

H2020 VALUMICS Project

Making sustainable food consumption a reality

Research Findings Brief
September 2021

Evidence based actions

‘Recommendations’ based on the VALUMICS research findings are put forward broadly to describe evidence-based actions whose deployment has the ability to support promoting and reaching more sustainable food consumption in Europe.

Intention-action gap

Despite people stating their intentions to eat healthier and more sustainably, the share of sustainable food consumption is still low. There is a large gap between sustainable attitudes and actual consumption.

About this research

How can we move from attitudes and intentions to action and generate behavioural change towards more sustainable food consumption in Europe? The findings and insights of the VALUMICS report **‘From intention to action’** help answer this question by making recommendations to various stakeholder groups on how to support sustainable consumption of food. Sustainable food consumption is understood as food purchasing and consumption patterns that are based on plant and fruit-rich diets with fewer animal-based products, locally sourced and organically produced food, and with less food waste and/or food packaging.

Intention-action gap

According to the EU Farm to Fork Strategy, citizens “pay increasing attention to environmental, health, social and ethical issues and they seek value in food more than ever before”¹. A recent European consumer survey across 11 European countries, with over 11,000 consumers, points to a similar trend: it shows that most consumers are aware of the environmental impact of food habits in general and two-thirds of consumers are open to changing their eating habits for the benefit of the environment². While majority of people state their good intentions towards eating healthier and more sustainably, the share of sustainable food consumption is still stagnating low. There is a large gap between pro-environmental and more sustainable attitudes and actual consumption of more sustainable food products³. The central question is: how can we move from attitude to action and generate actual behaviour change towards more sustainable food consumption? That’s a very complex question as “food preferences, choices, and eating habits are notoriously hard to change”³. The complexity emerges from the interplay between individual, social and contextual factors that influence and shape food consumption choices and patterns. Moreover, food purchasing and consumption are perceived as highly personal activities, often associated with one’s culture and identity⁴ and largely habitual and not subject to self-reflection⁵. The transdisciplinary character of food consumption behaviours requires a similarly transdisciplinary approach when looking at influencing behaviours towards more sustainable ones.

¹ EC (2020) Farm to fork strategy. European Commission.

² BEUC (2020) One Bite at a Time: Consumers and the Transition to Sustainable Food. Analysis of a survey of European consumers on attitudes towards sustainable food. June 2020.

³ Vermeir et al. (2020) Environmentally Sustainable Food Consumption: A Review and Research Agenda from a Goal-Directed Perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1 July 2020, Volume 11, Article 1603.

⁴ Lamory, N., & Laporte, C. (2016) The impact of culture on the food consumption process: The case of Sweden from a French perspective.

⁵ Mont, O., Lehner, M. & Heiskanen, E. (2014) Nudging. A promising tool for sustainable consumption behaviour? Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. Report 6643.

From intention to action

Behavioural models as basis

Behavioural models can be very helpful in mapping the context in which behaviours take place in order to help identify the critical barriers to and levers for change.

Less is more

In a jungle of information and labels, consumers have reported being overwhelmed by and confused as well as unable to understand and interpret the information behind each label^{6,7,8}.

Drawing from the research and insights of the latest and most compelling pieces of consumer evidence, including those of behavioural science the VALUMICS report ‘From intention to action’ puts forward **14 recommendations for supporting the shift towards more sustainable and healthier food consumption patterns**. Acknowledging the complexity of consumption behaviours and the variety of related determinants, the recommendations are built to ensure a systems-based approach to changing consumer behaviour. They call for various top-down and bottom-up interventions that would enable the transition towards more sustainable food consumption behaviours while accounting for consumer behavioural insights in order to increase the interventions’ effectiveness and fostering their practical implementation.

The recommendations are addressed at policy makers at all levels (local, national, EU), civil society organisations (CSOs) and food industry and distribution actors (“food industry actors”), especially retailers and restaurants, that have a stake and are engaged in European food systems.



Policy makers



Food industry

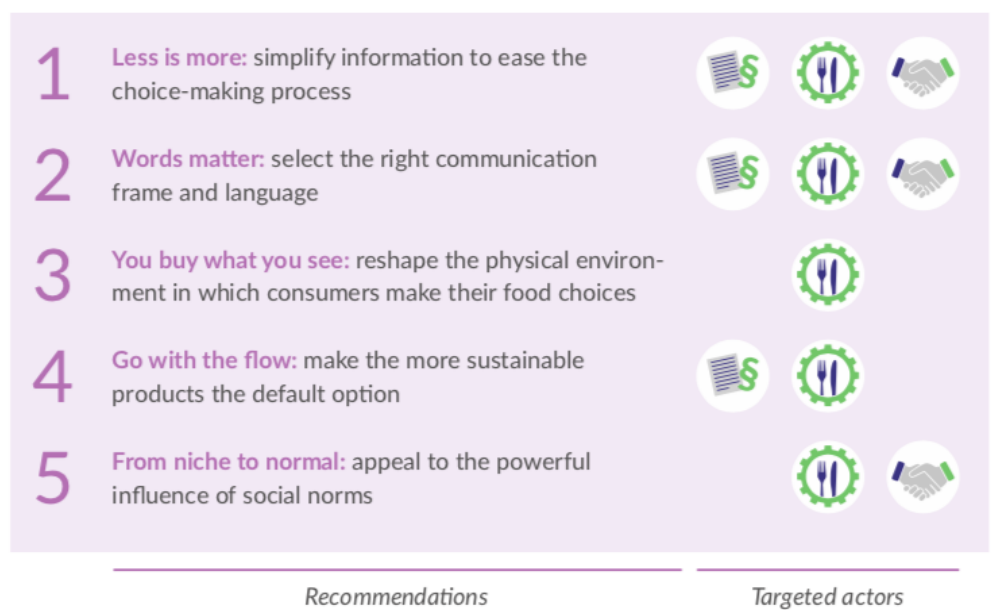


CSOs

Based on the angle of influencing and shaping food choices, the recommendations are organised into four main clusters, namely, ‘choice environment’, ‘choice expansion’, ‘choice editing’ and ‘beyond choice’.

Choice environment

Brings together recommendations aiming to make it easier for consumer to adopt more sustainable food consumption patterns by applying changes in the choice making environment context and how products are presented. These recommendations could be appropriate in situations in which consumers have the tendency to accept the status quo and do not make food choices consciously and/or rely to a large extent on habits. Their implementation works best in controlled environments, e.g. shops/stores, restaurants and canteens, in which the degree of direct change to those environments is relatively easy by the targeted actors.



⁶ Hartmann et al. (2019) Report on quantitative research findings on European consumers’ perception and valuation of EU food quality schemes as well as their confidence in such measures. Bonn: University of Bonn.

⁷ Daughjerg, C., Smed, S., Andersen, L. M., & Schwartzman, Y. (2014) Improving eco-labelling as an environmental policy instrument: knowledge, trust and organic consumption. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 16(4), 559-575.

⁸ Janssen, M., & Hamm, U. (2012). Product labelling in the market for organic food: Consumer preferences and willingness-to-pay for different organic certification logos. *Food quality and preference*, 25(1), 9-22. A

Local is relatable

Shortening food supply chains and relying on localised sources and production of food has been regarded as one of the most promising approaches to ensuring a higher degree of sustainability in the food sector⁹.

Show me the money

Even though sustainable products are assumed to be on the radar of citizens and consumers, they are still largely avoided due to their high prices and related unaffordability.

Time for bolder actions

The slow uptake of sustainable food consumptions calls for experimentation with the removal of food options considered unsustainable and unhealthy.

Choice expansion

Recommendations that aim to provide consumers with an expanded presence and assortment of more sustainable products that may also meet unmet needs. The offering and selection of new options is complementary to existing product assortments and local supply chains can promote citizen engagement to ensure a higher degree of sustainability in the food sector. Choice expansion recommendations are especially suitable for rectifying situations where consumers want to adopt more sustainable food consumption patterns but lack the possibility currently of doing so. This approach has limitations if the new options provided are and remain a niche market.



Choice editing

Brings together recommendations that influence choice by reviewing and removing choice options / products with a poor environmental, social record and/or other negative outcomes. These recommendations are most appropriate in situations where consumers want to adopt more sustainable food consumption patterns but lack the knowledge, opportunity or social support to make decisions themselves and are happy to delegate. Choice editing recommendations work well for tackling issues largely at pre-purchase phase.



Beyond choice

Recommendations that aim to intervene in and change broader aspects of the food system that have implications for the choice of food and generally food consumption patterns. Similarly, to the previous cluster, these recommendations look at enabling sustainable food consumption at phases preceding the purchase phase, by either creating the necessary pre-conditions for such choices or increasing the capability and motivation of consumers to participate in such patterns.

⁹ Galli, F. & Brunori, G. (eds.) (2013) Short Food Supply Chains as drivers of sustainable development. Evidence Document. Document developed in the framework of the FP7 project FOODLINKS.

Smart food

Digital intelligence such as big data or data mining could be utilised to study and analyse consumer purchasing and based on this analysis, produce or offer a specific amount of a particular product or service.

11	The power of education: further educate consumers on sustainable food consumption	 
12	Show me the money: deploy financial strategies to increase the affordability of sustainable products, raise taxes on less sustainable options or reflect the true cost of products	 
13	Smart food: harness the potential of technology for enabling more sustainable food production and consumption	  
14	Time is sustainable: foster work-life balance to allow citizens to have more time to plan and account for their food consumption patterns	 

Recommendations

Targeted actors

Further suggestions for each actor

Policy makers

- Account for behavioural insights when designing, implementing and monitoring policies for a more effective outcome and impact.
- Review existing policies and action plans with the intention of reducing redundancies, unnecessary information provision and friction
- Implement and test unconventional policies that favour sustainable products and hold the potential to disrupt normal market operations and stretch our understanding of those.
- Further implement (financial) policies that would incentivize the innovation and production of products with better sustainability performance while disincentivising their alternatives.

Food industry actors

- Support consumer intention and reduce confusion and potential reluctance towards sustainable products by increasing the transparency about the origin and composition of products and means of production. This could be achieved through easy-to-understand and more human-centric consumer communication efforts.
- Make it easier for consumers to select the more sustainable and healthier products by increasing their availability and accessibility in the food purchasing environment. Consider the gradual shift towards making the sustainable choice the default one, while phasing out the unsustainable alternatives.
- Invest and innovate to introduce more sustainable and healthier products while matching these with the latest socio-demographic factors. Moreover, harness the positive impact of technology and financial support that is given by policy makers.
- Collaborate and join efforts with other actors to support other activities and jointly advance sustainable food consumption.

Civil society organisations (CSOs)

- Continue sharing the know-how and expertise on sustainable food topics and strive to expand these insights and learnings with the most up-to-date developments.
- As a neutral and impartial actor, be part of the conversation, bring stakeholders together and drive the co-creation of solutions.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration

The recommendations target particular actors, but ultimately affect all stakeholders in a food chain. Thus, for the most effective implementation input, advice and collaboration from all stakeholders is highly recommended.

System based approach

For a more effective outcome, the recommendations should not be seen as separate action points but rather as complementary and reinforcing one another.

Keeping track of progress

To ensure the recommendations are contributing to their intended goals, it is necessary for the implementing actors to continuously monitor and evaluate their effectiveness and impact, throughout the entire chain also, and if necessary design responsive action

- Continue working together with citizens as well as making them aware and further educate them about their role and potential for driving sustainable food consumption forward. Consider behavioural insights to make such activities more human-centric

Relation to Farm to Fork

Looking further at their broader practical implementation, contribution and impact on current frameworks, the recommendations as a whole contribute to supporting the EU in achieving its targets and goals as defined in its Farm to Fork strategy and its specific future action plans. For example:

- ‘proposal for a legislative framework for sustainable food system’ – *all recommendations*;
- ‘initiative to improve the corporate governance framework, including requirement for the food industry to integrate sustainability into corporate strategies’ – *all recommendations, especially those targeted at food industry actors*;
- ‘launch initiatives to stimulate the reformulation of processed food, including the setting of maximum levels for certain nutrients’ – *recommendation 10 ‘Define thresholds’*;
- ‘set nutrient profiles to restrict promotion of food high in salt, sugars and/or fat’ – *recommendation 10 ‘Define thresholds’*;
- ‘proposal for a harmonised mandatory front of pack nutrition labelling to enable consumers to make health conscious food choices’ – *recommendations 1 ‘Less is more’ & 2 ‘Words matter’*;
- ‘proposal to require origin indication for certain products’ – *recommendation 1 ‘Less is more’ & 7 ‘Local is relatable’*;
- ‘determine the best modalities for setting minimum mandatory criteria for sustainable food procurement to promote healthy and sustainable diets, including organic products, in schools and public institutions’ – *recommendation 4 ‘Go with the flow’; 7 ‘Local is relatable’ & 10 ‘Define thresholds’*;
- ‘proposal for a sustainable food labelling framework to empower consumers to make sustainable food choices’ – *recommendation 1 ‘Less is more’ & 2 ‘Words matter’*;
- ‘review of the EU promotion programme for agricultural and food products with a view to enhancing its contribution to sustainable production and consumption – *recommendation 6 ‘Disrupt or disrupted?’; 7 ‘Local is relatable’, 12 ;Show me the money’ & 13 ‘Smart food’*;
- ‘review of the EU school scheme legal framework with a view to refocus the scheme on healthy and sustainable food – *recommendation 4 ‘Go with the flow’ & 11 ‘The power of education’¹⁰*



In line with F2F goals, the scientific community has also been calling for significant global dietary shifts, requiring the reduction of specific high impact foods consumption by more than

¹⁰ Willett et al. (2019). Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. The Lancet, 393(10170), 447–492.

50% by 2050, on the risk of failing to meet UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the Paris Agreement.

Conclusion and future outlook

Consumers at the centre

If consumers are not accounted for or tailored according to their need or behavioural processes, these strategies risk being ineffective or losing momentum.

When implementing these recommendations in practice as well as generally when developing further policy and strategic actions to enable the transition to more sustainable food consumption behaviours the following key insights and learnings could be considered and accounted for.

Analysis and understanding of the food environment and broader food system. Realising these recommendations effectively requires a detailed analysis of the food system aspect of focus, related environment and established operational structures.

Multi-stakeholder and participatory processes. The successful implementation of these recommendations is conditional on successful collaboration between food chain actors i.e. policy makers, food industry actors and CSOs as the most important ones.

Scaling up current initiatives. Without underestimating the importance of innovation and creativity, it is also recommendable to capitalise on existing resources and initiatives and find ways of scaling them up.

Consider consumers' reality and bring them in as active partners. It is important to reinforce the need to account for the reality of consumers' thinking and behavioural patterns as well as enable their participation in designing and shaping food frameworks.

Change in degrees. As urgent as the need for sustainable food consumption is, abrupt changes and strategies may potentially not survive the test of time or feasibility in current realities of the market. Changing in degree approach would ensure that the change is steady and sustainable.

Key sources for further information

To discuss the research presented in this brief, please contact the authors of the report or email arind.xhelili@scp-centre.org

Deliverable and report

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