



Key Q&A answered

Webinar: Putting Solutions on the table

Successful approaches and interventions to support more sustainable food consumption behaviours in the EU

16 July 2020

Throughout the webinar, questions were sent by the attendees through the Q&A chat function. The main questions were selected and answered by the webinar team:

- **What has changed in the EU Commission in relation to the new EU Farm to Fork Strategy?**

There has been a major change within the Commission in terms of the Farm to Fork Strategy, mainly because it is a new integrated approach to the food policy. It involves greater co-operation between the different DGs (e.g. DG ENV, DG AGRI). Also, there is a wider scope and integration with the European Green Deal, including topics such as climate change, reduction of GHG as well as other topics related to health and biodiversity among others.

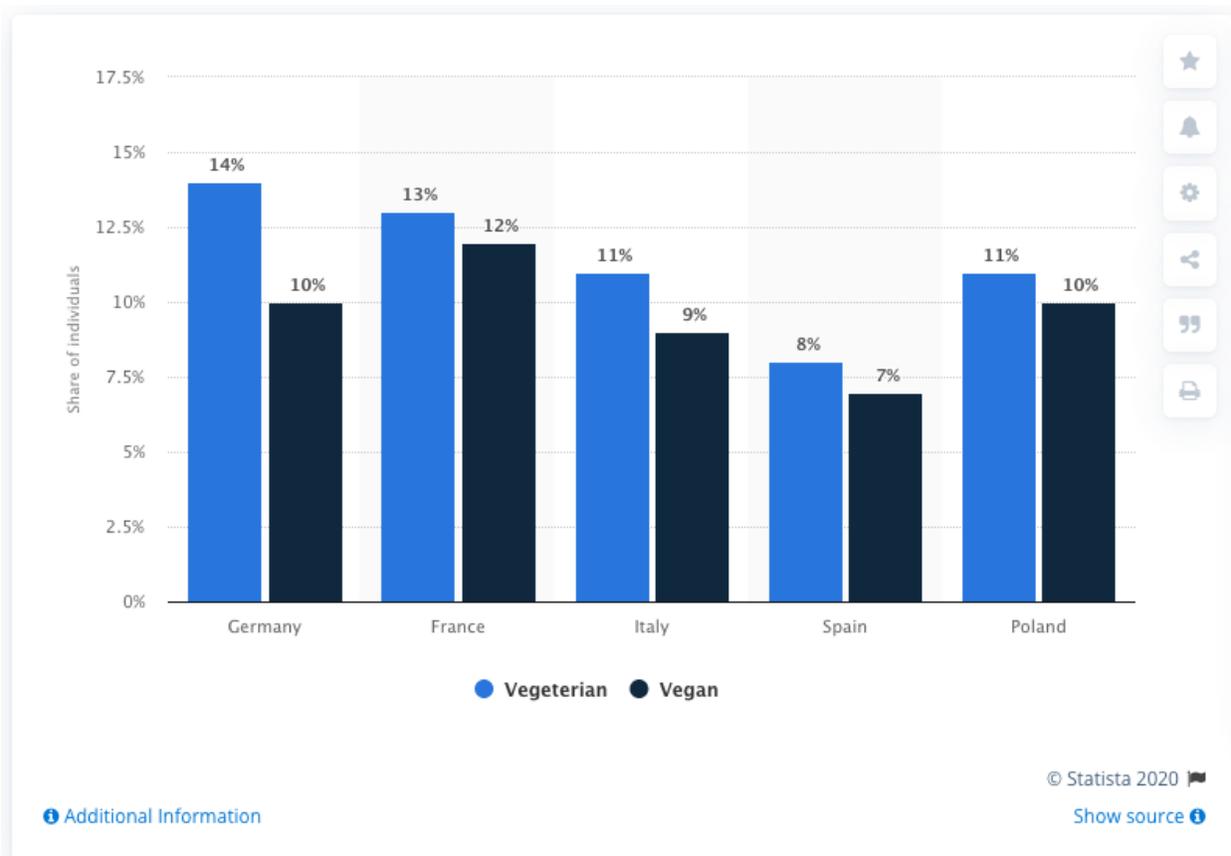
- **Retailers collect much valuable data on consumer behaviour. How can we encourage them to share it openly? Aside from providing new insights, this could also contribute to novel downstream services.**

This has to do with projects such as Valumics - a multi-actor project that brings stakeholders such as academics and retailers together (e.g. REWE) as part of the consortium. This brings food research and innovation activities that were not normal in the past, providing mechanisms where it is possible to learn from the retailer's experiences and internal data that they are willing to share. Also, to have a dialogue with academics and present outcomes of that joint work in the public domain. It concerns mechanisms by which we can bring together academic and non-academic stakeholders in the food supply chain to unlock that data and present insights. In addition, sharing information is still a sensitive topic for retailers, but collaborative initiatives at sector level

contribute in this direction, where food industry actors come together to target common goals such as avoiding food waste or improving sustainability at sector level or at a supply chain level.

- **Which country do you think is currently at the forefront of the sustainability & food consumption behaviours in Europe? Why?**

From the focus groups we analyzed, it was clear that participating consumers in Germany were more knowledgeable about sustainability. Increased knowledge, however, did not necessarily mean that the behaviours of the participating consumers were comparatively more sustainable. Nevertheless, we can see that, for example, the demand for organic milk and GMO-free milk is rising very quickly in Germany. For the EU27, we don't have a complete view on all countries, but it is evident that in various countries demand for more sustainable diets by consumers is growing. The graph below (Statista, 2020) compares the level of vegetarianism and veganism among young adults in various European countries.



On the other hand, it is important to have in mind the relationship between farmers, processors, retailers and consumers. For example, in France there is a stronger divide between society and farmers, which should be addressed. This is important because consumers will need to trust the level of sustainability of the food provided by the farmer and processor.

- **Why do you think people distrust organic labeling?**

There has been a number of research projects analyzing trust in food labeling (Hartmann et al. 2019, Daugbjerg et al. 2014, Janssen and Hamm 2012). In general, information is usually not straightforward and sometimes confusing for consumers. People would generally have more trust towards a food product that is local / regional and towards some preferred brands. Moreover, there are three types of “distrust” expressed in the Valumics focus groups conducted in Italy: at the societal level (“those eating organic food are the happy few, we don’t want to be like them”); at the retail level (“those selling organic food are making huge profit out of that and I don’t want to give them my money”); and at the health level (“I’m not sure organic food can really bring health benefits, but I’m happy to test if it’s not too expensive”).

- **Do you find that skills/confidence in cooking can be a barrier to sustainable food behaviour? For example, obsession with meat for proteins, rather than other types of foods.**

When thinking about the Valumics focus groups that we conducted across EU countries, the specific aspect of cooking did not come up so strongly. What became clear is that social interactions play an important role in our food consumption habits. For example, a supporting environment, such as living with friends that eat more sustainably, helps consumers to overcome challenges (e.g. knowing different food types or recipes) according to different life and social contexts. So the social aspect and context seem to have an influence towards vegan/vegetarian lifestyles and changing food consumption behaviours, able to help overcoming potential barriers related to knowledge or skills. However, it may be for some particular foods, skills and confidence in cooking matters. For example, one barrier to eating less utilized and more sustainable fish species in the UK is a lack of culinary skills (Amilien et al. 2019).

The CSCP has recently done a test with an app aimed at supporting more plant-based diets, and the aspect of being part of a WhatsApp group with other users of the app was a key motivation for people to keep using the app and look more into recipes and increase their cooking skills with a plant-based diet. What was interesting about the connection with the social component was that this social environment, even if digitally, enabled and empowered people to cook more sustainably and app retention was higher among those joining the WhatsApp group.

- **We eat too much animal proteins and fats. Is this ok?**

That’s what emerges from nutritional data at the EU level – this is only at the macro-nutrient level. Once you look at the micro nutrient level, there are also issues related to the sort of fat which is consumed, with potential overconsumption of trans and saturated fatty acid, and also an issue regarding the balance between fatty acid 3 and 6 (too much 6 vs 3).

It is relevant to have in mind that the EAT-LANCET Report (2019) indicates that the consumption of fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes will have to double, and consumption of foods such as red meat and sugar will have to be reduced by more than 50%. A diet rich in plant-based foods and with fewer animal source foods confers both improved health and environmental benefits (Afshin et al. 2019).

- **How do you measure COVID-19 impacts in the overall implementation of the Farm to fork strategy?**

There is a paragraph on the COVID-19 pandemic in the F2F strategy. The Commission will make a contingency plan to better respond to new events. It is still uncertain what the effect of COVID-19 will be. What is known is that the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of a robust and resilient food system that functions in all circumstances, and is capable of ensuring access to a sufficient supply of affordable food for citizens. This is a main goal of the Farm to Fork strategy.

- **Why protein seems to be a problem according to one of the presentations and carbohydrates not?**

From a nutritional perspective, carbohydrates, in particular when absorbed under the form of sugar, are, of course, problematic. EU average consumption of sugar is close to the maximum threshold identified by WHO (100g/ day), but many argue that this threshold is already way too high. From an environmental perspective, the production of carbohydrate is less of a problem – although depending on how it is produced it might lead to some issues.

On the other hand, producing animal proteins is a key matter of sustainability concern due to its impact on climate change, biodiversity and land use. The rising production and consumption of animal proteins in Europe is associated with a massive opening of the Nitrogen Cycle, which is the basic component of proteins. In short, it has led to massive flows coming in from imported soybean and mineral nitrogen production and application, and massive flows going out to water bodies and the atmosphere. All those processes have massive environmental impacts.

- **How do you measure sustainability of foods? What metrics can be used and how do you communicate it?**

From the environmental sustainability perspective, the dominant approach today is to rely on Life Cycle Assessment, as presented in the webinar. At the level of products or lifestyles, carbon and material footprints have been increasingly used as impact indicators. This gives a general idea of the scale of the impact, but has limitations e.g. when it comes to understanding the actual impact of food on biodiversity issues within agricultural landscapes. One of the reasons is that it relies on average production systems, while different production systems have very different impacts on the environment. On the question of livestock and in particular ruminant livestock, please look to the blog post written by the IDDRI colleague Xavier Poux: <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/blog-post/eu-biodiversity-strategy-importance-permanent-grasslands-line>

- **How far can education contribute to behaviour change and be addressed in schools, potentially with also visits to botanical gardens, farms, forests, and the creation of vegetable gardens in schools, that children may cook their own healthy meals, without delay, for a holistic approach to food production and consumption?**

Education is a necessary and consists of one component among others to support the transition to a sustainable food system and diets. The prize-winning initiative GemüseAckerdemie has been

doing a great job in this regard, bringing to schools some of the activities highlighted in the question.

- **Unfortunately, the price of organic food is still too high and too many people are unable to afford it. How is Europe going to act on price?**

The Farm to Fork strategy acknowledges that prices are an important factor and that currently prices do not always send the right signals. There is already a proposal on the table to change VAT regulation and make the prices more affordable. Reducing the price of organic foods can increase their demand (Afshin et al. 2017) and aid the switch to more sustainable and healthy diets.

- **Many unhealthy processed foods benefit from huge and aggressive marketing campaigns. Should we be limiting these given the large impact they have on unhealthy choices?**

This was one option considered by the Commission in previous versions of the F2F: to regulate meat marketing. This was eventually not retained. But clearly marketing regulation is an important area of action – but not easy to work on. The “inverted pyramid” of food marketing is well known: the amount of a TV spot for a given food item is in inverse proportion of the health requirement for this food item. What is already included in the Farm to Fork Strategy is the planning to develop an EU Code of Conduct for responsible business and marketing practice to promote the availability and affordability of healthy, sustainable food options.

- **How would you explain the growth of the organic sector? Is it only a limited consumer group not trusting in the organic label?**

What came out from our Valumics focus groups was that, while there is some level of distrust vis-à-vis organic food, there is also a hope that it can be healthier. As such, when the price difference is not “too high” (too high being subject to different appreciations), consumers said they are happy to go for organic, and that they were increasingly buying organic food.

- **Is food waste associated in some way with affluence?**

Tim Benton’s work on the cheap food paradigm shows that the more affluent countries are and the higher the yields, the higher the level of food waste. See: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332465137_The_paradox_of_productivity_agricultural_productivity_promotes_food_system_inefficiency/figures

- **EU funded research provides important insights and recommendations. However, at the end of the research project, these insights are often not followed up upon by policy makers. Are you planning any follow-up actions after the end of the Valumics project to facilitate implementation?**

Potential follow-up actions and future projects will be discussed in the course of the next year, prior to the closing of the project. The Valumics team are happy to discuss results and insights with policy makers at regional, national and international levels.

- **How can we aim for high quality and sustainability for meat production if the supermarkets instead the specialized shops (e.g. butchery) are the main places where people purchase meat?**

There are two opposite trends in that respect. One is that supermarkets are indeed trying to reduce food prices and costs which maybe at the expense of sustainability. But a second tendency is that of some retailers to develop new sourcing strategies based on locality and more stringent sustainable & fairness criteria – e.g. System U, Intermarché in France, ProPlanet labeled projects in Germany. The former dynamic might be stronger than the latter, and this is one of the reasons why the Valumics project has part of its scope the collaboration with a retailer partner to pilot / test food consumption interventions.

- **Although literature tends to categorise 'food labelling' as nudging, it requires some cognitive effort from consumers to make an 'informed' food choice. Is that really a 'nudge'?**

There are different perspectives. Some argue (Cadario and Chandon 2020) that labelling is a nudge as it seeks to change consumer behaviour without altering economic incentives or prohibiting particular choices.

- **How do you see the transition to a healthier and more sustainable model outside the EU, e.g. Latin America?**

According to the Farm to Fork Strategy, the EU will promote the global transition to sustainable food systems in international standard setting bodies, relevant multilateral fora and international events, including the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the Nutrition for Growth Summit and the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, in all of which it will seek ambitious policy outcomes. Moreover, the EU Commission will present in 2021 a legislative proposal and other measures to avoid or minimise the placing of products associated with deforestation or forest degradation on the EU market. Additionally, the EU will focus its international cooperation on food research and innovation, with particular reference to climate change adaptation and mitigation; agro-ecology; sustainable landscape management and land governance; conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity; inclusive and fair value chains; etc.

Particularly with regards to Latin America, some of our nonprofit partners have been doing an incredible job working on ways to mobilise farmers and consumers towards more sustainable food production, such as IABS: <https://iabs.org.br/>

- **Is it possible for the EU to become sustainable while buying (importing) from extra EU countries that hold very unsustainable production models?**

This is the “elephant in the room” as soon as we start discussing with farmer organizations about raising sustainability standards in the EU. The case of organic wheat potentially coming from Ukraine, or vegetal proteins from Latin America, are of course the case in point. The question of vegetal proteins / leguminous crops is probably the most important one from an environmental

point of view; as an increasing the share of leguminous crops will be key in reaching the –20% N applications set out in the F2F, but is potentially out of reach if there is no aid recoupling or PES scheme for N provision, given the very strong competition from Latin American countries. The topic has also been discussed here: <https://re.livecasts.eu/how-to-use-best-the-new-cap-eco-schemes> (32')

- **Where is the proof that organic milk is more sustainable?**

Organic milk is in general grass fed, enabling for the maintenance of permanent extensive grasslands, which plays a key role in maintaining ecosystem services, biodiversity or water quality. Organic dairy production systems also lead to other environmental and social benefits, compared with conventional milk production systems (Arfini et al. 2019).

- **Under which behavioural driver would you classify the information that consumers get from their GPs in terms of how it impacts their food choice?**

Information from a GP can be classified under the heading subjective norms (Conner and Armitage 2002). Subjective norms refer to the pressure an individual perceives from important others to conduct or abstain from a particular behavior. A GP is often an “important other” to whom consumers listen but individuals vary in terms of the desire to comply with the wishes of others. So given the same advice from a GP, one consumer may follow it, and for example improve their diet, and others ignore it.

- **Each week many people eat multiple meals outside the home. How do we train the gastronomic sector to provide healthier sustainable meals and information to their customers?**

There are various interesting interventions being tested by the gastronomy and hospitality sector. Framing “language” in an appealing way in menus and how information is presented to the customer is one of them. For example, for meat eaters, "vegetarian" means "healthy – but unsatisfying – food". A study by the London School of Economics (LSE) and advised by the Better Buying Lab showed that if you're a meat eater, you are 56 percent less likely to order a plant-rich dish if it's contained within a "vegetarian" box. It's All in a Name: How to Boost the Sales of Plant-Based Menu Items: <https://www.wri.org/news/its-all-name-how-boost-sales-plant-based-menu-items>

Chef and kitchen staff training should include a greater focus on sustainable food procurement and healthy diets.

- **Regarding the most relevant sustainable food consumption for Europe, wouldn't it be ideal to focus more on the production of food regardless of the food per se? What are your thoughts on this idea?**

The food system is a complex one and to achieve its sustainability we must act holistically taking into consideration both production and consumption. This means that we cannot only look at the problem from the production point of view and vice-versa.

- **Would you say that the main current food issues in Europe are more related to the behavior of citizens and consumers than to public policies?**

This is not an “either or” question. Public policies are one of the instruments available to intervene towards enabling more sustainable food consumption behaviours.

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