

Can consumers save the world? Everyday food consumption and dilemmas of sustainability, Nordic workshop in Helsinki, 12–13 June 2008

National Consumer Research Centre, Kaikukatu 3, 00530 Helsinki, 5th floor, room Monitori

Programme

Thursday 12th (12–6 pm + dinner)

12.00–13.00 Lunch

13.00 –13.15 Opening: the aim of the workshop

13.15–15.45 Session I. Politics and discourses of sustainability

Chair: Johanna Mäkelä

Ecology as aesthetics and way of life

Johan Hedrén

Dept. of Water and Environmental Studies, University of Linköping

Green Consumer Mobilization – A State Responsibility?

Ingrid Sælensminde

University of Bergen

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – A practical Answer to some Dilemmas of Sustainability?

Maria Bjune

The Royal Norwegian Society for Development

Short break

Eco-rational food – Towards welfare and sustainability through social entrepreneurship?

Tuija Mononen

University of Joensuu

Greenhouse gas emission from food products and diets: possibilities for climate friendly eating patterns

Annika Carlsson-Kanyama

Sweden

15.45–16.00 Coffee

16.00–18.00 Session 2. Food and everyday practices of consumption

Chair: Magnus Boström

The ultimate test of consumer citizenship: Food rationing during World War II.

Iselin Theien

Institute for Social Research, Norway

Dealing with environmental challenges of consumption in food practices

Bente Halkier

CBIT, Roskilde University, Denmark

Benefits and harms of vegetarian world in the short and long term

Markus Vinnari

Finland Futures Research Centre, Turku School of Economics

Towards a sustainable food plate

Christine Hvitsand¹ and Geir Lieblein²

¹Telemark Research Institute, ²UMB

Envisioning sustainable food consumption in practices of everyday life

Johanna Mäkelä, Mari Niva and Päivi Timonen

National Consumer Research Centre, Finland

20.00 Dinner at Ateljé Finne (Arkadiankatu 14)

Friday 13th (9 am – 4.30 pm)

9.00–11.30 Session 3. Consumers, citizens and markets

Chair: Bente Halkier

Change makers: Who are they?

Laura Terragni, Hanne Torjusen, Gunnar Vittersø

SIFO – National Institute for Consumer Research

The typical green food consumer – who is she and how to design tools for her (or is it a him)?

Magnus Boström¹ and Mikael Klintman²

¹Södertörn University College, Department of Life Sciences

²Lund University, Research Policy Institute (FPI)

Consumers and citizens perception of meat and meat quality: relative importance of environmental issues

Jesper Lassen

Department of Human Nutrition/ Danish Centre for Bioethics and Riskassessment

University of Copenhagen

Organic food as new luxury: A neglected perspective in the strive for sustainable food consumption

Per Østergaard

Department of Marketing & Management

University of Southern Denmark

Coupling of trends in food consumption and environmental impacts, aspects at regional, national and global scale

Sirpa Kurppa

MTT Agrifood Research Finland

11.30–12.30 Lunch

12.30–14.00 Comments and lessons learned: Sustainability as embedded in everyday food consumption practices in Europe?

Commentator 1: Eva Heiskanen, NCRC

Commentator 2: Laura Terragni, SIFO

Discussion

14.00–14.15 Coffee

14.15–16.30 General discussion and future plans: the way forward to a joint project?

ABSTRACTS

Session 1. Politics and discourses of sustainability

Ecology as aesthetics and way of life

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In my paper I discuss theoretical and methodological aspects of a study which aim is to identify and analyze ideas and signs of the philosophy of life and aesthetics in commercial discourse on food products in Sweden with an emphasis on the 2007 and 2008. The project will be carried through by a critical analysis of both written and visual embodiments of the ecological and “natural” signs and symbols in advertisements etc.

It has now become common practice to strive and to ask for a society built on the principles of nature and ecology. This fact applies to all Swedish political parties and also to many NGOs, companies and authorities in the field of environmental concern. Ecological symbols, arguments, signs, principles etc are frequent in political pamphlets, media, marketing, design, architecture, planning and other practices where the future society and everyday environments are embodied (Hedrén 2006). The concepts *ecology*, *natural* and *environment* are nowadays loaded with a huge amount of positive value, and accordingly very useful in the marketing of any product or project. Just a few decades ago the situation was strikingly different. The engagement in environmental issues was then primarily a task for rather radical actors asking for a profound change of society. Today the protection of, and the responsibility for, the environment has become a quite common engagement, and at least on a rhetorical level the striving for ecological adaptation is almost hegemonical. Speaking through a concept of Raymond Williams, this implies a change in the *structure of feeling*, that is, in the general attitudes and thought patterns concerning the world (Williams 1997).

The study draws upon critical discourse analysis, visual analysis, media studies and theories on visual culture.

Green Consumer Mobilization – A State Responsibility?

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This thesis studies how the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment tries to increase citizen involvement in environmental issues by using “grassroot” consumer organizations as a tool. Two such organizations are examined, namely Grønn Hverdag (Green Living) and 07-06-05 Tid for forandring (07-06-05 Time for Change). Both give the impression of being autonomous consumer organisations but are essentially working to implement, rather than influence, environmental policy. Based on interviews with representatives of the organizations and of the Ministry, I attempt to examine the following: Are these top-down “grassroot” initiatives compatible with democratic principles, and are they able to strengthen citizens’ involvement with environmental issues?

The study deals with this question by looking at the relation between the state and environmental organizations in Norway in a historical perspective. I argue that the two organizations are parts of what might be regarded as a negative trend for democracy and political participation. First, increasing governmental control of voluntary organizations might transform many organizations into “arms of the state”. Second, public administration is participating in political debates in new ways, partly at the expense of voluntary organizations and political parties. Further, though political consumerism may be regarded as a legitimate tool for citizens to express political concerns, I argue that these state-dominated organizations may

place too much responsibility for environmental problems on the individual consumer and too little on the political level. The organizations might therefore fail to address important societal questions, and this may also limit their ability to gain popular support. This leads to the question of whether the focus on consensus and cooperation is always the best way for the political and administrative level to address environmental concerns.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – A practical Answer to some Dilemmas of Sustainability?

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“We are all farmers – some are active, others are less active”. This statement from one of the consumer-participants in a CSA-farm illustrates the core of CSA: Consumers and farmers share ownership and responsibility for food production.

In cooperation with Hanne Torjusen at the National Institute for Consumer Research (Sifo), Norway, I have collected experience about CSA from other countries through research publications, general information and visits. We have also initiated and followed up a few examples of CSA-farms in Norway.

The presentation in this workshop will describe the core elements of CSA, identify some of the dilemmas of sustainable consumption, and analyze whether and how CSA actually represents an answer to some of them.

[See the whole paper here.](#)

Eco-rational food – Towards welfare and sustainability through social entrepreneurship?

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Food does not come to consumers' tables straight from the farms, but the whole agri-food system is located between production and consumption. The concept of agri-food system refers to those activities in society, which are linked with food production and consumption. So called conventional food production and agri-food system have been a target of strong criticisms because of environmental problems caused by modernized agriculture. Development of alternative agri-food systems, like organic production and local food, are seen as challenging conventionalized and industrialized food system. Attributes of high quality, local, natural, and embeddedness to local ecosystem are often linked to alternative agri-food systems. They are also seen as reconvene trust between producers and consumers.

In alternative food systems food is usually supplied by alternative supply chains, like direct sell. However, in Finland, there have been difficulties with these supply chains, because of the long distances in rural areas. Centralized trade, on the other hand, makes food supply ecologically unsustainable and unrational. In my research I aim to study and discuss the possibilities of social enterprises in solving this problem, and also in promoting supply of organic and local food. The purpose of social enterprises is to create jobs for disabled and long-term unemployed and at least 30 % of the employees are disabled or previously unemployed in the long term.

The idea of supply model introduced is based on previous researches on marketing opportunities of organic and local food. According those researches, in institutional kitchens there is willingness using organic and local food. The personnel of these kitchens, or farmers, do not have resources (time, money, proper equipment) to wash and chop f. ex., vegetables. Thus, pre-processing like washing and chopping could be done in social enterprises because high technical know-how is not required. Entrepreneurs would collect

vegetables, and also deliver them to the kitchens after processing. If there were social enterprises concentrated to processing organic and local food in county or municipality level, prices of food and transportation costs would decrease remarkably. Thus it would also make the alternative food systems more rational and sustainable. This supply model would fulfil environmental, economical as well as socio-cultural aspects of sustainable development.

Greenhouse gas emission from food products and diets: possibilities for climate friendly eating patterns

Annika Carlsson-Kanyama
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Abstract: Anthropogenic warming is mainly caused by emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄) and nitrous oxide (N₂O) with agriculture as a main contributor for the two latter gases. But also other parts of food system contribute, CO₂ emissions emanate from the use of fossil fuels in transportation, processing, retailing, storage and preparation. Food items differ substantially when greenhouse gas emissions are calculated from farm to table. A recent study of about 20 items shows that the span is from 0.4 kg CO₂ per kg edible product up to 30 kg CO₂. For protein rich food such as legumes, meat, fish, cheese and eggs the difference is a factor 30 with the lowest emissions per kg for legumes, poultry and eggs and the highest for beef, cheese and pork. The large emissions for ruminants are mainly explained by CH₄ emissions from enteric fermentation. For vegetables and fruits, emissions are usually not more than 2.5 kg CO₂ per kg product even if there is a high degree of processing and substantial transportation. Products transported by plane are an exception as emissions may be as large as for certain meats. Emission from foods rich in carbohydrates such as potatoes, pasta and wheat are less than 1.1 kg per kg edible food. We suggest that changes in the diet, towards more plant-based foods, towards meat from animals with little enteric fermentation and towards foods processed in an energy efficient manner present an interesting and little explored area for mitigating climate change.

Session 2. Food and everyday practices of consumption

The ultimate test of consumer citizenship: Food rationing during World War II.

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When discussing sustainable food consumption in the affluent societies today, it is worth recalling the experiences of austerity during World War II. In most of Europe, food was rationed in a complex system which illuminated the social aspects of consumption. The system of rationing was created as an alternative to the market economy, in order to ensure that the scarce goods were distributed as evenly as possible among the population, and not primarily to those with the most economic resources. Within this system, special provisions were made for categories of consumers deemed in need of extra supplies, such as pregnant women and manual workers. As a general observation, consumers supported the rationing as long as the states upheld their part of the deal, which was to make sure that the rations were adequate, affordable and available for purchase.

This presentation will focus on how consumers contributed to making the food rationing system work, both on the point of purchase and in the subsequent use of the goods. Of paramount importance in this respect was the effort of the housewives, who assumed the responsibility for the many mundane and heavy tasks associated with for instance queuing for food and preserving and preparing food of varying quality, while also supporting the morale of the rationing system. These housewives were in many respects “model citizens” in a rationing system created to ensure sustainable food consumption in a time of crisis.

Dealing with environmental challenges of consumption in food practices

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The main point of this presentation is to argue for the fruitfulness (for both consumers and for sustainability) of focusing on the variations in the multiplicity of environmentally challenged performances in food practices, that carry consumption with them, instead of trying to create more and more specified segments of consumers with varying patterns of consciousness and behaviour to target with media messages. The theoretical approach of the presentation is a practice theoretical perspective. The presentation will use this perspective to re-interpret and reflect upon qualitative case-studies in my earlier research (on young consumers and on parents with young children) in order to analyse out a possible variation of openings for change in (especially the procedures and the positionings) of the performances in food practices.

Benefits and harms of vegetarian world in the short and long term

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Vegetarian lifestyle has gained a lot of interest in academic circles during the last two thousand years. The lifestyle has been rigorously investigated from ethical, social and environmental perspectives. Large amount of discussion has been devoted to the arguments in favor of vegetarianism in different arenas. This paper collects the harm and benefit arguments devoted to vegetarianism together from a deep vegetarian perspective, developed by Michael Allen Fox and presents them in a futures table. The novel idea of the paper is to collect the ideas in short (less than 30 years) and long term (more than 30 years), in order to emphasize the importance of different outcomes of short term and long term evaluations in the case of vegetarianism. The harms and benefits are further divided into effects on producers, consumers, animals and biota.

Keywords: Vegetarianism; Sustainability; Futures

Towards a sustainable food plate

Christine Hvitsand, Telemark Research Institute, Geir Lieblein, UMB

How can our food consumption become more sustainable? One way is to eat in a more environmentally sound way and to encourage the agricultural sector to produce types of food which have less impact on the environment. Today most of the attention in relation to environment and food production is related to emissions of green house gases. There are, however, evidently other elements that contribute in deciding the sustainability level of a given food item. That could be factors like the input of resources required for producing the food, the production method, as well as natural and cultural conditions of the region. There is a need to go further into the concept of "sustainable food" and conceptualize which dimensions or criteria that are important when defining sustainability. In order to implement the concept of sustainable food, it seems valuable to use a geographical region as case. The different food system stakeholders will be able to contribute in defining what kind of food is sustainable for their region within the frames of what we can tell is sustainable from the conceptualization process. Another partly overlooked dimension is the gap between knowledge and action towards sustainability. Knowing more about what is sustainable food consumption will not necessarily lead to more sustainable food consumption practices. To explore the vital link between knowledge and action, a school will be involved in the project. A set of "sustainable" menus will be implemented in a school and a "farm-to-school"-relationship will be encouraged. The opportunities for motivation and learning in different levels will be studied in an action research mode.

Envisioning sustainable food consumption in practices of everyday life

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The global consequences of environmental problems are widely recognised in both political agendas and in people's everyday life. As food consumption forms a significant part of the environmental load of households, the sustainability of what we eat is an increasingly topical question. The starting point of our paper is the theory of practice as a potentially fruitful theoretical approach to ecologically and socially sustainable food consumption. Our aim is to address the everyday encounters between consumption practices and the different dimensions of sustainability. We analyse consumers' ideas and notions on future food consumption from the perspective of practices understood as doings, sayings and materials as changing in time.

The empirical data of the study were collected as part of a collaboration between multidisciplinary BRIGADE and MIRHAMI 2030 projects. This sub-study investigates the social and cultural conditions affecting sustainable food choices by mapping consumers' ideas about future food consumption. Altogether 53 participants participated in six focus group discussions held in autumn 2007. The participants were invited to construct images of future food consumption by thinking about activities relating to cookbooks, kitchens, grocery shopping, food packaging and meals. The results show that in consumers' ideas the changes in practices were linked with the technological and material transformations envisioned for the future.

These exercises depict that consumers' images of future food consumption are embedded in practices that are at the same time are changing and stable. Through practices consumers are able to recognise their various roles as users, consumers and citizens in constructing future. In order to discuss sustainability we need to acknowledge these sometimes even contrasting roles of people. By taking into account this manifoldness we address the potential of sustainability to become entrenched in the practices of everyday life and develop into sustainable lifestyles.

Session 3. Consumers, citizens and markets

Change makers: Who are they?

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Food consumption is largely a routinized practice, embedded in the normative and institutional frame of given food systems. At the same time, however, food consumption is often an arena for social change and transformation.

The main aim of this paper is to explore innovative food related practices. Particularly, we want to look at those consumers which, through their consumption practice, enhance sustainability and foster alternative visions of the relationship between consumers and producers.

The paper utilises data from both quantitative and qualitative studies conducted in Norway in the last decade. We start our analysis by considering some of the first studies investigating consumption of organic products. By that time, approximately ten years ago, the number of people purchasing organic products was particularly low and provision mainly took place at the margin of the conventional market. Who were the consumers of organic products at that time? Were they a homogeneous group? Which kind of motivations did they have? Was consumption of organic products part of a wider lifestyle project? And, most of all, what has been the aftermath of this experience in terms of changing the conventional market and the ways of thinking about food?

As consumption of organic products has progressively increased, and has reached a noteworthy position in the conventional market, we want to consider if the social characteristics of purchasers of organic products also have changed. Data from a recent survey will be used with the purpose of making a comparison between the very first wave of consumers of organic products and those buying these products today. What we expect to find is a lower homogeneity among the today purchasers, which may suggest a transformation of the meaning of organic products.

While organic products seem to face conventionalisation, new initiatives are though emerging. Among these we can mention fair trade products, farmer markets, box schemes, CSA and food purchased direct from food outlets on the farm. Are these initiatives new attempts of promoting alternative networks in the food system? Who takes part to these forms of consumption? Do we find similarities between the ones buying fair trade or farmer markets products and the pioneers of organic food purchasing? In brief, who are the “change makers”?

The typical green food consumer – who is she and how to design tools for her (or is it a him)?

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This paper has two aims. **Our first aim** is to explore various quantitative and qualitative studies on ‘green’, ‘political’ or ‘concerned’ food consumers and compare and critically discuss some of the conclusions drawn from these studies. **The second aim** of the paper will be devoted to discuss the relation between a “typical” green food consumer and green food labels.

Several studies present nice typologies of various consumer groups. The typical concerned consumer, according to several studies, is well-educated, belongs to the middle or upper-middle class, has a good income, is white, often a woman in her lower middle age or middle age, has children, and lives in Northern Europe or North America. However, we wish to problematize this notion of the green political consumer from a number of angles (e.g. in relation to the definition of ethical consumers and cultural notions of what is to be seen as political). In particular, we wish to discuss the finding from existing quantitative studies that there are particularly two variables that appears to affect political consumption strongly: “women” and/or “well-educated”. Although we find the evidences in these studies strong, it is still relevant to ask whether research has missed the political consumer engagement of men. And in part we will discuss that the most well-educated could also very likely be the most ambivalent consumers. We will draw on qualitative studies and social theorists (Beck, Giddens, Bauman) to push this latter point.

Existing studies say little about consumers’ thoughts, assumptions, and reflections about such tools as green labels. The researchers appear to assume that eco-labels, fair trade labels, or similar arrangements resonate with the identities, hopes, and political sentiments of consumers. The first part of the paper leads us to introduce a view of a ‘typical’ green food consumer as **reflective, ambivalent, and uncertain**, capable of developing ‘reflective trust’. In a recent publication (Boström & Klintman 2008) we maintain there is a general discrepancy between what is presented to consumers on the front stage in green labelling (through categorical and overly simplistic ecological messages), and what is actually taking place on the back stage (where the green labels are created and negotiated). The production of tools for green political consumerism does not adequately correspond to the hopes, thoughts, uncertainties, ambivalence, and reflective capacity of the ‘typical’ concerned consumer. We maintain that the insistence on objectivity, simplicity, and neutrality generally seen among advocates of green labels does not support the development of ‘reflective trust’. Hence, there is a mismatch between the production side and the consumption side of green labels. In this paper, we suggest how to explore this research topic further. In part, there is a need for more studies, we argue, that more focus on green consumers’ thoughts, reflections and ambivalence regarding the tools for their shopping behaviour. In part, will also briefly discuss how green labels and other consumer-oriented tools can be developed that better match the ambivalence and reflective potential among concerned consumers and we will suggest some new research topics on this matter.

The analyses, findings and suggestions for further research topics that are discussed in this paper generally stem from two recent publications:

Klintman, M., Boström, M.; Ekelund, L. & Lindén A-M (2008) *Maten Märks. Förutsättningar för konsumentmakt*. Lund: Lunds Universitet

Boström, M. & Klintman, M. (2008) *Eco-standards, Product Labelling and Green Consumerism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Consumers and citizens perception of meat and meat quality: relative importance of environmental issues

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Organic food as new luxury: A neglected perspective in the strive for sustainable food consumption

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In today's market there is a growing segment of consumers who are so wealthy that they consume luxury products. The wealthy segment is not only the traditional old money rich, but also the growing group of nouveau rich. This segment can, due to their wealth, consume products which are beyond the average consumer, but when it comes to food this group of consumers is limited to mainstream supermarkets. Despite a few product categories as caviar, etc., food consumption is not at the same level for this group as the rest of the stuff they consume. By studying the wealthy consumers as a segment practicing conspicuous consumption, a hitherto neglected market for sustainable consumption could be constructed. Price would not be an important parameter in this market and it would be possible to sell high quality organic product. It would also be possible to see this segment as the market for product development within the organic food sector. Organic food products in this high end market could later be disseminated into other segments, when the price is lower, due to the trickle down effect which is well known for product within conspicuous consumption. By using such a strategy new venues for sustainable consumption could be developed. The opportunities for a market for luxury organic food should be explored, since it could open new opportunities for sustainable food consumption and a venue for product development to a segment who is not sensitive to price.

Coupling of trends in food consumption and environmental impacts, aspects at regional, national and global scale

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In the Millennium report, adaptive mosaic was selected as the most promising alternative to enhance protection of ecosystem services and regional as well as global sustainability. The requirement of pure market economy is a free movement of materials and money from region to region, and economically optimized efficiency of production and supply. The requirement based on regional ecosystem services is optimization sustainable use of those services, focus on regional innovation and aim to regionally originating niche markets. This could be regarded as the regional CSR. European countries are living in conflict between regional or global approach, as national borders in terms of agricultural and food policies have been wiped

out. The major trend in global food market is an increase of food consumption, not necessarily improved welfare. Simultaneously, food supply is being centralized into hands of global companies that focus on globally accepted growing plants and cultivars. Respecting of a local culture or heritage is not a feature that is commonly included into CSR of globalizing companies. That means narrowing of a raw material base of final products, moving towards monocultures and narrowing a base for culture, economic life, rural landscape and biodiversity, and with competition to narrowing of supply and increase of price. The choice is in the food consumers, the power is in food trading companies and impacts will be seen in surrounding growing and living environment and, indirectly, in welfare of consumers. The general environmental impact categories at present are: impact to water, climate and soil, added with use of primary energy. Use of land area represents the impact to biodiversity and that is not enough! Biodiversity is the dynamic component that is strictly linked to multifunctionality of human society. The understanding of the link between biodiversity and multifunctionality should be improved, in favor of sustainability.