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Food transition, a shared responsibility

Authors

Élise Huber

Former Research Fellow at IDDRI, Agricultural and food policies

Pierre-Marie Aubert

Director, Agriculture and food policies programme

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Would consumers be drivers of the food transition? The idea has taken root in the debate, fuelled by the strong growth in the consumption of organic products and the growing mistrust of consumers towards the so-called "conventional" agriculture. But are these signals unequivocal? Are the changes underway sufficient to transform our food system structurally and sustainably? Based on a survey of some forty consumers, divided according to their socio-professional categories, we show that the factors that motivate consumption choices and the perception of different types of food, particularly those known as "sustainable", vary greatly within the population. These results illustrate the need not to base the food transition solely on changes in demand—which would mechanically result in a change in supply—but on the contrary to simultaneously accompany the transformation of supply, demand and the conditions of their

meetings.

Which "sustainable" food?

First, the survey shows that the concept of "sustainable food" is far from being anchored in the imagination and daily life of all consumers. And when it is, it is a concept with, according to the interviewees, divergent meanings, which only very partially overlap with the definition criteria commonly used in expert debates.¹ For example, in response to the question "What would you define as a sustainable food or basket?", several groups remained focused on the issue of plastic packaging as the main sustainability criterion. For other consumers (especially those from less privileged socio-professional categories), the idea of "sustainable" food has proved to be alien to their concerns. These results reveal both the inoperable nature of this concept, but also—and above all ?—the fact that the question of the sustainability of food choices does not cross society in a homogeneous way, despite the (relatively) high coverage it has received over the past 12 months in the mainstream media.²

Health as a priority

Consumer groups however pointed out the diversity of factors motivating their food consumption choices: lifestyles, economic constraints, weight of habits, social values (equity, ecology), etc. And they do not necessarily converge towards practices associated with sustainability as experts understand it. The main determinant highlighted remains the health benefit: food quality and composition of the basket.

In addition, consumers face an abundance, if not a cacophony, of contradictory information and messages on what would be the "right" food behaviour to adopt on a daily basis, reflecting both the differences of opinion among experts and the many attempts by the private sector to showcase their efforts in this area. This can lead to frustration and thus slow the evolution of consumption patterns towards more sustainable food.

Organic agriculture: environmental and social issues

While the environmentally sustainable nature of organic food is debated within the expert community with regard to climate issues, it is no less debated by consumers. A large number of consumers recognise and appreciate a certain "democratisation" of organic products (made more affordable in supermarkets). Some of them reveal a more or less marked lack of confidence or reluctance towards the label. As a result, consumers buy products from organic farming (AB) mainly "to ease their conscience". The health factor, the main argument pushing consumers towards the purchase of products from AB, thus appears potentially fragile, which could ultimately weaken the continuation of the strong growth that the organic market has experienced in recent years.³

This phenomenon could even be amplified by the distinct forms of rejection observed in our survey with regard to the figure of the 100% organic consumer; this rejection expresses a fragmentation of consumption patterns between various "communities" of consumers with heterogeneous concerns,⁴ and shows that changes in practices are far from unambiguous.

The transition of the food system beyond consumers

Consumer practices evolve, expressing ever-increasing societal expectations about the quality of our food and effectively contributing to the food⁵ transition—the constant progression of the fair trade and AB sectors.⁶ However,

the evidence gathered here shows that relying solely on market logic and letting consumers bear the burden of this transition could prove problematic. The heterogeneity of expectations and the diversity of factors guiding actual consumption practices could lead to only marginal changes in "average" diets, which are insufficient in relation to the challenges. From this perspective, it is no longer just a question of urging consumers to change their eating habits. It is necessary to engage in a broader reflection in order to identify all the levers (incentives, regulations, taxes, etc.) which, by truly transforming the practices of all the actors in the food system, will make the most virtuous consumption choices—environmentally, socially and for health—become simple, obvious and accessible to the consumer.

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1 While the notion of sustainable food (from an environmental and health point of view) holds no consensus within the academic world, some criteria are common to most research: a limitation of total caloric intake and sugar intake, a balance between vegetable and animal proteins to the advantage of the former (unlike the current situation, where the ratio, in France and Europe, is on average 2/3 animal to 1/3 vegetable) and a lower total protein consumption compared to the current situation. The issue of organic (AB) products is widely debated: many studies point to their positive impact on the health and biodiversity of agro-ecosystems, while others stress its relatively lower effectiveness from a climate point of view, without taking into account the changes in eating habits associated with the development of organic consumption. As we will see, AB products are also controversial on the consumer side, but for different reasons.

2 See Le Parisien (<http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/climat-pourquoi-il-faut-changer-nos-habitudes-alimentaires-08-08-2019-8130909.php>); Le Monde (https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2019/01/17/un-steak-par-semaine-des-foies-et-des-proteines-vegetales-la-recette-du-regime-de-sante-planetaire_5410177_3244.html)

3 The French organic farming market has doubled in 5 years, between 2012 and 2017 (https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2018/06/01/l-essor-du-bio-en-france-en-dix-graphiques_5308122_3234.html).

4 Legendre, V., Sans, P., Barrey, S., Boutin, B. (2018). Controverses sur la consommation de viande : enseignements d'une analyse sociologique. INRA Productions animales, 30(5), 479-486. INRA.

5 See the 2017 IFOP/WWF opinion poll : https://www.wwf.fr/sites/default/files/doc-2017-10/171010_sondage_wwf_ifop_agriculture%202.pdf

6 In 2018, the French organic market grew by 15.7% (<https://www.agencebio.org/vos-outils/les-chiffres-cles/>) and the fair trade market by +22% (<https://www.commerceequitable.org/le-commerce-equitable/quelques-chiffres/>).

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