Understanding and concern for sustainability do not translate into action on food choices

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Brussels (February 11 2014): A pan-European study by the European Food Information Council (EUFIC), published in Food Policy, has found that consumers have a reasonable understanding of sustainability as a responsible behaviour towards the environment and a fair treatment of present and future generations. However, they do not tend to have a detailed understanding of the role of sustainability along the food supply chain or of various sustainability labels used on food and drink products. Furthermore, their understanding does not translate into driving food choice.

Carried out in collaboration with Prof Klaus Grunert from Aarhus University, Denmark, the study explored consumer understanding of sustainability; sustainability-related logos(such as Fair Trade, Animal Welfare, Rainforest Alliance and Carbon Footprint), information search behaviour and food choice. A nationally representative survey was carried out in six countries (UK, France, Germany, Spain, Poland and Sweden), as well as, focus groups in four of these (UK, France, Germany and Spain).

The research focuses on consumer understanding, motivation and use of sustainability-related information in a food and drink context. Consumer understanding of the topic is generally high; participants in the UK, France, Germany and Spain predominantly associate sustainability with being environmentally and ecologically friendly by preserving resources and maintaining the balance of nature. Swedish consumers refer to the shelf life of foods, while Polish respondents place more importance on maintaining a certain standard of living and a ‘sustainable’ economic output/growth.

While understanding and concern are generally high, environmental and ethical aspects do not play a major role in food choice. When tested against nutritional value and different price levels in a conjoint study, sustainability has no meaningful impact on food choice, across all product categories tested. While younger people are more likely to use environmental and ethical labels to make their food choice, overall national differences are small. Qualitative insights underline time constraints, perceived price differences and a lack of detailed understanding of the information sources as the main barriers for including sustainability into the decision making process.

Most consumers have heard about the term ‘sustainability’ but the concept remains abstract and diffuse and therefore difficult to deal with” explains Prof Grunert. “When asked, consumers generally express concern about sustainability issues and would like to be informed about them, however, in the context of food and drink purchases, sustainability issues are not a priority.

Consumer awareness of sustainability labels is generally low but varies significantly across the countries analysed in the study. Understanding of the concept behind the labelling scheme is uniformly highest for the Fair Trade label, compared to the Rainforest Alliance logo, the Carbon Footprint (“working with the Carbon Trust”) and the Animal Welfare scheme. While on average UK consumers correctly identify more
than half of the 4 labels shown, the majority of Spanish and Polish consumers barely identified more than 1 label. Qualitative insights reveal a considerable amount of scepticism towards quality seals, coupled with the desire for (more) trustworthy labelling, information and education on sustainability-related topics.

High concern does not translate into food choice

Concern with environmental and ethical issues is reasonably high among European consumers and they would like to see a more widespread use of all four labels analysed. Sustainability is less of a concern for consumers when considering specific products. Out of six categories (chocolate, coffee, ice cream, breakfast cereals, ready meals and soft drinks), consumers only showed concern about sustainability for coffee and ready meals. Adding to these insights on consumer motivation, results show a clear favour towards information at the point of purchase. The top places consumers would like to see sustainability-related information are in-store (labels on-pack, in the aisle or on the shelf), followed by online sources and programmes/advertisements on TV.

Results of this research do not necessarily imply that sustainability information will not play a role in future food purchases. However, compared to issues related to health and nutrition, ‘sustainability’ is more difficult to grasp and as such more difficult to be relevant in a consumer’s immediate (purchase/consumption) mind-set. This could change when sustainability issues in the context of food and drink become more prominent in the public debate, as it has happened with issues of health and nutrition.

For more information: