) reported having difficulty obtaining food on a regular or occasional basis due to their economic status.<sup>21</sup> The years-long expansion of the UFEF for students of all ages is part of Seoul’s attempts to decrease gaps in access to healthy food via public meal service. The third aim, urban-rural coexistence, envisions an urban food system that can help revitalize shrinking rural communities and economies resulting from decades of depopulation, changes in industrial structure, and changes in South Korean diets (i.e., a decrease in rice consumption) by establishing a public food procurement system that directly connects urban consumers and rural producers. The fourth aim addresses public concerns about food safety by strengthening legislative measures such as testing residual agricultural chemicals, monitoring food facilities including school food canteens, and enhancing food labels. Finally, the aim of governance building involves cultivating collaborative

food decision making and the enactment of a local ordinance protecting the human right to healthy food.

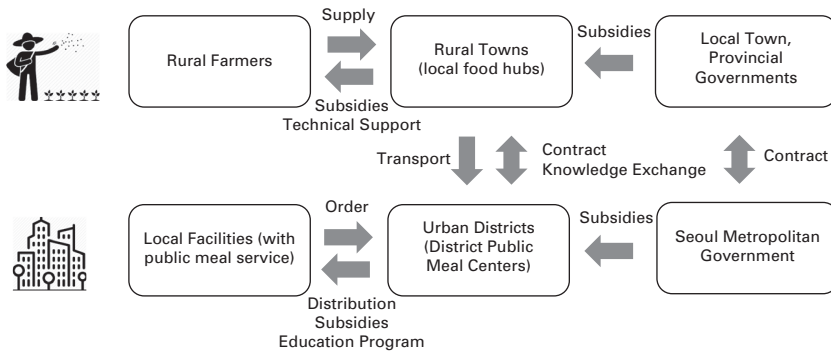
### **URBAN-RURAL COEXISTENCE PUBLIC MEAL SERVICE**

One of the most important and influential projects under the Seoul Food Master Plan 2020's third aim, urban-rural coexistence, is the Urban-Rural Coexistence Public Meal Service Program (UCPM). It reflects the understanding that cities, particularly a metropolis like Seoul with its dense population, can play a critical role in reinvigorating local food economies by providing a consistent source of demand for locally produced goods. At the 2018 Mayors Summit, the UCPM was recognized with a Milan Urban Food Policy Pact Award for Winning Practices for its efforts to build a regional food supply and distribution system.

The UCPM's basic concept is to establish short, direct supply chains between twenty-five urban districts in Seoul and rural towns, which are paired one to one, so that public institutions (e.g., early childhood or regional education centers, welfare facilities, hospitals, and government buildings) can source fresh local food from small-scale and family farmers. As an outgrowth of the UFEF with a separate scope, the UCPM focuses primarily on early childhood education centers that are not included in the UFEF. While expenses for meal service at early childhood education centers (including daycare centers and preschools for children aged zero to five) are already covered by government subsidies, Seoul offers additional financial incentives to institutions that spend more than 60 percent of their monthly food budget through the UCPM system. When an urban district, which has autonomous political and legislative power as a sub-administrative unit of Seoul, decides to join the UCPM, a municipal-level selection committee composed of invited external members evaluates candidate rural towns based on the robustness of their local food system, administrative support, and regional capabilities, then matches a rural town with the urban district. As of March 2023, the UCPM had twelve pairs of urban districts and rural towns.

Each district needs to build a district-level public meal center that serves as an urban food hub connecting a partnered rural town and the district





### 11.1 The partnership structure of the Urban-Rural Coexistence Public Meal Service.

in order to join the UCPM system. These public meal centers are distinct from *Orbon*, which is operated at the city level for the UFEF. New direct supply chains utilizing food hubs in rural towns and UCPM district-level public meal centers in Seoul (see figure 11.1) are expected to increase the availability and affordability of eco-friendly food for public meal services, while also expanding the market for small-scale sustainable farms. The UCPM requires the provision of “environmentally friendly” food products that include: (1) nationally certified *organic* produce grown without the use of agricultural chemicals (including pesticides, herbicides, and growth regulators), chemical fertilizers, and antibiotics and (2) nationally certified *non-pesticide* produce grown without the use of agriculture chemicals and with less than one-third of the recommended amount of chemical fertilizer. Several participating rural towns have developed independent local-level certificates to assist farmers in transitioning to sustainable farming by providing administrative and technical assistance, as obtaining a national certificate often requires an excessive amount of time and effort, which is particularly challenging for elderly farmers. The UCPM also accepts non-herbicide, non-GMO (non-genetically modified organisms), and radiation-free criteria to accommodate these local-level certificates, which frequently have lower standards than the national certificates and reduce entry barriers for farmers.

District-level public meal centers in Seoul and local food centers in rural towns are two pivotal players in the UCPM. These district-level public meal

centers have been newly built for the UCPM with funds from district-level governments and the Seoul Metropolitan Government. Human resources, storage space, and delivery trucks are all part of the public meal centers, the operation of which is subsidized by the district- and city-level governments. District-level public meal centers not only serve as urban food hubs, gathering and transporting food to participating institutions, but they also regularly run extensive tests for residual agricultural chemicals and lead education programs about healthy eating and sustainable food systems for children and their parents. Local food centers in rural areas, which are typically founded and run by town- and/or provincial-level governments, aggregate and distribute locally produced food to schools and other institutions. They also function as umbrella organizations that set action plans and assist local farmers through various programs such as year-round farmers markets and support for agricultural cooperatives to foster sustainable farming practices.

What sets the UCPM apart from other global examples of innovative institutional food procurement is that the public sector has been actively involved in building the “infrastructure of the middle” to connect small-holder and family farmers in rural areas with metropolitan public institutions.<sup>22</sup> The concept of infrastructure of the middle indicates both hard infrastructures (food hubs, warehouses, and transportation) and soft infrastructures (networks, subsidies, and education).<sup>23</sup> By using public purchasing power to connect small- and mid-scale farmers with consumers, the infrastructure of the middle constructed through the UCPM mobilizes “the resources, facilities, and networks that create a critical mass, enabling alternative food producers to meet the needs of high-volume, high-profile food service clients.”<sup>24</sup> This particular form of infrastructure of the middle within the UCPM, which binds an urban area and a rural town in a pair as an exclusive food chain via anchor institutions in the city, was made possible by the UFEF’s successful implementation since 2010. In Seoul, and South Korea more broadly, the UFEF helped pave the way for further government investments in alternative supply chains. Policy language within the UFEF to encourage the use of sustainably grown local produce enabled the conception of the UCPM as a city-led initiative, which focuses on more direct actions to strengthen shrinking rural economies by empowering smallholders and family farms.

## CONCLUSION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC FOOD PROCUREMENT

The evolution of Seoul's public food procurement (see table 11.1) illustrates the government's commitment to enhancing the sustainability and equity of food systems across urban and rural areas. According to an interim evaluation report, the sourcing capacity of participating rural towns meets about 73 percent of the total demands from urban institutions in Seoul.<sup>25</sup> The number of people sourcing food for the UCPM (excluding the UFEF) increased more than five times since the beginning of the program as of June 2019 (from 7,844 to 44,328). The percentage of eco-friendly ingredients used for meal service at participating institutions increased from 22 percent (March 2016, before the program) to 67 percent (December 2017, after the program) to 85 percent (June 2019). This matters for the livelihoods of rural farmers since they keep up to 95 percent of the cost of food sold through the UCPM supply chain, in comparison with 61.5 percent or less than the cost of food sold through conventional wholesale markets.

**Table 11.1** Major timeline of public food procurement programs in Seoul

Year	Major milestones
2011	Launch of the UFEF in public primary schools in the Seoul metropolitan area.
2014	Expansion of the UFEF to middle schools (public and private).
2015	Formulation of the Seoul Master Plan begins.
2017	Six districts join the UCPM: Gang-dong, Geum-cheon, Do-bong, Seongbuk, No-won, and Gangbuk.
2018	Four districts join the UCPM: Seo-daemon, Dong-jak, Eun-pyeong, and Joong-rang.
2021	Expansion of the UFEF to private primary schools and high schools (private and public).
2022	More districts join the UCPM, bringing the total to twenty-five districts.

Note: The UCPM program was to be fully implemented by 2022. However, logistical challenges, budgetary constraints, and the unexpected obstacle of COVID-19 have resulted in delays.

While the UCPM has had some success in increasing the quality of public food services and the livelihoods of rural farmers, this public food procurement model is still in the early stages of development. An evaluation report of the Seoul Food Master Plan 2020, released in March 2021, exposed some concerns related to the UCPM including insufficient public funding, insecurity of policy continuity, and failures in cross-departmental coordination. It also pointed out that the current plan as a whole, which is largely focused on food distribution, food security, and food safety, ignores issues with food production and food waste disposal.<sup>26</sup> Problems such as backlash from conventional food markets, which are arguably losing market share due to the government intervention, and the potential for co-opting grassroots food initiatives that had already been committed to alternative supply chains for childcare centers have also been raised by grassroots stakeholders. In attaining long-term shared visions, ambiguous definitions of “local” and inconsistent interpretations of “eco-friendly” food could be barriers. For instance, the questions of what a local food system should look like, what standards for eco-friendly food in public meal service should be, and whether the exclusive consumption of *organic* food is conducive to encouraging sustainable farming in the long run remain controversial and unresolved. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic-related shutdowns of public institutions, such as schools and childcare centers, put additional strain on these alternative supply chains by halting public food sourcing. To offset food systems disruptions during the pandemic, the national and local governments in South Korea attempted to redirect foods reserved for public sourcing to individual-level consumers and group purchasing by other public institutions.<sup>27</sup>

To grapple with these problems and others, the Seoul Metropolitan Government is now crafting the first part of the Seoul Food Master Plan 2030, building on insights from the execution and evaluation of the 2020 version. Different departments with expertise in lifelong education, public health, and social welfare are working together on this revised plan, and the Seoul Food Civic Council has helped collect public feedback from various interest groups such as consumer cooperatives, producers, and grassroots stakeholders. To achieve a comprehensive municipal-level food master plan, it will be necessary to negotiate and integrate conflicting perspectives and priorities into shared goals—for example, food safety

must not come at the expense of food justice—and to develop a mechanism to ensure policy continuity based on the long-term vision.

To date, though, South Korea's UCPM already suggests a possible path in which city-level initiatives to expand public food procurement can contribute to re-localizing regional food systems by rebuilding the middle of supply chains. The UCPM's governance structure and logistics enable stakeholders from both urban and rural areas to partner together in a transformative effort to create more sustainable local food systems. It is critical for planners and policymakers to understand the fundamental issues underlying contemporary food systems as public goods and the local context of food politics to achieve collaborative partnerships across different sectors and geographies. The UCPM, as a government-led initiative to develop a place-based public food procurement system that stemmed from the UFEF school lunch program, demonstrates how transforming school food politics can lead the way to broader changes in regional food systems that benefit both rural producers and urban consumers. Ultimately, lessons from South Korea's UFEF school lunch program and Seoul's UCPM will help policymakers, practitioners, and academics in many worldwide cities who are looking for a transformative instrument to establish sustainable local food supply chains using the power of public food procurement.

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