

FOOD, HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY – THE CONSUMER’S ROLE IN A SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM



Consumers want to make sustainable food choices for the sake of their own health, the climate, and the environment. They seek healthy products and want food production throughout the value chain to maintain the lowest possible environmental footprint, within the planetary boundaries. Through their choices and behaviour, consumers play an essential role in the transition to a more sustainable society. However, the food supply chain is complex and it is challenging for consumers to find relevant and correct information and make informed decisions. Many of the goals that Norway has committed itself to involving the climate, sustainability and health are related to food, and a more comprehensive approach is necessary to achieve these targets. Obesity and unhealthy diets are major public health challenges with grave consequences for both individuals and society. Food production contributes to significant greenhouse gas emissions and other negative environmental impacts. However, food is essential for life, and future food systems must ensure access to food as well as sustainability for the environment, and to promote social equality.

The definition of a sustainable food system is constantly evolving. Nevertheless, we do have solid knowledge of the direction that food consumption should take. There is no single measure that can solve all the challenges we are facing. The transition to a sustainable food system involves numerous policies and areas of society, and the entire value chain from primary production to consumers. Consumer interests are particularly important in this transition. This is about the consumer's right to make informed decisions and the right to safe and healthy food. Future food systems must facilitate healthy and sustainable food choices.

This position paper presents initiatives that the Norwegian Consumer Council believes are necessary for ensuring the rights and needs of consumers with respect to food, health, and sustainability. The work of the Norwegian Consumer Council in this field encompasses both advocacy and consumer information.



FACTS ABOUT FOOD AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION:

Studies show that consumers now feel a greater sense of responsibility for changing their consumption, out of consideration for both sustainability and health:

- 1 out of 2 is willing to change their behaviour, even if this means they are met with higher prices and/or practical difficulties
- 6 out of 10 are willing to reduce or eliminate food waste
- 1 out of 2 wants to reduce intake of sugar
- 3 out of 10 want to reduce consumption of red meat

Consumers think that politicians, the food industry, and producers must take more responsibility:

- 4 out of 10 do not believe that current food production methods are sustainable
- 7 out of 10 believe that animal welfare must be improved
- 4 out of 10 find it difficult to know what would be the most sustainable food choice, and state that information concerning this can be confusing
- 4 out of 10 mention price as an obstacle for choosing healthy and sustainable food
- 6 out of 10 wish to have regulations and other policy measures in place that can influence consumer choices

Sources:

Forbruker og bærekraft (Opinion 2020),
Bugge and Schøll (OsloMet SIFO 2021)



LABELLING TO ENSURE INFORMED DECISIONS

Improved labelling is one of the key initiatives in consumer advocacy. Consumers need easy access to clear and trustworthy information about food products if they are to make informed decisions. Public authorities have the primary responsibility for introducing new rules for regulating food labelling. In addition to regulations that specify how food should and can be labelled, voluntary labelling schemes may also play a significant role in informing consumers.

The Norwegian Consumer Council recommends:

- Introducing mandatory nutrition labelling using a simplified colour code on the front of the packaging. The Keyhole label (Nøkkelhullet) is not sufficient.
- Introducing mandatory labelling that informs of the total environmental footprint of a food product.
- Stricter regulation and enforcement to prevent healthwashing and greenwashing – i.e. labelling and marketing that misleads consumers into believing that food products are healthier and more environmentally friendly than they actually are.
- Regulations that prohibit health and nutrition claims placed on products with a high content of salt, sugar, and fat, based on nutrition profiles.
- Date marking for food products that indicates the product's actual shelf life.
- Strengthening independent, third-party certified labelling schemes that truly help consumers to differentiate between products with respect to the environment, health, animal welfare and ethics.
- Introducing a clear and simple, mandatory origin labelling and introducing animal welfare labelling that provides consumers with information about where the food comes from,

as well as its production standards for animal welfare.

- Consumers must be ensured the right to choose GMO-free food. Food products where genome editing techniques (CRISPR) have been used must be clearly labelled as genetically modified (GMOs).

ADVICE AND INFORMATION BASED ON SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

Information and knowledge promote consumer power and enable consumers to make informed choices.

The Norwegian Consumer Council recommends:

- Updated national dietary guidelines for healthy and sustainable diet based on independently reviewed research and science.
- Targeted public information campaigns from the authorities that also reach the most vulnerable consumers, with the aim of enhancing consumer knowledge and their ability to compose a healthy and sustainable diet.
- Providing consumers with information that strengthens their ability to assess the shelf life of food products and increases their knowledge of how to correctly store food at home.

PROTECT CHILDREN AND YOUTH FROM AGGRESSIVE MARKETING

Children and youth are exposed to heavy marketing pressure, especially through social media and digital platforms. The marketing of products and services that have a negative impact on health and body image is especially serious. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child also includes children's right to health. Authorities have a responsibility to protect children's rights in this area.

The Norwegian Consumer Council recommends:

- Stricter regulations for the marketing of unhealthy food and drink aimed at children and youth. The Food and Drink Industry Professional Practices Committee (MFU) is not sufficient. Surveillance-based advertising must be prohibited and sanctioned.
- A ban on the sale of high-caffeine, energy drinks for children under the age of 18, due to the health risks involved with their consumption by children and youth. Targeted information campaigns from the authorities in order to increase awareness and resistance to energy drinks among youth.

ENABLE HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE CHOICES

Availability and price are factors that strongly influence behaviour and consumption. It must become easier for consumers to make healthy and sustainable choices, and the unhealthy and less environmentally friendly choices must become less accessible.

The Norwegian Consumer Council recommends:

- Targeted use of taxation and other fiscal measures to influence behaviour change in the desired direction, e.g. through:
 - Differentiated taxes on added sugar in food and drinks, based on the sugar content of the end-product.
 - Differentiated taxes based on the food product's nutritional value and environmental impact, such as reduced VAT on fruits and vegetables.
- Requiring that product development meets consumers' request for a healthy and sustainable diet, e.g. by producing foods with less salt, sugar and saturated fat.
- Clear and transparent policies by retailers and food producers stating how they facilitate healthy and sustainable choices, with respect to



product development, product placement, pricing and marketing.

- Kindergartens, day-care facilities, schools and elderly care must offer healthy and sustainably produced food in accordance with national guidelines and dietary recommendations. Public procurement must include criteria for nutritional content and sustainability.

FOOD SAFETY AND ANIMAL WELFARE

Consumers have a right to safe products. Harmful and undesirable substances must be avoided in order to protect consumer health. Consumers also expect animal welfare is ensured in food production. Animal welfare scandals provoke anger among many consumers. Food safety and animal welfare must be ensured, e.g. through better regulation and implementation, and more active supervision.

The Norwegian Consumer Council recommends:

- The Norwegian food safety authority must be ensured resources that enable it to take a more proactive role in the development of both national and international regulations. This applies to both safe food and safe food packaging, and to the active enforcement of the existing regulations.
- Food fraud is the deliberate deception, misrepresentation, and manipulation of food, which may cause harm to humans, animals, and the environment. Efforts to combat food fraud and to ensure traceability must be given high priority.
- Norwegian agriculture, aquaculture and food industry must take steps to ensure good animal health and animal welfare in food production. There must be transparency about the conditions that affects the health and living conditions of these animals.

ACHIEVING THE FOOD WASTE REDUCTION TARGET REQUIRES SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

Initiatives to reduce food waste is high on both the national and global political agenda. The UN Sustainable Development Goals state that food waste should be reduced by 50 per cent by 2030. Both government authorities and the food industry must implement measures to reduce food waste throughout the entire value chain. Consumers have a clear responsibility for reducing their food waste; however this responsibility cannot rest solely on the consumers.

The Norwegian Consumer Council recommends:

- The development of smart and environmentally friendly food packaging must be intensified. It is essential to develop packaging that is more efficient at preserving food quality, also after the package is opened.
- Packaging sizes must be adapted to different household sizes and consumers in different life situations.
- All unnecessary packaging must be reduced, with more bulk sale of fruit, vegetables and food products that do not require packaging.
- Store chains should avoid launching sales promotions (3-for-2) of products with a limited shelf life and should also avoid unnecessary bundling and additional sales.
- There should be greater focus on technological developments that can help consumers reduce food waste.
- The government must evaluate initiatives and efforts to achieve the goals of the Industry Agreement on Food Waste, and assess the need for regulations that prevent overproduction and remove structures in the value chain that create food waste.



HOLISTIC POLITICAL EFFORTS TO DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

Better use of resources, eliminating waste and regenerating nature are key components of a circular economy. The food system must also, to a larger extent, become circular. The overall effects of production, processing, distribution and consumption on our health, the environment and nature must be viewed as a whole. This requires comprehensive efforts across the whole value chain.

The Norwegian Consumer Council recommends:

- Developing a holistic plan to ensure a transition to a more sustainable food system, with a focus on the population's need to maintain a sustainable diet. The goal of such a plan must encompass reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and protecting natural resources, biodiversity, agricultural land and consumer health.

