

The Consumer Voice in Europe

FOOD SUSTAINABILITY

The consumer perspective



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Why it matters to consumers

Our food system will experience an unprecedented confluence of challenges over the next decades. World population is expected to reach over nine billion by 2050, increasing the demand for food. At the same time, our planet's resources are dwindling and agricultural production will be confronted with the effects of climate change. The availability, price and quality of food could be severely affected if no action is taken. Many consumers feel concerned and are willing to make more sustainable food choices but struggle turning words into deeds for a series of reasons including availability, price and labelling of sustainable food options. Sustainable food choices must be made easier and affordable

Summary

A sustainable food system should guarantee safe, affordable and healthy food for all and not use natural resources at a pace that exceeds the capacity of the earth to replenish them. The current food systems are generally not sustainable and they challenge the security of the food supply chain.

For a more sustainable food consumption and production, BEUC considers necessary to:

- **Inform consumers** about how their food is produced;
- Ensure that the types of **production/processing methods used are in line with consumers' expectations**;
- **Integrate sustainability elements in all food production standards**;
- **Make sure healthy and sustainable food choices are the easy option** for consumers, namely:
 - Improve consumer access to more sustainable products at an affordable price;
 - Create an environment that supports healthy and sustainable food choices, for example by increasing availability and range of sustainable food products;
- Allow **consumers to make informed choices** and in particular:
 - Ensure food sustainability labels are clear, unambiguous, reliable, verifiable, not misleading and user tested;
 - Provide consumers with standardized and comparable information capturing relevant food sustainability aspects;
 - Develop consistent indicators and new tools to assess the different sustainability aspects of a product and potential trade-offs;
- **Reduce food waste** and in particular:
 - Collect data to better understand where food waste occurs across the food supply chain and why;
 - Encourage joined-up action from all stakeholders from farm to fork;
 - Improve date labelling and inform consumers about correct food storage and preservation through better advice on products packaging and education;
 - Improve packaging;
 - Enable consumers to better manage portion sizes, for example by avoiding super-sizing and making it easier for consumers to choose smaller portions.

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1. Introduction

The current state of our planet shows the urgent need for action towards healthier and more sustainable diets. The global population is expected to reach over 9 billion by 2050, increasing the demand for food. Worldwide, 2.8 million people die each year as a result of being overweight or obese¹ while about 793 million people are undernourished². Extreme weather conditions due to climate change are seriously affecting food production³. In addition, about 30% of the food supply is lost or wasted every year⁴.

It is necessary – and possible - to reverse the trend. A sustainable food system is one that guarantees safe, affordable and healthy food for all and that uses natural resources at a pace that observes the capacity of the earth to replenish them⁵.

To support the transition towards such system, it is key to raise consumers' awareness about how food is produced, to make the sustainable and healthy option the easy choice for consumers and to reduce food waste.

2. Raise consumers' awareness about how food is produced

2.1. Provide consumers with more information about food sustainability

Consumers are generally unaware of many of the challenges the food system faces. But once explained they feel concerned, want more information about how their food is produced and would like more sustainable and healthy choices. This is what came out of a research² conducted by our British member Which? and the UK Government Office for Science in 2015.

Three “public dialogues” were carried out across the UK and included people chosen to be broadly representative of the population. They aimed at exploring consumers' responses to food security and sustainability challenges. For the majority of participants price and convenience were initially the most important factors when shopping for food. Many also listed healthy choices as a priority but highlighted that marketing practices make it more difficult for consumers to eat healthily. Only a few participants were aware of the challenges food systems are confronted with. After hearing about those challenges, respondents added other elements to their shopping priorities. They considered that the impact of food production on climate change, biodiversity and water use, the impact of climate change on food



¹ See WHO http://www.who.int/gho/ncd/risk_factors/obesity_text/en/

² FAO. State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015.

³ See BEUC position on climate change http://www.beuc.eu/publications/beuc-x-2015-094_sma_position_paper_on_climate_change.pdf

⁴ <http://www.fao.org/save-food/resources/keyfindings/en/>

⁵ <http://www.which.co.uk/documents/pdf/food-system-challenges---public-dialogue-on-food-system-challenges-and-possible-solutions-411910.pdf>

production, making the healthy choice easier, food waste along the food supply chain and ethical issues of food production should also be taken into account.

The research showed that more consumer involvement and awareness-raising about the food system are essential to promote healthier and more sustainable food choices.

2.2. Ensure production methods are in line with consumers' expectations

The research led by Which? and the UK Government Office for Science² also discussed **possible solutions to food security and sustainability challenges** – from behavioural change to the role of new production methods and technologies. It showed consumers need to be involved in decisions about future production methods to ensure those are in line with their expectations.

Participants clearly favoured **low-tech and natural production methods** as well as those focused on behaviour change, even though novel technologies or production processes were not rejected out of hand. For hi-tech solutions and processes, polled consumers wished that an independent organisation ensures they are safe, worthwhile and that there are no low-tech alternatives which would be publicly acceptable and achieve similar outcomes.

Consumers also wished for a **stronger government leadership** through greater regulation of farming, manufacturing and production processes² as well as improved labelling requirements.

2.3. Sustainability elements should be integrated in production standards

Food production systems should be more sustainable so that the burden is not on consumers to choose the most sustainable products. Sound evidence and indicators must be developed to enable sustainability elements to be fully integrated in production standards by setting minimum legal requirements all producers should comply with.

For example, new binding requirements would be more effective in driving animal welfare standards upwards than creating more voluntary labels. The current jungle of animal welfare labels is too complex and does not help consumers make an informed choice.

3. Making the healthy and sustainable option the easy choice for consumers

Research by consumer organisations⁴ shows that many consumers want to make more healthy and sustainable choices but struggle to do so. Those barriers need to be tackled across the food supply chain.

3.1. Sustainable must be affordable

Convenience and price remain key factors when buying food. Moreover consumers tend to believe that more sustainable diets are more expensive. This belief greatly deters consumers from looking for alternative



diets. It is therefore essential to increase consumers' choice of sustainable food products and make sure that healthy and sustainable products are available and affordable for all consumers, including the most vulnerable.

Restaurants, canteens, hospitals and schools should include healthier and more sustainable products on their menus. It would also be useful to investigate to what extent initiatives such as short supply chains, alternative food networks, local farming systems and direct on-farm sales have the potential to expand consumers' access to more sustainable products, while recognising that these may not be options for all consumers and that a full life cycle approach is necessary when determining the sustainability of food systems.

It is also important to create a friendly environment for healthy and sustainable choices. Government have a key role to play in achieving this by proactively engaging with all stakeholders along the food chain, including consumer organizations, food producers and retailers.

3.2. Allow consumers to make informed choices

Making sustainable choices is still difficult because of the lack of information and marketing practices. Consumers have a hard time navigating through the jungle of sustainability labels. There are too many labels some are little known, many are poorly understood and most of them do not help consumers understand how they address different sustainability issues. Moreover many of these labels are not verified by third parties and some are spurious labels invented by food producers themselves. It is therefore essential to help consumers make truly informed choices through different steps detailed below.

3.2.1. Cutting through the labels overload

A broad variety of sustainability labels appear on relatively few products. The proliferation of highly diverse labels makes it difficult for consumers to rely on them to differentiate between sustainable and non-sustainable products.

According to the largest global directory of ecolabels⁶, over 450 labelling schemes are available worldwide of which approximately a third include standards for food/beverages. A 2012 survey⁷ by the European Commission identified 129 public and private sustainability-related food information schemes available at EU or national levels. These schemes aim to increase transparency along the food chain and inform the consumer to push for sustainable consumption but most of them miss the target.

The growing number of labels and related communication initiatives may be interpreted as a sign of success. Sales of products carrying sustainability labels are reported to increase. For instance, Fair Trade UK reports sales hiked by 12% from 2010 to 2011. However, label overload and gaps in understanding both the concept of sustainability and specific labels may result in consumer confusion and limit the use of such labels⁸. Food companies should strive to make the sustainable option more visible. For example, they

⁶ <http://www.ecolabelindex.com/>, last consulted on 8 March 2016.

⁷ European Commission, 2012. Food Information Schemes, Labelling and Logos, Internal Document DG SANCO.

⁸ Comas Marti and Seifert, 2012; Grunert, 2011; and Horne, 2009.

could provide more standardised and easy-to-understand coding schemes based on transparent and meaningful indicators of the different elements of sustainability.

3.2.2. Providing consumers standardised and comparable information

When consumers are informed about the sustainability issues, they become more open towards sustainable food consumption. Some consumers even indicate they are willing to pay a mark-up for more sustainably-produced foods⁹. But what consumers say somewhat varies from what they ultimately put in their trolleys. Many reasons explain this behaviour, such as the lack of a commonly agreed definition of food sustainability, the multi-dimensional nature of the issue, or the fact that products with a good score on one sustainability aspect might score badly on another one.

Such behaviour gap is also due to the weaknesses of current labels in providing information about products' overall sustainability impact¹⁰. Existing labelling schemes typically emphasise only one single factor, such as whether a product is organic, its low carbon emissions or its local origin¹¹. In addition, constant trade-offs underlie food purchases: brand image, use-by-date and nutrition information all compete with sustainability factors in consumer behaviour.

Consumers may not lack knowledge or access to information but rather lack the ability to process all the different and complex information being thrown at them¹². It is therefore necessary to develop labels that clearly convey the sustainability 'score' of food products and thus bring easy-to-interpret messages.

There is a strong need to develop harmonised methodologies to assess the overall sustainability impact of food products. Schemes such as the carbon footprint and the life cycle assessment have been criticised because of concerns over the calculation methods (e.g. reliability of the data used).

BEUC therefore supports more research for the development of new tools to assess the different sustainability elements of a product and potential trade-offs. Developing harmonised methodologies for assessing food sustainability is no easy task, but pilots and initiatives are on-going. If successful, it could become possible to assess not only a product's environmental performance but its overall sustainability.

3.2.3. Ensuring labels are clear, user tested and truthful

Research by Which?¹³ has shown that there is little consumer awareness and understanding of most ethical and environmental labelling schemes on the market. Evidence also illustrates that labels do not always capture what they are standing for. Consumers' trust in enforcement and control of what labels are expected to capture may be low¹⁴.

⁹ Faber et al., 2012. Rousseau and Vranken, 2013.

¹⁰ Thibert and Badami, 2011; Schumacher, 2010; Bleda and Valente, 2009.

¹¹ Grunert et al., 2014; Van Amstel et al., 2008.

¹² Moseley and Stoker, 2013.

¹³ <http://www.staticwhich.co.uk/documents/pdf/making-sustainable-food-choices-easier-which-report-231317.pdf>

¹⁴ Vlaeminck et al., 2015.

For example, the EU Common Fishery Policy reforms have introduced new requirements to provide important fish information (incl. a more precise indication of the catch area and the fishing gear category). Unfortunately such information is hard to interpret and does not immediately convey which fish product is the most sustainable. This shows the need to condense mandatory requirements into an easy-to-understand coding scheme to drive consumers towards more sustainable food choices. Label design must be efficient to impact consumer behaviour.

BEUC suggests that all new sustainability labels introduced on the market are tested among consumers, taking into account different literacy levels, background, socio-economic groups, etc. Symbols, pictures and language should be self-explanatory. It is essential to avoid a plethora of different schemes with different meanings. As seen with the evolution of the nutrition information, the inclusion of an interpretative element in the label design is paramount to enable comparisons and informed choices.

Sometimes the information about food sustainability consumers is confusing or even misleading. Such “green wash” makes it harder for consumers to truly assess the sustainability of a food product¹⁵. As a result, even when consumers are willing to buy more sustainable products, they have to rely on a rule of thumb to decide what will end up in their trolley. Green claims that can convey false environmental credential of a product - such as “natural” - should be banned.



More generally BEUC calls for sustainability labels to be user-friendly, clear, understandable, evidence-based, validated by independent third parties, truthful and user-tested. We also consider important to ensure that labelling schemes are used consistently across different products to avoid confusion.

3.2.4. Raising consumers’ awareness about the benefits of eating healthy and sustainable

To be effective, nutrition and sustainability labelling schemes should be widely promoted and linked to broader government messages. To be effective information campaigns should not only promote the benefits of eating healthy and sustainable but also stress the disadvantages associated with unhealthy and unsustainable diets. These educational campaigns should target children and younger people because early learning and experience affect the development of food preferences¹⁶. Empirical studies show that medical costs related to unhealthy diets amount to €980 billion or 9.4% of the European Gross Domestic Product¹⁷. While moving towards more sustainable and healthy diets can save money, unsustainable diets contribute to biodiversity loss, climate change and nitrogen pollution which in turn affects consumers’ well-being.

Education in isolation is not, however, enough. As already highlighted, the environment in which people make their choices and the options available to them is crucial.

¹⁵ Lozano et al., 2010; Schumacher, 2010; Van Amstel et al., 2008.

¹⁶ Birch, LL (1999). Development of food preferences. *Annu. Rev. Nutr.* 1999. 19:41–62.

¹⁷ *Epidemiology and Community Health*, 2011.

4. Reducing food waste

A large amount of our food is lost or wasted. According to the European Commission's own estimates¹⁸, nearly 100 million tonnes of food are wasted annually in the EU. Whilst 40% of that waste occurs at retail and consumer level, 60% occurs even before food has reached supermarket shelves.

Food waste is a shared responsibility across the food chain. Action is needed at all levels including: tackling overproduction at farm level and damaged products/packaging at manufacturing level; preventing cold chain ruptures during transport and poor stock handling and management at retail level; addressing bad or no consumer packaging, bad shopping habits or improper food storage at consumer level, etc.



Consumers should not be the only ones to reduce their food waste. Producers should too.

Besides its negative environmental impact, food waste is unacceptable from an ethical perspective but also has financial consequences for consumers. Each year, on average, a Belgian family throws away perfectly edible food worth circa €300¹⁹. In the UK, each month, the average family throws away almost £60 of food that they bought but did not eat²⁰. To move towards sustainable, healthy and affordable diets, reducing food waste is thus a crucial step.

Research consistently shows that foods most wasted by EU households essentially consist of fruit and vegetables (fresh salad in particular), bakery items, meat and fish, dairy products, dried food (pasta, rice) and condiments^{21,22,23}. Food waste at home is largely linked with food-related routines²⁴. They include shopping routines (i.e. the purchase of too large food portions) and routines regarding the use (or non-use) of left-overs (with the amount of left-overs affected by the food portions that have been bought). According to a recent study²⁵ in the EU-27, 58% respondents indicated that the availability of smaller portion sizes in shops would help them cut food waste.

In September 2015, as part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a target of halving per capita food waste at the retail and consumer level, and reducing food losses along production and supply chains. The European Commission's EU Action Plan for the circular economy²⁶ adopted in December 2015 outlines actions to support the achievement of this target.

¹⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food_waste/index_en.htm

¹⁹ Test-Achats 589. Gaspillage alimentaire. September 2014.

²⁰ WRAP 'Love Food, Hate Waste' campaign. <http://england.lovefoodhatewaste.com/content/5-sure-fire-ways-save-money-your-food-bills>.

²¹ German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (2012).

http://www.bmel.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/Ernaehrung/WvL/Studie_Lebensmittelabfaelle_Langfassung.pdf?__blob=publicationFile

²² WRAP [report](#) (2008). The Food We Waste.

²³ Crem, bureau voor duurzame ontwikkeling, [report](#) (2013).

²⁴ Stancu, 2015; Stefan et al, 2013.

²⁵ Flash Eurobarometer 316 (March 2011). [Attitudes of Europeans towards resource efficiency](#).

²⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/jobs-growth-investment/circular-economy/docs/communication-action-plan-for-circular-economy_en.pdf

In particular, **we welcome the Commission's proposal to develop a common EU methodology to get a better picture of where and how much food is wasted across the supply chain.** It will help ensure that quantifiable efforts to reduce food waste can be expanded beyond the retail and consumer level. We also support the Commission's intention to help consumers make more sense of the 'best before' date. However, this is no silver bullet against food waste, as we explain further below.

With regard to the use of former foodstuffs and by-products from the food chain in feed production, **we consider of utmost importance not to compromise food and feed safety.** We urge particular caution on plans to reauthorise the use of non-ruminant Processed Animal Proteins (PAPs) in pig and poultry feed, following their reintroduction in fish feed in 2013. With the BSE crisis and other animal feed-related scares, the EU has had to learn the hard way about the potential long-term consequences of certain practices. It is widely recognised that the feed ban has been the key animal health protection measure against the spread of TSEs (Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy). In this regard, we warn against any hasty move to relax the prohibition of feeding non-ruminant PAPs to poultry and pigs. Strong guarantees must be in place to prevent 'cannibalism' (e.g. pig feed being given to pigs) and robust analytical methods for detecting the species origin of PAPs must be available to ensure such 'intra-species recycling' ban is effectively enforced.

4.1. Date labelling

Date labelling has been pinpointed by the European Commission and some Member States as an important cause for food waste, although it is just one among many. A set of clear rules at the EU level are needed with respect to the way foods are allocated a 'best before' or 'use by' date and how those dates are calculated.

Under the EU's labelling rules, food products must bear an expiry date. There are two types: the 'date of minimum durability' - better known as 'best before' date - indicates until when the food retains its expected quality (incl. texture, appearance, taste, flavour, vitamins and minerals content), whereas the 'use by' date indicates until when consumers can eat the food safely. Only very few foods escape this requirement (e.g. fresh produce, chewing-gums, cooking salt).



58% of consumers always check expiry dates when shopping. Hence the need to make them meaningful in all languages.

Expiry dates are useful information to consumers – and one of the factors they look at the most when shopping for food²⁷. According to a 2015 Eurobarometer survey²⁸, nearly six in ten European consumers (58%) always check the ‘use by’ and ‘best before’ dates when shopping and preparing meals, with very few indicating that they never do (only 3%).

Consumers’ understanding of the difference between the ‘use by’ and ‘best before’ dates varies from one EU country to another. The Eurobarometer²⁹ findings showed that just under half (47%) of consumers understand the meaning of ‘best before’ labelling and somewhat fewer (40%) are aware of the meaning of ‘use by’. In both cases, a quarter or more think incorrectly that the meaning of date marking differs according to the type of food for which it is used. This confusion might be partly explained by the translation of the terms ‘use by’ and ‘best before’ from English into the different national languages. In some countries (e.g. Spain³⁰, Germany³¹), research has shown that consumers do understand the difference well but in some other countries (e.g. France³²), the terminology is ambiguous and generates confusion (‘à consommer de préférence avant le’ is too close to ‘à consommer jusqu’au’). The terminology chosen for each language should better reflect the two elements that make the ‘use by’ and ‘best before’ dates inherently different, i.e. safety Vs. quality. For the sake of clarity, packaging should even mention that the food may still be consumed past its ‘best before’ date - provided it has been properly stored.

Informing and educating consumers on the distinction between the two types of expiry dates as well as on what to do with food past its ‘best before’ date can help reduce food waste associated with date labelling. The European Commission displays useful communication materials on its website³³. Consumer organisations represented by BEUC also do a lot in this area (publication of leaflets, brochures, magazine articles, website information, etc.)^{34,35,36}.

By contrast, exempting more types of foods from the ‘best before’ date requirement – as some have suggested to tackle date labelling-associated waste – could be counterproductive. As we have pointed out in section 4, foods which are wasted the most by EU households (fresh fruit and vegetables, bread, meat, and dairy) typically bear no date at all. In the absence of any shelf-life information, consumers might end up throwing away more food out of precaution if they no longer recall when they bought the product in question and feel unsure of its quality. When buying a food, consumers are entitled to know they will get the quality they expect and pay for.

²⁷ BEUC (2013). [Where does my food come from?](#)

²⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/FLASH/surveyKy/2095>

²⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/FLASH/surveyKy/2095>

³⁰ Organización de consumidores y usuarios. Tiramos 1 de cada 3 alimentos. Article published in *Compra Maestra* nº 387; December 2013.

³¹ Verbraucherzentrale Nordrhein-Westfalen, Fachhochschule Münster and Institut für Nachhaltige Ernährung und Ernährungswirtschaft (2012). [Verringerung von Lebensmittelabfällen – Identifikation von Ursachen und Handlungsoptionen in Nordrhein-Westfalen](#)

³² CLCV. Enquête sur les dates limites de consommation. Published in December 2013.

³³ http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food_waste/library/docs/best_before_en.pdf

³⁴ Fédération Romande des Consommateurs – [Mieux comprendre les dates limites](#)

³⁵ Test-Achats. [Gaspillage alimentaire: Que pouvez-vous faire, vous?](#). January 2015.

³⁶ OCU. [Manual de uso de fechas de caducidad y consumo preferente](#). September 2013.

If we are serious about helping consumers cut edible food waste at home (and save money), expiry dates must be realistic. The French consumer organisation UFC Que Choisir³⁷ has shed light on some date labelling-related marketing practices that fuel food waste, such as unnecessarily short 'use by' dates for e.g. yoghurts and dairy desserts, of which the microbiological quality remains excellent up to three weeks after the expiration date.

BEUC and its members have also observed differences on the EU market when it comes to determining whether a given food (e.g. yoghurts) will bear a 'use by' or 'best before' date. This confuses consumers and shows the need for greater transparency on the setting of expiry dates. **It is essential that only those foods for which there is a genuine safety issue bear a 'use by' date.** That date needs to reflect the product's perishability rather than marketing considerations, such as pushing for a faster stock rotation in supermarkets. Foods that do not pose any health risk - provided they are properly stored - should bear a 'best before' date reflecting the loss of quality over time.

4.2. Promotional Offers and Packaging Size

It is necessary to consider whether special offers that entice consumers into buying food they do not need (e.g. 'buy 2 get 1 for free') lead to unnecessary over-purchase and therefore contribute towards waste (e.g. multi-buys on perishable foods). Consumers who took part in the Which? and UK Government Office for Science Research on Food System Challenges³⁸ pointed that while in principle the special offers can be a 'good deal', they could result in wasting money and food.

Packaging size can also be an issue if it leads to overbuying a food that cannot be stored for a long period of time. Offering consumers a choice of packaging sizes can help them buy the food amount they need (provided smaller packages do not come at a much higher price per unit). When food is sold in large packages to allow consumers to save money, the portion to be eaten on one occasion should be easy to measure and the remainder should be easy to store for a reasonable period of time (e.g. outer packaging with smaller doses inside).

4.3. More guidance on portion sizes and smaller plates

A recent study³⁹ showed that consumers eat less when the portion is given a larger sounding name (like 'double'), but eat more when the same portion receives a normal sounding name (like 'regular'). 'Normal' or 'Regular' portions have grown in size over time and as such consumers are more likely to eat more. Providing guidance on portion names can have an impact on purchase as well as consumption behaviour.

³⁷ UFC Que Choisir. Halte au gaspillage ! Article published in Que Choisir n° 525; May 2014. See [press release](#)

³⁸ <http://www.which.co.uk/documents/pdf/food-system-challenges---public-dialogue-on-food-system-challenges-and-possible-solutions-411910.pdf>

³⁹ Just, D. & Wansink, B. 2014. One Man's Tall Is Another Man's Small: How the Framing of Portion Size Influence Food Choice. *Health Economics*, 23: 776-791.



Consumers tend to serve themselves more when using larger utensils, plates, or bowls. Reducing plate size can cut food waste by 20%.

Consumers typically underestimate calories in larger servings and tend to serve themselves more when using larger utensils, plates, or bowls. These perception biases contribute to a distorted sense of consumption and result in higher calorie intake and food waste. Therefore reducing plate size, e.g. in the catering sector, could be explored to reduce both food waste and calorie consumption.

A study⁴⁰ showed that reducing plate size in buffet-style restaurants could change eating behaviour, reducing food waste by 20%. Another study by Schwartz et al. (2012) tested the impact of asking whether consumers wanted to down-size their portions instead of super-sizing them. Up to 33% wanted to down-size their portion and they did not compensate by ordering other food items.

In order to tackle food waste at the restaurant table, **consumers should also be encouraged to take their leftovers home.** Many EU consumers may feel embarrassed to ask for so-called "doggie-bags" or may think restaurants will not provide them. This cultural hurdle can be addressed via awareness-raising/education campaigns. For instance, BEUC's Belgian member Test-Achats launched a public contest⁴¹ to find a French and a Flemish name for the English word 'doggie-bag'. This initiative, supported by many restaurants, helped to make the practice of taking leftovers home more common among Belgian diners.

4.4. Help consumers on how to use leftovers

Consumers also tend to cook too large portions at home and do not re-use the leftovers mostly because they have no clue. Providing advice and guidance on how to make best use of leftovers can limit food waste. Consumer organisations strive to provide consumers with concrete tips including shopping planning and food storage advice, recipes to re-use left-overs, etc.

4.5. Food packaging

Improved packaging can prevent waste and increase recycling opportunities. Technological innovations in packaging materials can be promising but should not come at the expense of food safety and quality standards. While waiting for high-technology improved packaging, important steps to reduce food losses and waste can already come from packaging mentioning how food should be best preserved and stored. Some consumers might think that products are best stored if the package material is removed but this is not always true. Consumers thus need to be informed that packaging can help to keep a product fresh for a longer period. Informing consumers about correct storage can help reduce food waste.

⁴⁰Kallbekken, 2013.

<http://www.scpknowledge.eu/sites/default/files/knowledge/attachments/Nudging%E2%80%99%20hotel%20guests%20to%20reduce%20food%20waste.pdf>

⁴¹ <http://www.test-achats.be/alimentation/aliments/en-direct/ne-dites-plus-doggie-bag-mais-rest-o-pack>

Simple solutions such as re-sealable packages can already limit food losses and waste. Another means is to offer a range of pack or portion sizes to meet the needs of different households⁴². A survey conducted by the Dutch consumer organisation Consumentenbond (2011) showed that almost one quarter of respondents indicated that the packaging and portion sizes were too large or non-resealable and that this resulted in throwing away food. This percentage even increases among young single or double-income household.

5. Conclusion

To move towards a more sustainable food system, BEUC considers it necessary to inform consumers about how their food is produced and ensure that the types of production/processing methods used are in line with consumers' expectations. Sustainability elements should be integrated in all food production standards. Moreover it is essential to make healthy and sustainable food choices the easy option for consumers. Consumers should be provided with standardized and comparable information capturing relevant food sustainability aspects and food sustainability labels should be clear, unambiguous, reliable, verifiable, not misleading and user tested.

It would also be useful to develop consistent indicators and new tools to assess the different sustainability aspects of a product and potential trade-offs.

One of the biggest challenges in terms of food sustainability is food waste. To reduce food waste it is necessary to gain a better understanding about where food waste occurs across the food supply chain and why. It is also important to improve packaging and date labelling and inform consumers about correct food storage and preservation through better advice on products packaging and education. Consumers should also be allowed to better manage portion sizes, for example by avoiding super-sizing and making it easier for them to choose smaller portions. Lastly, joined-up action to reduce food waste from all stakeholders and from farm to fork should be encouraged.

END

⁴² Parfitt, Barthel and Macnaughton, 2010; Kessova, 2013.



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