Putting Solutions on the Table

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

Focus on Portugal

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Putting Solutions on the Table

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

This was the title of a webinar organised by the H2020 project VALUMICS and held in July. The purpose of the webinar was to share and discuss insights from existing evidence from hands-on, behaviourally-informed pilot interventions and strategies suitable for the food industry and policy makers in order to drive more sustainable food consumption practices. 170 persons registered for the event and more than 90 joined live to hear and interact on several key questions, notably:

• How can we move towards a healthier and more sustainable food consumption, in view of the EU food consumption policy landscape, particularly the Farm to Fork Strategy?

• Which sustainable food consumption targets lie ahead of us?

• How can food consumption behaviours and solution-oriented interventions trigger and shift towards a more sustainable future?

• How are these behavioural interventions applied in real life contexts and what might we learn from them?

The webinar was moderated by Ms Mariana Nicolau, Project Manager at the Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production (CSCP) and organised in collaboration with its VALUMICS partners Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI), Newcastle University, University of Bologna and the University of Iceland.

In the opening presentation, Henk Westhoek, DG SANTE, European Commission provided an overview of the recently published EU Farm to Fork Strategy, with a particular focus on ways to promote sustainable food consumption and facilitate the shift towards healthy and sustainable diets. Henk emphasized that changes in “the food environment” is an important area to improve food information provided to consumers (e.g. through labelling) and that “healthy and sustainable food should become more affordable to consumers”.

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His key points and messages were:

- The Farm to Fork Strategy as a key part of the EU Green Deal.
- EU Food systems face challenges at the social, environmental, economic levels of sustainability:
  - Social: such as e.g. healthier diets – reducing obesity; the need to improve animal welfare; social rights of workers in the food chain; food affordability.
  - Environmental: such as e.g. the need to tackle climate change; protection of the environment; preservation of biodiversity; reduction of food losses and waste and the need for a circular bio-based economy.
  - Economic: such as e.g. fairer incomes for farmers, fishers & aquaculture producers; a transition providing new business & job opportunities.
- Explaining the integral approach and why it is necessary. Citizens and consumers are at the centre of the sustainability transition, and around them is the food environment and the actors involved, including producers, the scientific community and policy makers:
  - There are different levels of governance and multiple instruments: legislation and regulation, financial incentives, education, research and innovation, procurement, voluntary commitments.
- 2030 targets for sustainable food production. Achieving targets at the EU level would require concrete actions, including:
  - A legislative framework for sustainable food systems with general principles and requirements, policy coherence and provisions for governance, with the collective involvement of stakeholders.
  - Development of a contingency plan (2021) for ensuring food supply & security in times of crisis.
  - Actions mainly focused on the CAP to stimulate sustainable practices, improve the corporate governance structure, increase responsibility of corporate enterprises and restrict promotions of fat, salt and sugar targeted at retailers and consumers.
- Shift towards more sustainable diets: enlarging the offer, food environment, pricing and food labelling.
- Transition requires a collective approach.

Pierre-Marie Aubert, Coordinator, European Agriculture Initiative, IDDRI, then spoke about food consumption impact reduction targets for 2050, highlighting the key transition pathways and diet changes needed to help society getting there. Mr. Aubert highlighted that "there is a clear benefit from a health and environmental perspective" in reducing the animal protein intake (in particular for red meat) and increasing the intake of fruits and vegetables.

His key messages were:

- What changes do we need?
  - Consensus on sustainable food systems and a definition of the target sustainable diets through scenario development.
  - Aim to better understand the rational behind sustainable diets, laying the ground for this scenario exercise.
- Toward more sustainable food consumption patterns. 3 Main dimensions: Nutritional (macro- and micro-nutrients), environmental and cultural (eco-regional). An analysis of food groups based on these values to identify how much should be eaten at “maximum per food groups” based on health considerations.
  - Environmental (planetary boundaries): Analysis based on LCA of average values, within nutritional thresholds.
  - Social: heterogeneity between the EU countries and within the countries, due to socio-economic factors.

Attendees were then polled to have their view on the question “What Farm to Fork strategy transitions towards more sustainable food consumption you consider most relevant for Europe?”

The results showed the consensus to reduce food waste and move towards a more plant-based diet.

In her presentation, Mariana Nicolau, CSCP, shared insights based on the VALUMICS work about key drivers of food consumption behaviours in the EU as well as the main challenges and opportunities in addressing behaviours. Ms. Nicolau highlighted the research findings showing that people are “predictably irrational” and emphasized the usefulness of mapping behaviours with a behavioural model in order to focus on what exactly needs to change, rather than jumping straight into designing sustainable food consumption strategies.

She focussed on the importance of the moment of food shopping, understanding how people behave (landscape) and thinking about why people behave the way they do (drivers) and covered:

- A review of behavioural models: Do people want to do it (motivation)? Can they do it (capability and opportunity)? Is there a reason to do it now (trigger, prompts)?
- Presenting VALUMICS primary and secondary data collection based on an agreed framework of drivers of behaviours: personal factors, social contexts (family friends), environment, physical context, economic and marketing factors (price, subsidies, marketing), and food attributes.
• Beef consumption decreased but is still high, trend is expected to continue, but this is just a timid reduction. What are the characteristics? E.g. men consume more than women, higher income in the countries investigated were linked to higher beef consumption, personality traits like openness and friendliness were found to be inversely connected to beef and meat consumption based on existing studies:
  o economic and marketing: cheap price acts as a barrier to reduce meat consumption.
  o personal: habits, knowledge and concerns have limited influence.
  o food attributes: health perspective of meat, convenience and usability play a role in the purchasing decision of meat.

He covered the following points:
• Overview of behaviour change interventions that have been successful in the past – at the level of the final consumer and earlier in the value chain.
• Information- based interventions alone have limited success. One study showed a 53% success rate and that interventions that are longer than 5 months are more likely to be successful. Human factors matter and socio-economic factors have to be included. Overall, information needs to be combined with environmental change interventions.
• Economic incentives to consumption change depend on the price elasticity of the product categories if they are positive or negative. Cross price effects are not considered. Economic incentives work across different locations and settings.
• Nudge-based interventions (Cadario and Chandon, 2020) based on cognitive, affective and behavioural enhancement:
  o Studies lack a look at subsamples, they might nudge those already engaged, rather than those to be reached because of their bad diet.
  o Interventions should aim to make desired behaviours as easy as possible.
  o There are stronger positive effects when switching from cognitively to behaviourally oriented interventions.
  o People need to understand the benefits of the nudge (connection to information-based campaigns).

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Next steps as part of VALUMICS: Looking at effects of retail interventions with the project partner REWE International including: choice provider, choice architects and choice editing.

You can read more in these reports:


The final presenter, Antonella Samoggia, Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural and Food Sciences, University of Bologna (UNIBO) introduced the preliminary recommendations that the VALUMICS project is preparing and aimed at supporting the achievement of food consumption impact reduction goals.

Prof. Samoggia emphasised that more choice availability for consuming sustainable products can help to shift food consumption behaviours and to eliminate certain types of food products that do not meet a minimum sustainability threshold (e.g. minimum fair prices to the farmers, sustainable packaging).

She presented and described the four clusters of recommendations that the project is currently preparing: choice editing, choice expansion, choice environment, beyond choice.
Choice editing (decreasing the offer of unsustainable products).

• Suitable when consumers lack knowledge, opportunity and social support to make different choices.
• Need to eliminate certain types of products that do not meet a minimum of sustainability threshold.
• Adopt a cross-sectoral approach, establish a dialogue with powerful chain actors, strengthen the role of independent third-party accredited labelling schemes.

This would allow policymakers and businesses: opportunity to create public-private roundtables to discuss commonly agreed minimum standards as a way to set the level of ambition for future business innovation and regulation.

Choice expansion (providing consumers with a choice of more sustainable products)

• Suitable when consumers want sustainable food systems but lack the opportunity or capability of doing so.
• Challenged when new sustainable products are a niche.
• Make sure consumers can choose more sustainable products because they are available.
• Promote public green procurement, support certification schemes and ecolabels and offer seasonal and regional production.

This would give policymakers the opportunity to incentivise business sustainability-oriented innovation ensuring new and more sustainable products to the market and provide businesses with the opportunity to test more sustainable options and strategically position themselves in the market.

Choice environment (making it easier to make sustainable choices, intervening in the in-store environment on how products are displayed and communicated).

• Suitable when consumers struggle in overcoming the intention/action gap and need to address habits.
• Need to integrate more sustainable food options in store shelves, promote vending machines with sustainable choices, reduce portion and plate size, improve science-based information and communication, reduce the noise around the consumers, reduce the visibility of unhealthy food.

Controlled environments are fruitful spaces for policy making to support greater availability and visibility of more sustainable food and allow businesses to reshape the physical environment to better profile and feature their sustainable products, fostering public acceptance and curiosity, and thus supporting a more sustainable product portfolio.

Beyond choice (everything beyond the choice, more core to the consumers background)

• Intervening in broader aspects of the food system that have implications in the choice of food.
• Need to foster work-life balance to enable individuals to have more time to engage with their food, develop multidimensional sustainability food education in schools.

Giving policymakers opportunities to incentivise flexible work schedules and routines, in line with business requirements while adequate to the worker needs (family commitments, availability, etc). The possibility of new ways of work were one of the main outcomes of the current pandemic.


Throughout the webinar, questions were sent by the attendees through the Q&A chat function. Examples of these questions and answers are presented here and grouped by category:

Farm to Fork Strategy

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.

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 in 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.

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.

Would you say that the main current food issues in Europe are more related to the behaviour 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.

Dietary choices

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 macronutrient 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 omega 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%. Studies have shown that a diet rich in plant-based foods and with fewer animal source foods confers both improved health and environmental benefits.

**Why does protein seem to be a problem according to one of the presentations and carbohydrides 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.

### Consumer behaviour

**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 (from 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.

**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 behaviour. 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% 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.

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 to learn from retailer's experiences and internal data that they are willing to share. 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.

**Do you find that skills/confidence in cooking can be a barrier to sustainable food behaviours? 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, helping able to overcome potential barriers related to knowledge or skills. However, it may also be (for some particular foods) skills and confidence in preparation and cooking food, such as fish or seafood.

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 digital), enabled and empowered people to cook more sustainably and app retention was higher among those joining the WhatsApp group.

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Organic food

Why do you think people distrust organic labelling?
A number of publications have analysed trust in food labelling (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 or 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”).

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 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.

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).

Outside the EU?

How do you see the transition to a healthier and more sustainable model outside the EU, e.g. Latin America?
Within 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.
Particularly with regards to Latin America, some of our non-profit 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.

References


