

# ONE BITE AT A TIME: CONSUMERS AND THE TRANSITION TO SUSTAINABLE FOOD

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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*Between October and November 2019, BEUC, The European Consumer Organisation, carried out a survey together with 12 of its member organisations across 11 EU countries<sup>1</sup> to investigate consumer attitudes towards sustainable food.*

### Key findings

01

**Consumers tend to underestimate the environmental impact of their own eating habits,** although there is some awareness about the impact of food habits in general.

tary health, more efforts will have to be made to foster behavioural change. This is particularly the case among those consumers (over 1 in 3) currently unwilling to eat less red meat.

02

Overall, when it comes to food, **consumers primarily see 'sustainable' as a synonym for environmentally friendly, without GMOs and pesticides, and local,** with some specificities across countries.

06

Whilst they have **little appetite for insects and cultured meat,** consumers are **more likely to consider plant-based 'burgers' (if made without GMOs) and traditional vegetarian foods** (e.g. pulses) as alternative sources of protein.

03

**Over half of consumers say that sustainability concerns have some influence (42.6%) or a lot of influence (16.6%) on their eating habits.** Price, lack of information and the challenge of identifying sustainable food options as well as their limited availability are the main perceived barriers to sustainable eating.

07

**Over one third of consumers (38.9%) would support regulations** obliging farmers and food producers to meet more stringent sustainability standards. **Even more (53%) agree that farmers should be given incentives** (e.g. through subsidies) to produce food more sustainably.

04

**Two thirds of consumers are open to changing their eating habits for environmental reasons,** with many willing to waste less food at home, to buy more seasonal fruit and vegetables and to eat more plant-based foods. However, decreasing their dairy consumption or spending more money for sustainably produced food is more of a challenge for consumers.

08

**Most consumers (57%) want sustainability information to be compulsory on food labels. However, the idea of taxing less sustainable food is not very popular with consumers** (only 1 in 4 agree that less sustainable food should be taxed more).

05

**Slightly over 40% of consumers say they have either stopped eating red meat or have cut down due to environmental concerns.** Yet with EU red meat consumption levels still well above the recommended intake for optimal human and plane-

09

Finally, **consumers expect their governments to take leadership** in promoting sustainable food production and consumption. They also want **the EU to stick to its current level of ambition on food sustainability,** regardless of whether or not other countries around the world are doing the same.

<sup>1</sup> Austria (Arbeiterkammer), Belgium (Test Achats/Test Aankoop), Germany (vzbv), Greece (Ekipizo, KEPKA), Italy (Altroconsumo), Lithuania (Lietuvos vartotojų organizacijų aljansas), Netherlands (Consumentenbond), Portugal (DECO), Slovakia (Spoločnosti ochrany spotrebiteľov), Slovenia (Zveza Potrošnikov Slovenije), Spain (OCU).

## BEUC recommendations

*Our survey shows some encouraging trends regarding consumer willingness to adopt more sustainable food habits (albeit these trends are not commensurate with the shift that experts say is needed). The survey also highlights important barriers to change that need to be addressed to support sustainable food choices by consumers.*

*Considering all of these findings, the following recommendations should be considered during the policy debate around making the EU food system more sustainable:*

### 01

**Public awareness about the environmental impact of food production and consumption** – especially when it comes to people’s own food choices – is insufficient and **must be increased**.

that encourages consumers to eat more plant-based foods rather than less meat; providing consumers with attractive alternative protein sources; and offering a wider range of meat-free options in the food catering and hospitality sector can all help in this respect.

### 02

**Clear, independent advice from public authorities through dietary guidelines that take both nutrition and sustainability into account** is needed. This would help consumers who want to make more sustainable food choices turn their intentions into actions.

### 05

**Food prices must be fair** in order to protect people and the planet, and they must send the right signal to consumers to foster behaviour change. At the same time, it is vital to **ensure that all consumers can afford a healthy and sustainable diet**. This may become even more of a challenge in the aftermath of COVID-19.

### 03

**It must be made easier for consumers to identify the sustainable choice** via improved information on food labels. This would also include clamping down on greenwashing and misleading sustainability claims.

### 06

**A focus on consumer choice and individual responsibility alone will not be sufficient to bring about the significant changes in food habits that are required**. We need action at various levels (regulation, food production, retail, etc.) to change the food environment (i.e. all factors that shape consumer choices, such as pricing, availability and marketing) in a way that makes it easy for consumers to adopt healthy and sustainable diets.

### 04

**Consumers must be encouraged and supported in adopting diets that are more plant-based**, as cutting down on red meat is crucial for lowering the food-related footprint. Focussing on positive messaging

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## WHAT ABOUT COVID-19?

COVID-19 has caused significant disruption to the EU food system, shaking supply and demand, and it may have a knock-on effect on food availability and prices down the road.

Had our survey been conducted after the outbreak of COVID-19, **it is possible that some of the findings might have been different** (e.g. food availability and affordability might have been more prominently associated with ‘sustainable’ by consumers).

**But the health crisis has also brought about rapid change in consumer food habits**, with more home cooking, greater attention to food waste, and a growing demand for food from short local chains. Although only time will tell if these trends will last, policymakers should seek to **capitalise on them where they can contribute to greater food sustainability**.