Every day, hospitals and universities feed millions of people. Students, staff, doctors, and patients alike are fed by these large scale institutions, often with little concern or reflection as to where the food has come from, how it was grown, harvested, or transported. However, in North America and Europe there has been increasing recognition that food is a multi-faceted topic; the state of our industrialized, global food system is connected to a range of issues including the obesity crisis, threats to food safety, declining health of farmers and rural communities, environmental degradation, and questions of public security. Recognition of such connections throws into question the common practice amongst public institutions to source the cheapest food possible; participation in the industrial food economy undermines public health and sustainability goals, placing such practices at odds with the mission of our institutions.

As part of this movement, there is increased interest in using institutional food procurement as a way to support a more widely spread shift away from the global, industrial food system model and to use hospital and university food procurement policies to help support the development of more sustainable, localised food systems. Due to the large scale of their operations, the optimization of public institutional spending can be influential in supporting a shift towards more ecologically and socially responsible food systems. Potential benefits include improved access to fresh foods, urban and rural local economic development and reduced environmental impact.

BOX 1.0 – COMPONENTS OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD PROCUREMENT

Purchasing Preferences: A tool used to help guide institutions and their food service contractors in food procurement decisions. These guidelines can take a number of forms, and typically include a ranking of priorities. Existing food service contracts often seriously limit what institutions can do in this regard.

Farmers’ Markets & CSAs: Running onsite farmers’ markets and CSA programs for staff and community members are popular ways institutions can increase access to healthy local food while increasing distribution channels for farmers. Increased access to local foods can promote healthy eating habits amongst patients, staff and local community users.

Onsite Kitchen Gardens: These gardens can enhance the patient environment, help increase the visibility of an institution’s food-related work, raise awareness about local foods, increase neighbourhood green spaces and lend support to local urban agriculture initiatives.

In London, England hospitals are experimenting with reforming cafeteria menus and incorporating seasonal food from small to mid-size local farmers. In North America, universities and hospitals alike are changing their food purchasing criteria, in some cases adding explicit language into food service contracts which requires suppliers to source local foods.

Components of sustainable food procurement include the use of purchasing preferences, the encouragement of farmers’ markets and other types of community supported agriculture (CSA), as well as the development of onsite kitchen gardens (as described in box 1.0).

Institutions that have sought to increase the amount of local, seasonal produce they procure have introduced other supporting...
reforms into the institutional food environment, such as: menu and cafeteria reform, healthy vending, public education, and waste reduction (for more, see box 2.0). These reforms typically offer ways to facilitate institutional sustainable procurement, while also increasing the scope of benefits associated with sustainable food procurement.

Despite the numerous benefits, institutional food reform faces challenges and barriers. The main challenges facing significant reform include the lack of sustainability information in the food chain, the lack of local supply and distribution infrastructure, and the lack of institutional buy-in (as described in box 3.0). Such challenges do not mean that sustainable food procurement is unfeasible. However, they underscore the need for innovative approaches to sustainable food procurement; successful initiatives recognise and address these challenges.

**BOX 3.0 – CHALLENGES**

**Lack of Sustainability Information in the Food Chain:** It is often difficult to know where and how different food items have been produced. A single, holistic sustainable food certification does not exist in many locales; unless purchasing directly from farmers, institutions and their food service providers must sort through the multitude of food labels claiming to support sustainable food systems.

**Lack of Local Supply and Distribution Infrastructure:** Large institutions are accustomed to a consistent supply of local food year-round. In many cases, supply of local food is limited, due in large part to rural decline and the consolidated, globalised nature of food production and distribution. Unpredictable weather and growing conditions may require increased menu changes and administrative flexibility.

**Lack of Institutional Buy-In:** Formal support from administration is vital to instituting sustainable food procurement as it often requires significant changes to food services, including investment in human resources, budgetary reallocations and strategic

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