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# Local food and sustainable regional development

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines municipality-owned sustainable and local food production initiatives in Dalarna, Sweden, through the lens of the 'public plate' as both a strategy for securing high-quality, sustainable food and a tool for regional development. Using a qualitative case study, we explore how these initiatives promote local food while advancing broader sustainability goals. We situate local actions within regional and national policy contexts, highlighting how overlapping agendas shape implementation. Focusing on the Återttaget programme, we reveal the opportunities and challenges public actors face in mobilising food systems to address environmental, social and economic objectives in place-based development frameworks.

## KEYWORDS

regional development; local food; policy; public sector; sustainability

**JEL** Q1, Q18, R11, R58

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in local food has increased amongst policymakers seeking to pursue self-sufficiency, build resilient food systems and promote sustainable development (e.g., Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021; Feagan, 2007). This growing attention spans elements such as organic food provision, short supply chains, resistance to globalised capitalist systems and efforts to address the abandonment of rural areas (Simonetti, 2012). Concerns around food (in)security in Europe have intensified (Borch & Kjærnes, 2016), with the COVID-19-related supply chain disruptions amplifying interest in how food systems are organised and governed (Alabi & Ngwenyama, 2023). In Sweden, the National Food Strategy (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2016) has emphasised food security, encouraging municipalities and regions to develop local food strategies to strengthen sustainability and resilience.

Meanwhile, regional development discussions increasingly emphasise economic models that stay within planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009). This has led to calls for 'green and just' regional development (Eadson & van Veelen, 2023), and empirical research on how sustainability transitions are actualised and supported at the regional level (Hansen & Coenen, 2015), often through

targeted policy actions (Coenen et al., 2015). At the European level, regional development policy is also evolving, with Smart Specialisation shifting toward prioritising sustainability (Veldhuizen, 2020).

It is at this intersection of local food and sustainable regional development that we situate our study. We explore how policy actors at local and regional levels can bring these goals together in a holistic and integrated manner. Using a qualitative case study of the Dalarna region in Sweden, we focus on two municipally-owned food production projects: Återttaget in Rättvik and Borlänge. Drawing on policy analysis across governance levels, and interviews with public sector actors involved in these initiatives, we examine the challenges and opportunities that arise when linking local food and regional development agendas 'on the ground' in a rural and peripheral setting. Our guiding research question is: How do national, regional, and local level policies and actors conceptualise the role of municipally owned food production in sustainable regional development, and how do these conceptualisations relate to one another?

The paper is structured as follows. First, we situate our study within the existing literature on local food and sustainable regional development, outlining their intersection and potential for dialogue. We then introduce the case of

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Dalarna, explaining why this largely rural and peripheral region is an interesting site of enquiry, particularly as one of the ‘early movers’ in implementing publicly owned local food projects. In our analysis, we present insights from our policy analysis and interviews, examining how local food aligns with regional development agendas from a multilevel governance perspective. In our discussion and conclusion, we reflect theoretically on integrating local food initiatives into sustainable development narratives, using the concepts of the ‘public plate’ and ‘municipal foodscapes’ (Morgan, 2008; Morley & Morgan, 2021). We also offer policy recommendations, suggesting how local and regional policymakers can collaborate to deliver a ‘win-win’: providing quality local food while advancing sustainability goals.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1. What is ‘local food’ and why is it important?

The first goal of our literature review is to explain why we are interested in local food is of interest and why applying a regional development lens offers useful insights. Local food has been studied from various perspectives, including retail, community-based initiatives (Cristiano, 2021; Maughan et al., 2018), production and consumption of particular crops (Meyerding et al., 2019), farmers markets and farm shops (Bavorova et al., 2016). Related terms include slow food, alternative food initiatives, community food and short food chains (Feagan, 2007). Sanz-Cañada and Muchnik (2016) refer to ‘territory and identity-based food products’ highlighting that local food is not only spatial but also embedded with cultural meaning. As Eriksen (2013) explains, local food means different things to different people. While proximity is central, its definition varies, ranging from the same locality to the same country (Eriksen, 2013). Given its context-dependent nature and relational proximity (e.g., stakeholder interaction, shared values such as freshness and traceability), the European Union (EU) allows member states to define it within rural development frameworks (Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021). This study adopts the EU Joint Research Centre’s definition: ‘a food system in which foods are produced, processed and retailed within a defined geographical area’ (Kneafsey et al., 2013, p. 23).

Recent food scandals have undermined trust in global markets, causing a shift toward local food as a safer, more sustainable option (Meyerding et al., 2019). Local food is often associated with small-scale producers and local support, while global trade is linked to large-scale production and environmental harm (Joosse, 2014). Consumers also perceive local food as higher quality, fresher, healthier and tastier, and value supporting local producers (Bavorova et al., 2016). However, the idea of ‘good food’ is fluid and shaped by social and digital media (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020). Understanding how consumers assign value to local food is central to its role (Clark et al., 2021).

Local food often performs better across several environmental indicators (Meyerding et al., 2019; Schmitt

et al., 2017), though its benefits depend on the measures being used and are not always the ‘greenest’ across all measures (Payen et al., 2015). Beyond sustainability, it contributes to rural development, job creation, producer empowerment, food safety, education, and reduced transport (Joosse, 2014). We use the Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainable development, ‘meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987), alongside the three pillars of sustainability: environment, social and economic (Purvis et al., 2019). While often paired with sustainability, we focus on food system resilience, defined as the ‘capacity over time of a food system and its units at multiple levels, to provide sufficient, appropriate and accessible food to all, in the face of various and even unforeseen disturbances’ (Tendall et al., 2015, p. 19). We also distinguish between the three phases of resilience: robustness, adaptability and transformability, and their link to sustainable development (Meuwissen et al., 2019).

This paper focuses on two elements of local food: its potential for ‘better’ food provision at the local level, and its regional development opportunities. Before explaining our rationale behind using the sustainable regional development lens, we clarify what ‘better’ means in this context. Arguments include support for local agriculture, transparency in production, regional identity, food security, rural–urban linkages, landscape management and environmental benefits. ‘Better’ food may also relate to health, though not always.

### 2.2. Sustainable regional development

Contemporary regional development debates increasingly acknowledge major environmental and social challenges, with Donald and Gray (2019) calling for scholars to address the dual crisis of work within today’s ecological and social context. The combination of various crises and shifts in economies and societies has deepened regional inequalities, leading to processes of left-behindness and discontent, often expressed politically (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Pike et al., 2024). Rural and peripheral regions are frequently portrayed as suffering most, though such generalisations overlook the diversity of regional types and the fact that not all rural areas experience negative outcomes of left-behindness (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pugh & Dubois, 2021; Willett & Lang, 2018).

There is a clear need for regional development that is both green and just (Eadson & van Veelen, 2023), including of places, and responsive to complex social and ecological challenges (Donald & Gray, 2019). Sustainable regional development means breaking with ‘business as usual’ and adopting holistic, multidimensional approaches, driven by leadership and change (Sotarauta et al., 2012). Change agents can open new development paths by creating opportunity spaces, and public sector actors are increasingly recognised as such agents (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). Place leadership is also seen as essential for enacting change at the regional level (Beer et al., 2019).

Food is one potential area for sustainable regional development. Recent research has begun to link local food with broader debates about sustainable regional development, exploring how ‘a more integrated and territorial agri-food approach can support sustainable regional development’ (Wiskerke, 2009, p. 369). Whilst connections between local food production and regional economic development are not new (Marsden et al., 1999), interest is growing due to its broad impact on residents and potential to advance sustainability for both regional economies and entrepreneurs (Lever & Sonnino, 2022; Marsden & Smith, 2005). Food fits within a foundational economy approach, which focuses on essential sectors and services needed for a decent life, delivered in a more sustainable and just manner (Hansen, 2022; Martynovich et al., 2023).

Local food also plays a role in place-branding strategies aimed at boosting regional attractiveness and tourism. Examples from various countries show how food is used to promote regions, including our case study’s ‘Taste of Dalarna’, a publicly funded initiative guiding tourists to local producers (Visit Dalarna, 2021). This aligns with Canadian cases where creative food clusters leverage agricultural and cultural resources (Lee et al., 2015). Food is directly employed within regional development approaches via ‘food tourism’ (Rachão et al., 2019), destination-branding (Lai et al., 2019) and sustainability-branding (Su et al., 2019). In Sweden, municipalities increasingly engage in competitive green branding to boost their regional development and attractiveness efforts (Andersson, 2016).

### 2.3. The role for the public sector: the ‘public plate’ and ‘municipal foodscapes’

Within this wider theoretical backdrop of local food’s significance for delivering diverse benefits to people and places, not least tying into a sustainable regional development agenda, we are interested in the role of the public sector therein.

Recent scholarship highlights growing municipal involvement in the local food agenda (Morgan & Santo, 2018). In this study, we draw on two concepts by Kevin Morgan and colleagues: the public plate and the municipal foodscape. Although not part of our initial design, they emerged as highly relevant during analysis, prompting further exploration in the Swedish context. Morley and Morgan (2021) argue that the public plate offers a way to stimulate transformative food agendas at the municipal level, requiring coordinated action across national, regional and local scales. Recognising food’s foundational role, highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, can lead to more progressive and impactful food policy reform.

Two points from this framing guide our paper. First, the concept of the public plate, which refers to food provision through public canteens such as schools, hospitals and care homes (Morgan, 2008), provides the sphere within which we situate our discussion. We focus on public local food provision and production, addressing gaps in knowledge about municipal roles through a Swedish case

study. Second, we adopt a multilevel perspective, acknowledging that understanding local food production requires attention to regional, national and international dynamics.

Morley and Morgan (2021, p. 2) also introduce the municipal foodscape, which is ‘the part of a food system that is shaped, both materially and socially, by the agency of municipal government’. Municipalities contribute through partnerships (Moragues-Faus, 2020), improving access to healthy food, reducing waste (Treutwein & Langen, 2021), supporting community growing, and providing food services in schools and hospitals (Gray et al., 2018; Morley & Morgan, 2021). However, municipal involvement is complex, often marked by tensions between finance, public health, economic development and sustainability. Projects can also fall victim to the tides of local politics, supported or thwarted by unsympathetic politicians (Morgan & Morley, 2014; Morley & Morgan, 2021).

Sweden is not alone in expanding municipal food initiatives to promote sustainability and development. In France, municipal farms and local procurement for school meals have been established (Morley & Morgan, 2021), and interest in public sector food provision is also high in the UK (Gray et al., 2018). Interest in public sector food procurement and provision is also high in the UK (Gray et al., 2018). Less economically advanced regions, such as peripheries, rural areas and post-industrial regions, can build resilience to withstand economic and environmental shocks (Barr & Devine-Wright, 2012). As such, food can be linked to wider local and regional development agendas, thus: ‘it underpins the socio-economic health of all localities, furnishing the basis for economic growth in conventional technology-driven sectors’ (Morley & Morgan, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, developing a sustainable and resilient local food system is vital for the economic vitality of places going forward.

Having outlined the key literature and concepts, we now introduce our case study of the Dalarna region in Sweden. We consider it a compelling example for exploring the dynamics, challenges and opportunities of publicly owned local food production within a wider regional development strategy.

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

### 3.1. Case study selection

We chose to research Återttaget in Dalarna, focusing on the projects in Borlänge and Rättvik, as they are among Sweden’s longest-running public food initiatives. This provided access to reports, media coverage, and long-term municipal and regional actors involved in the projects. From a public plate perspective, these cases are notable for being fully publicly owned, without private or civil society involvement. We were also interested in how local food production and consumption in Dalarna are directly linked to wider objectives in sustainable and resilient development, particularly protecting the region’s environment and culture, and supporting its tourism-dependent economy.



### 3.2. Methods

We followed a qualitative case study (Stake, 2008) approach, combining document analysis and interviews with key policy stakeholders involved in the Återtaget projects at the local and regional levels. Interviews were a mixture of in-person and digital, alongside an in-depth analysis of policy documents relating to local food and regional development across governance levels, including key national and European levels (Table 1).

Whilst we also analysed rural and agricultural policy and procurement policies (Ministry of Finance, 2016; The National Agency for Public Procurement, 2017), our analysis here focuses on documents directly addressing our dual interest: local food and regional development.

We conducted 11 in-depth interviews with public sector employees with expertise in agriculture, food and regional development. The interview guide was changed in relation to the interviewee's different areas of expertise and organisation, but the core themes – local food and regional development matters, and Återtaget – remained consistent. To contextualise Återtaget, we also consulted news articles and the municipal websites.

We have kept the interviewees anonymous because in such a small sphere it would be easy to identify people from their positions. Suffice it to say that all our interviewees were public employees. Interviews included officials and one local politician from the municipalities (five), the regional office (two), the county administrative board (two), and national authorities: the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth and the National Agency for Public Procurement. The interviews were conducted as part of a research project resulting in a master's thesis (Westerdahl, 2020).

Table 2 outlines our multilevel analysis framework. We draw on the concept of multilevel governance (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Hooghe & Marks, 2002), originally developed for European Cohesion Policy, but now widely applied to regional and innovation policy (Magro & Wilson, 2013; Pugh, 2018). A multilevel governance perspective could allow for flows and interactions between the various levels of policymaking to be considered, and opens the potential to study policy at different spatial scales. We follow the typical implementation of multilevel governance in European policy studies, which considers the local, regional, national and European policy levels.

Whilst the number of interviews is modest, we prioritised depth and relevance, selecting participants with specific knowledge to complement our policy analysis. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, recorded and translated into English for analysis. We manually coded the transcripts and cross-checked coding across the research team. We followed the standardised informed consent procedure within our institutions by providing a consent to participate form to all research participants to read and sign, which gave information about the project, its aims, how we would use and store the data, and their

right to amend or withdraw their participation at any time. We also consulted interviewees on how they would like to be referred to in the paper.

Our analysis followed a three-stage process (Figure 1). First, we analysed them inductively, searching for themes and topics that arose from the data, so-called 'underlying themes' (Bryman, 2016). Second, we applied a deductive lens based on our research question, focusing on interactions between local food and regional development agendas. Finally, we combined both approaches using a 'trees and branches' coding structure, influenced by Gioia et al. (2013), to organise themes into higher order categories. The themes presented in the analysis section reflect this process and capture the diverse rationales and perspectives surrounding Återtaget, as expressed in both policy documents and stakeholder interviews.

## 4. INTRODUCING THE CASE: LOCAL FOOD IN DALARNA

The Återtaget projects studied here are municipally owned by Borlänge and Rättvik, located in the Dalarna region in central Sweden. Our interest in local food and regional development led us to follow these projects over several years, prompting questions about how the local food agenda aligns with broader regional development goals when implemented through publicly owned food production.

Dalarna is one of Sweden's 21 regions, which in the European parlance correspond to the NUTS-3 level. It consists of almost 288,000 inhabitants and 15 municipalities, with Borlänge being one of the largest municipalities with 52,590 inhabitants, while Rättvik municipality has about 10,950 inhabitants (SCB, 2019). Municipalities in Sweden, of which there are 290, are the local level of government, and unlike in some national contexts, municipality does not equate to 'city'. Often referred to as 'the heart of Sweden', Dalarna is known for its central location and iconic cultural profile, including small villages, farms and the traditional red-painted Dalahäst horse. The region features a fragmented, forested landscape with a long tradition of small to medium-sized grazing farms, which contribute to a valued rural landscape and maintain biodiversity (County Administrative Board Dalarna, 2020). Dalarna is also tourism-dependent, with one of the highest shares of overnight stays in Sweden (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2020). While largely rural and peripheral, it includes smaller urban centres such as Borlänge, Falun and Avesta. In this study, we are interested in the Återtaget projects, which roughly translates to 'the recapture', focusing on two projects in two different municipalities in the region, examining how public local food production contributes to sustainable regional development.

### 4.1. Återtaget in Borlänge

In Borlänge municipality, the Återtaget project keeping Highland cattle started in 1994 as a cheap solution for

**Table 1.** Overview of the analysed policy documents.

Public document	Level	Publisher, year	Information
The National Food Strategy	National	Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Platform for overall food policy until 2030</li> <li>Globally competitive, innovative, sustainable Swedish food chain that is attractive to operate within by 2030</li> </ul>
The National Food Strategy 2.0	National	Regeringskansliet (2025)	Enhance Sweden's sustainable food production by increasing competitiveness, resilience and quality of the entire food supply chain through clear goals, strategic coordination, innovation and market development
National Strategy of Sustainable Regional Growth and Attractiveness 2014–2020	National	Regeringskansliet (2015); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014)	In line with the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. It focuses on physical/spatial planning and regional attractiveness for regional sustainable growth
National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Development throughout Sweden 2021–2030	National	Regeringskansliet (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote economically, socially and environmentally sustainable regional development</li> <li>Contribute to the transition to a sustainable society</li> </ul>
Regional Food Strategy	Regional	Region Dalarna (2017)	Written together with the County Administrative Board and the Federation of Swedish Farmers, this is the region's food strategy to 2030
Dalarna 2020	Regional	Region Dalarna (2014)	Region Dalarna's regional development strategy to 2020
Dalarna 2030	Regional	Region Dalarna (2021a)	The next strategy to 2030. The subtitle is 'together for a sustainable Dalarna'
North–Middle Sweden Smart Specialisation Report	Regional	Central Sweden European Office (2019)	Sets out the 2021–27 vision for the region's Smart Specialisation approach
North–Middle Sweden Economic Analysis	Regional	Region Dalarna (2025)	Economic report for the macro-region made up of three participating regions: Dalarna, Gävleborg and Värmland
Report on Economic Inequalities in Dalarna and Sweden	National/ Regional	Region Dalarna (2021b)	Part of a series of reports undertaken by the region to better understand the regional economy. This is the fourth part; the other reports are less relevant here because they cover issues such as housing inequality and workplace discrimination
For a Resilient Society	National	Sweden's Municipalities and Regions (2021)	The association for all municipalities and regions in Sweden (based in Stockholm) published a report about increasing resilience across the whole of society to respond to the various grand challenges (including COVID-19 recovery)

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Public document	Level	Publisher, year	Information
Responsible Actors for Development	National	Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (2020)	National-level document related to the regional capacities and actors involved in regional development
European Green Deal	International	European Commission (2019)	The overarching flagship policy at the European level towards a just, sustainable and inclusive transformation of European society and economy
European Rural Vision	International	European Commission (2021, 2022a)	The long-term vision for the European Union's (EU) rural areas up to 2040. It will be accompanied by a Rural Pact and an EU Rural Action Plan that support the achievement of the vision's goals

Table 2. Overview of the interviews and their multilevel governance perspective.

Interviewee	Interviews	Level
Municipal politicians	5	Local
Regional officer	2	Regional
County administrative board	2	
Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth	1	National
The National Agency for Public Procurement	1	

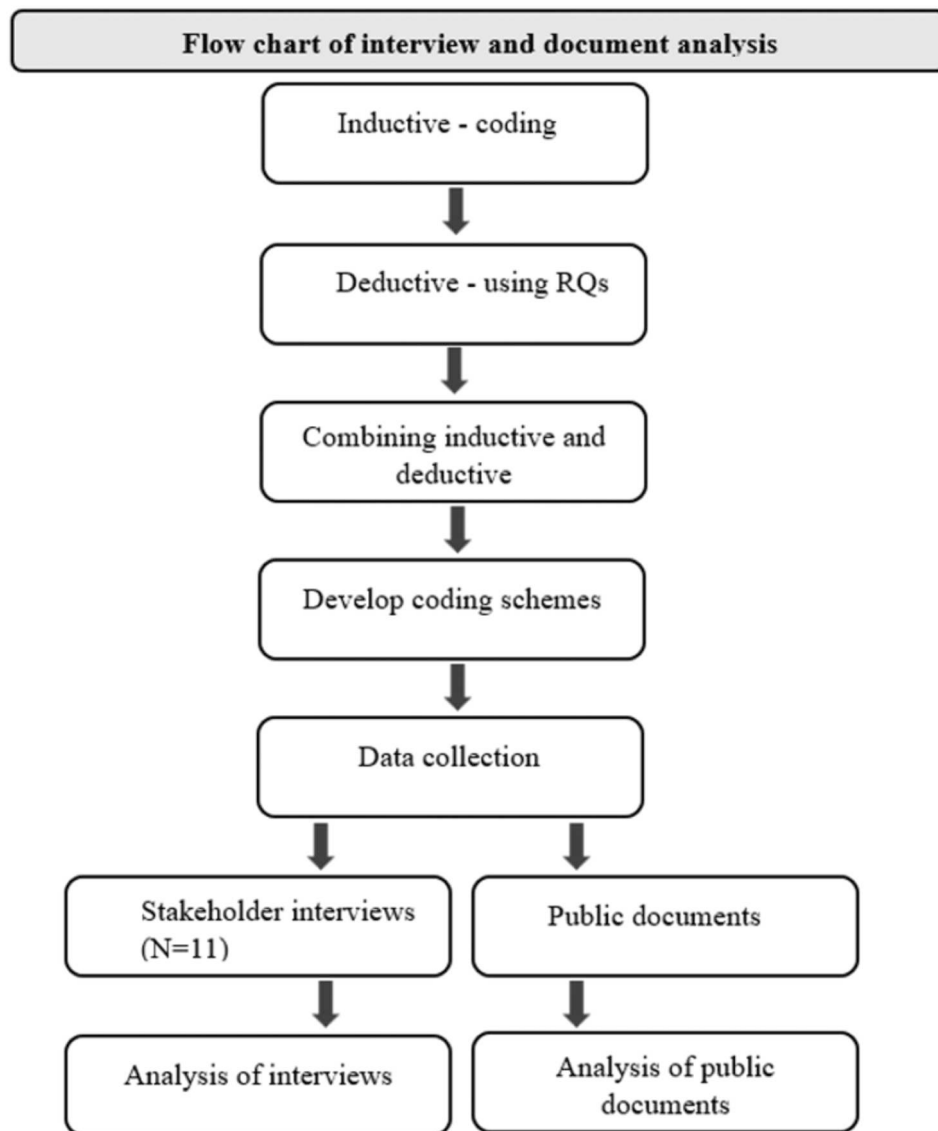
restoring a lake that was overgrown. Eventually, it expanded to include more land in the area that was not being cared for, responding to depopulation and the decline of livestock farming, issues common in rural and peripheral regions (Sveriges Radio, 2013).

The project aimed to maintain the landscape to historical standards (Borlänge kommun, 2019a, 2019b) and became viewed as important for the region in supporting tourism, upon which the area is dependent, and necessary for the people living in Borlänge to feel as though the spirit and history of the region is being preserved. In addition, cows have been used for educational purposes teaching schoolchildren about food production and climate-related issues (Sveriges Radio, 2013). Today, the municipality owns around 105 organically certified Highland cattle, grazing semi-natural pastures and wetlands. The herd is managed through a labour market initiative that provides employment for individuals previously excluded from the workforce (Borlänge kommun, 2019b).

From the outset, a key ambition was to use the meat in municipal daycares, schools and elderly homes, realised in 2010 (ATL, 2010; Södra Dalarnas Tidningar, 2011). Each year, 25–35 cattle are slaughtered locally and delivered to municipal kitchens (Borlänge kommun, 2019b). The municipality states that the project is positive financially versus sourcing cow products from the private sector (Dala-demokraten, 2016), while also providing locally produced food perceived as 'good food' for the public plate (ATL, 2010).

#### 4.2. Återtaget in Rättvik

Today, around 96% of the meat, nearly all potatoes, much of the pork and some vegetables used in Rättvik municipality's kitchens come from the municipally owned agricultural college (Rättvik kommun, 2019). The municipality produces about 720 tonnes of milk annually, which is 18 times the 40-tonne annual requirement of the municipal kitchen. The idea of taking the food produced from the local, municipal college was devised as a response to existing procurement processes not guaranteeing local or Swedish food products (Södra Dalarnas Tidningar, 2011; Sveriges Radio, 2008, 2013). At the college, the barn for the cows had to be rebuilt in 2009; politicians decided at that point to expand and adjust the production at the college to enable food self-sufficiency for the municipal kitchens (Sveriges Radio, 2008). Additionally,



**Figure 1.** Interview and document analysis.

the cost of the food produced at the college is said to be cheaper compared with buying the equivalent (Sveriges Radio, 2008, 2011). Getting the food from the municipal college is also argued to be better for the environment, public health, education and creating open landscapes (Rättvik kommun, 2019). One official states that, because of the project Återtaget, they have succeeded in creating a long-term sustainable food production in the area (Falu-Kuriren, 2017).

#### 4.3. The 'public plate' in Sweden

As explained in the case selection, Återtaget in Dalarna is a flagship example of publicly owned food production addressing local food provision but also wider regional development goals. While not unique, it was among the first of its kind in Sweden. Overall, the debate and prominence of discussions around local food and sustainable development are quite rich in Sweden, with issues around food provision to municipal daycares, schools, and elderly homes often appearing in the press. The governance

structures in Sweden also mean that the national context is sympathetic towards the 'public plate' and 'municipal foodscapes', since local governments in Sweden can affect the market towards sustainability and act as role models in their consumption patterns due to their relatively large share of autonomy (Lukkarinen et al., 2016). However, not all municipalities act sustainably, and their efforts must be assessed to understand what promotes or hinders regional development (Wolff & Schönherr, 2011).

Several municipalities now tailor procurement to favour Swedish and local food. Borlänge and Rättvik, have taken this further by owning food production for municipal kitchens. We will provide some examples from our own and others' research to illustrate this wider context. Härjedalen municipality owns 22 cows to serve local meat (Härjedalens kommun, 2021). Also, Mora, Orsa, Leksand, Gagnef and Älvdalen municipalities, all located in Dalarna, own grazing cattle (Fischerström, 2017). Vara municipality sets animal welfare standards only met by Swedish producers, while Hörby and Klippan



municipalities require fresh meat and ban vacuum packaging (Fischerström, 2017). In Norrtälje, one of the schools has a project where they follow a pig from the farm to the plate and the pupils also make their own sausages, while Ödeshög municipality make requirements in their public procurement that pupils in the schools should be able to visit the farms where their food comes from (Fischerström, 2017). Sollefteå and Kramfors municipality have become part owners of the harvest of local vegetable farms (Sollefteå kommun, 2016). These strategies are seen as more climate-friendly, ethical, and economically beneficial, keeping tax money local (Rooth, 2017; Sollefteå kommun, 2016).

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1. Links between local food and regional development

Our analysis explored the linkages between local food and regional development policy using a multilevel perspective. As discussed in the theoretical section, academic literature supports uniting these two areas to bring about transformative change, especially for rural and peripheral areas which have suffered many of the effects of left-behindness, whilst often having a significant food and agriculture sector. However, beyond these academic discussions of linking up local food and regional development, we tested whether this was happening in our case of Dalarna in Sweden. The headline message is that, yes, in Sweden the local food agenda is strongly linked to regional development. The National Food Strategy aims to build a competitive food supply chain that boosts production, meets environmental goals, and supports growth and sustainability (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2016). This echoes the European scenario, where, through headline initiatives such as the European Green Deal, the Rural Pact and Farm to Fork, all address rural regional sustainable development with a consideration of food and farming (European Commission, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

At the regional level, the Återtaget project is clearly situated within the wider regional development strategy in Dalarna. Interviewees emphasised that local food projects help retain public funds locally and support sustainability. A tangible example of this is how Rättvik has a focus on using local businesses and services around food production, such as sending the cattle to a nearby slaughterhouse.

Local food production is also viewed as a way of delivering upon regional environmental issues, preserving the traditional environment in Dalarna that is seen as vital for the local tourism industry:

The natural values that exist now do not exist in 10 years if you do not maintain the land ... it is rather an emergency in that it becomes overgrown, and farmers are closing down. ... These cows graze land that might not have been grazed otherwise.

(project manager, Borlänge)

In this sense, Dalarna is employing local food initiatives to counteract one of the classic negative effects of left-behindness in rural regions: depopulation and farm closure. In Rättvik, the increase in production at the school is partly credited with maintaining the open landscape around the area, and in Borlänge the project started as an efficient way of maintaining the popular visitor recreation land around the lake.

Dalarna's Regional Food Strategy links food production to environmental preservation: 'An environmentally and climate smart food chain creates ecosystem services and contributes to the value creation and profitability in the food industry' (Länsstyrelsen Dalarna, 2017). The National Food Strategy also highlights open landscapes, and the National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Development stresses attractive living environments (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2016; Regeringskansliet, 2021).

Local food production is seen as having an important interaction with other economic sectors in the regional economy. It creates additional value to the restaurant sector in the region, as 'the local food is part of the story about the district' (Länsstyrelsen Dalarna, 2017). Dalarna is a major tourist region in Sweden, and there is a clear rationale present within the regional strategy to link up food production and preserve the spirit, beauty, and history of the region.

That we have this open and vibrant landscape is very important ... it is the visitor industry that is our largest industry and source of income ... that it looks like this around Rättvik is a lot [of] thanks to Återtaget.

(project manager, Rättvik)

Återtaget has been explicitly drawn on its branding and place marketing materials:

we have had very good media throughout the years regarding Återtaget ... there are constant visits from other municipalities 'How did you do this? How have you been able to make it work?', it happens many times a year.

(head of unit, Rättvik)

Borlänge municipality has received prizes for their work, seeing Återtaget as part of their success in establishing themselves as a municipality that works with sustainable development, developing a good image.

Furthermore, we saw a clear motivation and rationalisation of Återtaget along the lines of developing regional resilience: 'we may have to think about – what if we don't get our food imports, what do we do then? ... And then [Återtaget] will still be there' (project manager, Rättvik).

This issue of food supply chain resilience has become even starker since we conducted our interviews, with the supply chain issues encountered during 2021 partly due to the covid crisis, and the fact that this could happen was mentioned by an interviewee even as we were conducting interviews in spring 2020. As was increasing extreme weather conditions and climate change.

this time it is Corona, what will it mean for agricultural production if the economy falls, and we get import stops on soy? How does it affect milk production in Dalarna? ... we have a lot to gain from also making use of what we can produce in the region or in the surrounding regions to maintain production.

(project manager, county administrative board)

Interviewees pointed towards creating a resilient food production system, looking at all the different components of the supply chain as a fully self-reliant system. The Regional Food Strategy calls for preparedness in food products and inputs (such as fossil fuel, fertilisers and pesticides), echoing literature on growing interest in self-sufficiency and resilience (Barr & Devine-Wright, 2012). National discussions also highlight the food sector's role in resilience (Sweden's Municipalities and Regions, 2021).

## 5.2. 'Better' food for the region's citizens

However, not everything about Återtaget is about linking up to the regional development agenda, especially what we saw from the local government perspective in Rättvik and Borlänge. It is also about providing what municipalities perceive as 'better' food. While the term 'better' is debated in the literature, it appeared frequently in interviews.

Food provision is quite a popular and politicised topic in Sweden, as seen above in regional and national strategies as well as in the municipalities' actions.

In the matter of food, it is very much ... an important and sensitive issue for many and it is a politically relevant issue constantly. What food is served in the public kitchens, what food you give to your old, sick and your children ...

(national agency official)

Återtaget can be understood as a way for the municipalities to produce food they consider to be of 'better' quality in a broad sense, while bringing positive effects to the local area and economy. The municipalities consider Återtaget as 'better' food based on an understanding of local food equating to higher levels of sustainability, assuming the better choice vis-à-vis international food supply chains (Joosse, 2014). As pointed out by a project manager in Borlänge:

we need to utilize the resources we have locally. We can't just buy food from elsewhere. Well, yes, we can, but also from a vulnerability perspective and also the perspective of utilizing the resources, it is good with a local production.

Additionally, this manager explains that the municipality owns cows for several reasons, and one of them is because they want: 'to get high quality, locally produced meat'.

What makes this difficult is that there are less and less farmers in the area and not a large variety of food products: ... so then you have to look at what can we do ourselves then?

(head of unit, Borlänge)

We saw the sentiment expressed in some of our interviews that also Swedish produced food is 'better' than that sourced from elsewhere. For example, as told to us:

We [the municipality] should not contribute to buying meat from Denmark, Germany, whatever it might be, where there are a lot of antibiotics, where you do not follow the animal welfare laws, we have here in Sweden.

(project manager in Rättvik)

In addition, Återtaget is highlighted as providing positive social outcomes through linking production with education and occupational rehabilitation. In Borlänge they teach children about where food comes from and how it is produced. Whilst in Rättvik, as an interviewee told us that the students at the agricultural school are said to 'of course feel proud as they are the ones producing the food for the whole public administration'. When discussing 'better food', the health and taste aspects were not particularly emphasised by our interviewees, but a project manager in Rättvik explained how Återtaget had brought about wider positive changes to the food production in municipal run facilities. Staff in municipal kitchens' workload changed from heating already cooked food to cooking using fresh produce: 'You call yourself "chef" more today than you did before'. The sense of feeling proud as a kitchen staff and at the dietary unit was also highlighted in Borlänge. So, from the local perspective there are multiple benefits felt from the projects, which were more clearly articulated than by the other government levels we spoke to, who were more concerned with the wider resilience and sustainable regional development aspects.

## 5.3. Local food as part of the broadening of regional development

At the regional level, we can see Återtaget as part of a wider trend within Sweden whereby regional development policies and approaches have broadened what it incorporates, and in particular taking an increasingly sustainability-oriented approach (Region Dalarna, 2021a). During the interviews, it became clear that the scope of what is considered regional development has widened, including local food production. At the time of research, it was the period of preparation of the new Regional Development Strategies in Dalarna, previous strategy ending 2020 (Region Dalarna, 2014), and food supply was understood as an issue on the rise together with other issues such as energy supply. As a project manager at Region Dalarna experienced:

There is a huge difference really! ... There was nothing about the environment and climate in the old one [regional development strategy] ... we are currently processing that like. What is meant by 'sustainable' and 'sustainable development'? And is there 'sustainable growth'? ... it has only been economic growth [in the Regional Development Strategy before].

(project manager at Region Dalarna)

This change is also experienced at the national level:

Everything from culture, public health, skills supply, all this affects companies and their ability to grow ... our assignments have also been broadened now ... the whole, whole view of society has also been broadened and changed.  
(head of unit, Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth)

#### 5.4. Complexities of the public plate

We argue that Återtaget is a good example of the ‘public plate’ in action, where the public sector takes on the full process from production to consumption of local food. Publicly owned local food production schemes such as Återtaget fundamentally question the role of the public sector and necessarily stretch it beyond what may have been considered normal previously. The increasing pressure on regional development to contain sustainability elements, and the local pressures caused by farm closures and the need to preserve the environment converge in the Återtaget case whereby the municipality ‘steps in’, expanding the scope of the municipal foodscape whilst delivering on its responsibilities regarding the public plate. However, we also received more critical or philosophical comments on this trend, which stretch somewhat beyond the specifics and perceived benefits of the Återtaget case and cause us to question the wider implications of local food projects more generally. However, the Återtaget case also invites more critical reflection on the broader implications of such initiatives. Questions arise regarding the appropriate extent of municipal involvement in food production, particularly when considering ventures such as dairy operations or meat processing. As a head of unit at Rättvik municipality expresses, there may be perceived to be some limits as to how far a local government should engage:

But would, should we start a dairy? Well, mmm, there are certainly those who would think that but then I would think it would be, well, tricky. I mean how much should a municipality actually do?

In addition to these more philosophical questions around the reach and role of local government, there are practical questions around the effective spending of taxpayer money. A project manager in Rättvik explained that they considered making their own sausage ‘but it was so expensive ... then it is no longer justifiable’. Similar concerns were expressed by a head of unit at Borlänge when thinking of expanding efforts such as Återtaget, highlighting both financial and political considerations where officials are being positive of expansions but ‘I think it is expensive to run too ... do you want to spend the tax money on [Återtaget]? I do not know if they [politicians] are prepared to do so’. These financial questions are of course a key element of the local food discussion when it comes to deciding how public funds should be used, and research in other regional contexts has shown that the financial

question often undermines the longevity of local food initiatives (Morgan, 2025).

Evaluating the costs of initiatives like Återtaget is complex, particularly when considering indirect benefits such as landscape preservation and its contribution to tourism. These kinds of local food projects may offer a way to combine multiple outcomes, economic, environmental, and social, even if such benefits are not easily captured through conventional cost-efficiency metrics. As one interviewee noted, this approach allows for the integration of different benefits, where ‘the total can be a win’.

However, the situation in the Swedish context is quite complex because the National Food Strategy states that food production needs to be able to meet challenges on the global market and be competitive, for it to be part of the transition to sustainable development (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2016). For this to happen the productivity level needs to keep the same pace as other countries and the costs of inputs and labour, often higher in Sweden, need to be on the same level as other comparable countries. The goal is to have cost-efficient production, where production values are continuously increasing, and the sector provides growing employment. This is not an easy balance to achieve.

Similarly, the Regional Food Strategy calls for competitive food producers (Länsstyrelsen Dalarna, 2017). The competitiveness of Återtaget when seen in such terms was questioned by several interviewees, usually at the regional and national rather than local level. Återtaget, and we argue indeed other public initiatives around local food may be seen as inefficient in a narrow economic competitiveness sense but still fulfilling several positive purposes from social and environmental perspectives.

I find it hard to believe that it really is effective, rational, instead there are other reasons that weigh more heavily ... it feels like a municipality may not be the best owner and manager of a farm, there may be others that would be more efficient. But there are other reasons that come in that trump it.

(official, Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth)

This tension between economic rationality and broader sustainability goals is a central challenge in regional development. It requires navigating goal conflicts, where initiatives that support sustainability in multiple dimensions may also entail higher costs. Addressing these conflicts is part of the broader adaptation process linked to climate change and the implementation of Agenda 2030.

As a head of unit at Region Dalarna summarised, the challenge lies in balancing different rationales and objectives:

That is the actual challenge, isn't it? To deal with the goal conflicts that arise when you can then see that ‘Well, we know this is good for sustainability in all its dimensions, but then it will be more expensive. ... So, what do we do then?’ It is about dealing with goal conflicts that the

adaptation [dealing with climate change, incorporating Agenda 2030] is about.

## 6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It is important to elucidate the implication of a case such as Återtaget beyond the specificities of the Dalarna case especially given that it is found that we lack knowledge when it comes to policy for smaller and more peripheral regions and municipalities if we compare to the much larger knowledge bank relating to more urban or core areas (Haylock & Connelly, 2018; Magoni & Colucci, 2017). Secondly, the trend towards place-based policies (Syssner & Erlingsson, 2023) means that policymakers in various places need experiences and evidence to draw on in their work. The increasing need for research to support green and just regional development (Eadson & van Veelen, 2023) means a rich and diverse bank of knowledge and experience from different regional settings is going to be key.

Taken together, the Återtaget case highlights several important considerations for regional policy and practice. Local food initiatives such as this can be strategically embedded within regional development frameworks to address sustainability, resilience, and social inclusion. At the same time, municipal involvement in food production requires careful navigation of financial sustainability and broader public value, particularly in national contexts where competitiveness remains a central policy goal. This highlights the need for national and regional strategies to more explicitly support municipalities as active agents in transforming the food system, including through the development of appropriate funding mechanisms and governance models. Moreover, peripheral regions like Dalarna require tailored policy support and greater visibility in research to ensure that development strategies are equitable and context sensitive. As place-based approaches continue to gain traction, grounded and diverse examples such as Återtaget offer valuable insights for informing policy design, especially in the context of green and just transitions.

Existing literature on the ‘public plate’ and ‘municipal foodscapes’ (Morgan, 2008, 2025; Morley & Morgan, 2021) provides some policy implications in the sense of approaches that have been tried in different local and regional settings, representing a range of different strategies and programmes that can be attempted. Examples range from leveraging the school food procurement system towards more local food inclusion (Kleine & das Graças Brightwell, 2015; Morgan, 2025; Son, 2023, 2024), supporting community-based initiatives (Cristiano, 2021; Maughan et al., 2018) farmers markets and farm shops (Bavorova et al., 2016), through partnerships (Moragues-Faus, 2020), improving access to healthy food, reducing waste (Treutwein & Langen, 2021), supporting community growing, and providing food services in hospitals (Gray et al., 2018; Morley & Morgan, 2021). In addition to building on this knowledge bank of cases

studies at the local and regional level that illustrate the different ways in which local and regional governments can help transition to a more sustainable local food sector, we also need to draw out the wider implications of the individual initiatives and policies to develop a broader understanding of how policy can better support sustainable regional development via leveraging the potentials of local food.

When we look at Återtaget from the perspective of tangible policy lessons, we see elements of the project that are very specific and special to the Dalarna case, but we also see other regions in Sweden working proactively with local food, for instance leveraging the procurement system in different ways or municipalities owning their own cattle (Fischerström, 2017; Kjellberg et al., 2024). The integration of various municipal sectors (education, elderly care, and local labour projects), combined with Sweden’s relatively high municipal autonomy and funding, makes the comprehensive ‘public plate’ approach possible, which might be harder in other contexts with less coverage of the public sector and less autonomy at the local government level. In such cases, it might first be necessary for central governments to grant more autonomy to regional and local levels of government to design both regional development and food policy in a place-based manner (Rodríguez-García et al., 2024).

Specific elements of the Återtaget model, particularly its strategies for local food procurement, offer transferable best practices. These include dividing procurement into smaller contracts, engaging local businesses during the pre-tender phase to build capacity, and linking local food initiatives with educational programmes, such as school visits to local producers, to enhance public awareness of food and environmental issues. These policy approaches feed into wider discussions taking place within the regional studies community about the largely untapped potential of public procurement to drive innovation and sustainability at the local and regional level, harnessing the potentials of local and regional government in this manner (Edler & Uyarra, 2013; Edquist & Zabala-Iturriagagoitia, 2012; Uyarra et al., 2017). Previous literature suggests that a place-based approach to leveraging public procurement could be particularly fruitful for lagging or peripheral regions (Sensier et al., 2024; Uyarra et al., 2020). Building on this, and the recognition that place based policies are very important for peripheral regions more generally (Syssner & Erlingsson, 2023), we suggest that focussing on place based approaches to local food procurement, given the fact that this sector is often over-represented in peripheral region contexts, might be a particularly fruitful avenue in terms of supporting sustainable regional development, delivering better food provision to local communities, and also enhancing rural areas resilience to external shocks.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

We have explored the different rationales and motivations existing around publicly owned local food



production initiatives in Dalarna, Sweden. We found, through analysing policy relating to food and regional development, and interviewing key experts involved in these agendas from the public sector at different levels, that there is a dual goal of the Återtaget local food project: delivering on wider regional development agendas, meanwhile providing 'better food' to the region's residents. Reflecting on previous research in this area, we examine a case of what Morley and Morgan (2021) are calling the public plate and municipal foodscapes, where the public sector takes a strong role in the local food agenda tied into its wider regional development goals. Whilst we appreciate the limits of single case studies in terms of broader applicability and generalisability play (Blatter & Haverland, 2012), we see the value in digging deep into the specifics of a case to understand the dynamics, tensions, and opportunities at play.

When we look at Återtaget from the perspective of policy lessons, we see elements of the project that we feel are very specific and special to the Dalarna case, and it would require further research in other regions and countries to unpack the geographical specificities of the policy approaches that have been implemented and found at least partly successful. The integration of various municipal sectors (education, elderly care and local labour projects) combined with Sweden's relatively high municipal autonomy and funding, makes the comprehensive 'public plate' approach challenging to replicate elsewhere. However, specific elements of the Återtaget model, particularly its strategies for local food procurement, offer transferable best practices. These include dividing procurement into smaller contracts, engaging local businesses during the pre-tender phase to build capacity, and linking local food initiatives with educational programmes, such as school visits to local producers, to enhance public awareness of food and environmental issues. Current research is exploring the public plate with two further municipalities in Sweden, Karlstad and Malmö, to cover a range of urban, small city, and rural settings to delve deeper into the case specificities versus more general issues in the sphere of local food and sustainable regional development in contemporary Sweden.

Returning to the specific conclusions we draw from the Dalarna case, it was clear from our interviews that the two interacting goals of Återtaget – regional development, and better local food – were prioritised somewhat differently by the officials at various levels. Those 'closest to the ground', as in the municipality officials, were those most concerned about the quality of food provision to the public institutions such as schools and elderly care homes. As we 'zoom out' to the regional, national, and European levels the links of how local food fits into a wider sustainable development agenda were prominent (European Commission, 2019). We have examined the Återtaget programme from the perspectives of the public sector and found there to be multiple rationales and objectives for the scheme shaping the food system

materially and socially. Overall, the strongest benefits of Återtaget are seen at the municipal level, where it is generally considered a success and a flagship programme.

The Återtaget initiatives harness the public plate for environmental aspects such as landscape preservation and biodiversity, and social aspects through education and training. In other words, the municipal foodscapes we encounter in these cases are significant in scope and detail – a whole landscape from field to plate rather than simply delivering meals to the end user (i.e., the children, elderly and sick of the region).

In addition, because environmental awareness has increased its importance concerning place branding for areas (Andersson, 2016), the projects of Återtaget have been beneficial for the municipalities as they can be used to display their environmental achievements. As such, the municipal foodscape can be leveraged in place marketing both to visitors but also to other regions and levels of government. This can be especially important when viewed against wider economic and demographic trends in Sweden which see migration out of rural inland areas and to the larger towns and cities which are rapidly growing (Jonsson & Syssner, 2017) – such approaches as Återtaget can be seen as place-based development efforts to counter such trends. We can certainly see moves in regional development approaches in Sweden to incorporate more sustainable development objectives into regional development, which is likely to see more interest and expectations put upon programmes like Återtaget that sit at the intersection of local food and wider regional policy agendas.

Creating such opportunities enhances municipalities' capacity for self-sufficiency and strengthens food system resilience. This is particularly relevant given that Sweden's self-sufficiency in food production has declined from 75% in the early 1990s to approximately 50% today, in contrast to neighbouring countries such as Finland and Denmark, which report self-sufficiency levels of 80% and 150%, respectively (Lantmännen, 2024; RISE, 2025). At the national level, the food strategy was updated in 2025, with the release of the National Food Strategy 2.0 with the overarching agenda to increase Sweden's food production sustainably by strengthening the competitiveness, resilience, and quality of the entire food supply chain through measurable goals, strategic coordination, innovation, and market development (Regeringskansliet, 2025). How the implementation of this brand-new strategy unfolds remains to be seen. Sweden is not alone in grappling with issues around local food and how to tie it into wider regional development in a sustainable mode, and we see the public plate as a key tangent if we are to move to a more foundational economy inspired approach whereby we pay particular attention to the sectors and services we require to live a decent life, in a sustainable and just manner (Hansen, 2022; Martynovich et al., 2023). We re-state, in line with Morgan (2025) the centrality of food, and policy towards public food at the local and regional level, as a vital piece of the puzzle.



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The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical best practices were followed, including informed consent from interviewees. Conducted in Sweden, the study is exempt from ethical review under the Swedish Act (2003:460) and is low risk.

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