

Evaluation “Sustainability and dynamics of food consumption patterns” (WP-074)

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Introduction

Food consumption, in particular the consumption of meat and other animal-based proteins, is highly relevant to global sustainability issues. Reducing meat consumption would alleviate societal pressures on important resources like water, health, energy, biodiversity and animal welfare. However, there is no shared vision of what a sustainable future should look like and in a pluralist society, values can come into conflict in various food-related areas. Policy makers have to take into account this pluralistic character of society and they need to adapt measures to address this challenge. There will be no ‘one-fits-all’ solution. Food consumption follows culturally engrained patterns, which vary widely across different sub-cultures. It is part of people’s worldviews, personal identity and social standing. The importance of meat in food consumption patterns is a transcultural phenomenon and it may therefore also be the most difficult to address. Policies aimed at changing food consumption patterns need to take into account the underlying values and adapt their measures accordingly.

Scientific work (De Boer, Taylor) has addressed the relation between world views and food consumption. This work set out from the identification of two broad orientations in world view. They involve, on the one hand, an emphasis on reasoning and utilitarian thought that fits with an instrumental reading of nature (e.g. doing what seems rational), and, on the other hand, an emphasis on intuition and creative imagination that fits with a sense of nature as an inner moral source (e.g. doing what feels natural). The associated empirical work has found that consumers vary with regard to their mindfulness / awareness of food-related values, and that they vary in the extent to which these values inform their food consumption choices. Schösler built on this work by distinguishing various archetypal food patterns, which give a more detailed insight in consumers’ everyday practice. Based on this knowledge, policy measures to reduce meat consumption can be geared towards different food patterns and their associated practices.

The idea of a specific food pattern might evoke the image of a fixed part of an individual’s identity, but it is certainly not intended that way. Such a pattern should be regarded as archetypal, in the sense that one individual might behave according one orientation at times, and according to another at other times. The same individual might engage in two very different food patterns during week time and in the weekends. Furthermore, food patterns is meant in a broad sense, to include not only preferences for certain foods or meals, but also shopping and cooking.

Aim

The aim is to find ways to reduce the unsustainability associated with food that are specific for different food patterns. The focus of the analysis is on the food patterns, not on the consumers.

Set-up

Interviews were carried out with Dutch citizens between the summer of 2009 and 2010. Participants were selected for being innovative, or for their particularly illustrative character in terms of food practice. They varied in age, gender and place of residence and they were recruited at organic shops, regular supermarkets, and via snowballing in the Slow Food organization, the NVVL, a network for experts working in the food industry in the Netherlands, and the Cuisine Culinaire Amsterdam (CCA), a hobby cooking club. This selection was expected to yield varied and pronounced views on food and to demonstrate how societal trends have

permeated daily practice. Using quantitative and qualitative data the researchers explored food practice groupings and their link to more sustainable choices.

Main findings

Schösler distinguishes four distinct food patterns:

“Prefers the ordinary meal”: Meat, vegetables and potatoes

“Mindful of food”: Intuitive and pure food

“Easy about cooking”: Efficient and easy cooking

“Likes to vary”: Mindful about variety, utilitarian about taste

This table provides a rough sketch of the different guiding ideas and the related consumption patterns.

	Prefers the ordinary meal	Mindful of Food	Easy about cooking	Likes to vary
<i>Guiding Ideas:</i>	Meals relatively unimportant	Food should be pure	Food is instrumental	Proud of taste
	Trust on conservative sources	Food is a part of nature, nature has to be cared for	Convenience and speed	Proud of local food culture
	Not caring about food choices / Not empowered to make informed food choices	Animals are fellow creatures	Eating and shopping should be efficient	Revive artisan production and care for cultural diversity
		Mindfulness as an independent value		Eating is pleasure and enjoyment
				Quality food is quality of life
<i>Consumption:</i>	Conventional and habitual practices	Unprocessed foods	One-stop shoppers	Great variation in the number of foods liked
	Meat central in three-component meals	Organic shops and markets	Meals combined with other activities	Shift from quantity to quality esp with regard to meat
	Avoid the unknown	Season and local foods	Convenience meals	Extensive cooking with particular ingredients (unusual cuts of meat)
	Unaware of food related values	Organic meat / vegetarianism	Open to innovative foods (meat substitutes)	Use of various specialty shops
	Little conscious environmental or health motivated food choices	Food and cooking as a means of being creative		Often personal relations with food providers
		Extensive and experimental home cooking		
<i>Mindfulness</i>	Low	High	Low	High
<i>Utilitarianism</i>	High	Low	High	Low

Schösler's results provide detailed insights in the relation between world view and food practice. The "Mindful of Food" and the "Likes to Vary" orientations coincide with a high level of mindfulness. Utilitarianism is strongest in the food practices of the "Easy about Cooking" and "Prefers the Ordinary Meal" orientations.

Conclusion

Different food patterns exist, which have changed over time, which are culturally and contextually embedded. These patterns share aspects of world view, but also of the pragmatics of everyday life. In order to change the sustainability impacts of food, policy makers should take the differences between these patterns into account to stimulate individuals to more sustainable behaviours.

Feasible transitions in meat consumption patterns vary in the different patterns. "Prefers the Ordinary Meal" is the most difficult as food consumption is unimportant but also driven by conservative patterns, with a pivotal role for meat. There is no obvious solution how this group can be encouraged to more sustainable choices. "Mindful about Food" is most open to a shift towards organic meat or a part-time vegetarian diet. "Easy about Cooking" is in principle open to meat substitutes if they are offered in a convenient form. It seems they are least bothered by the somewhat artificial (if framed as such) flair that meat substitutes have. "Likes to Vary" has two strong points: the fact that they have a broad taste and like to eat many different foods, makes this orientation open to eating many kinds of different cuts of meat. Second, food quality begins a central value leads to a preference for smaller portions of higher quality meat (often organic).

Meaning for TransForum

Existing supermarket formulas appear to be focused on the less mindful consumption patterns ("Prefers the ordinary meal", "Easy about cooking"). The other patterns can offer supermarkets and retail entrepreneurs starting points for differentiating their formulas, or for creating more value-driven formulas (such as "MarQt"). It seems that more mindful consumers are more likely to make sustainable choices. Therefore, supermarket formulas that succeed to incorporate food-related values may also nudge consumers to more sustainable choices. AH's "Puur en Eerlijk" label goes in some way to appease the "Easy about cooking" pattern, and maybe even the "Prefers the ordinary meal" pattern, in that it empowers the people with this orientation to make a more sustainable choice within a convenient frame. It allows for convenience one-stop shopping with a sustainable fringe, without the necessity of much mindfulness about food¹.

New supermarket formulas like MarQt appear to bridge aspects of the "Easy about cooking" and "Mindful of Food" patterns, in the sense that they offer a choice of products that is in line with the preferences of the mindful consumers, but also with the one-stop shopping habits of the convenience / routine habits of the easy cookers. In that sense they offer an affordance for more sustainable shopping for people with both orientations. However, these patterns require very different options to become more sustainable. The "Mindful of Food" pattern is best served with food options that are basic and unprocessed, and with a very low environmental impact. This pattern can be attracted to a vegetarian diet, through which its environmental impact due to meat consumption can be further reduced. Catering to the "Likes to vary" pattern would instead focus on putting cuts of meat to use that might otherwise go to waste. This pattern may be open to smaller pieces of meats, if they are sufficiently specific. Also, it may be possible to entice this pattern with exotic, vegetarian food moments, the enticing element being the exoticness.

Connecting values and practices

¹ These ideas have received more in-depth attention in TransForum's scientific theme IV, especially the projects "Stimulating consumer choice for sustainable products at the point of purchase" and "Subtle activation of sustainability values."

Schösler's research points out the importance of taking into account socio-cultural orientations of consumers, of which values are one aspect, but which also include aspects of mindfulness and awareness. Behavioural change can be facilitated by means of structural measures but also needs to take into account people's habits, values and culture. The current approach to change consumer behaviour, based on information and transparency, will not suffice with regards to food consumption as it only reaches aware (mindful) consumers. Schösler indicates an alternative option; by taking into account consumer practices and the implied value orientations, it may become easier for consumers to make more sustainable choices that fit with their lifestyles, without the necessity of a *conscious, reasoned* choice.

Implications for the agro-innovation system

Consumer behaviour has appeared one of the hardest to change variables in sustainability issues. Relating to consumer practices (and their implied value orientations) may be a promising addition to the repertoire for changing consumer behaviour.