

BLOG POST April 13th 2023

Public decision-makers must change their food transition narrative

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🕒 Reading time: 7 min



There will be no sustainable agriculture or good nutritional health without changes in diets, and this is a major challenge. However, the strategy mobilised so far in France to carry out this food transition, which is based on the bet of the responsible consumer, or "actor-consumer", is not producing the expected results. In a study ([Brocard & Saujot, 2023](#)) published in parallel to this blog post and focusing on the future National

Strategy for Food, Nutrition and Climate (SNANC), IDDRI insists on the need for much stronger public action to meet the challenges. This action would not weigh more heavily on citizens by restricting their individual freedoms¹ (IDDRI, 2020) or by asking them to make more effort, but would instead be directed at the main players who shape food practices

A transition in minds, not in actions

Per capita meat consumption has not been decreasing for several years and we are far from a trajectory compatible with our environmental objectives, which implies a reduction in the share of animal products in our consumption (Rogissart, 2023), even though its impact on the climate is becoming increasingly publicised. Organic food remains a niche market (6% of purchases) and the issue of animal welfare has not become a real criterion for purchasing. The appeal of local food has not changed the main patterns of food consumption and distribution channels (61% of purchases are made in supermarkets). Furthermore, nutritional recommendations are not sufficiently implemented by the French, particularly with regard to increasing the consumption of fibre and fruit and vegetables, and decreasing the consumption of processed meat and, to a lesser extent, meat (excluding poultry) (Santé Publique France, 2019). Social inequalities linked to food (e.g. obesity, fruit and vegetable consumption, organic consumption, etc.) remain, while situations of food insecurity are increasing (Brocard & Saujot, 2023).

Food habits are therefore not progressing, or not progressing enough, towards a sustainability that would combine environmental objectives and human health, while opinion polls seem to indicate the opposite². A gap exists, for example, between what citizens declare about their reduction in meat consumption and their desire to reduce it further³, or between their identification as 'flexitarians'⁴ and the reality of meat consumption (Rogissart, 2023); this is what some call a 'consumer-citizen gap', i.e. a gap between what citizens declare they expect from their food and their consumption behaviour (de Bakker and Dagevos, 2012).

The dominant narrative of the responsible consumer is not working

To understand how to get out of this situation, we need to go back to the dominant narrative of the last 20 years. We can summarise it as follows: the growing concerns of a part of the population, spread out by the media and opinion polls, were to amplify and gradually disseminate among the whole population trends that were still in the minority in terms of eating habits (being prepared to pay more for one's food, consuming less but better meat, more organic food, short distribution channels, etc.) and pressuring the players in the agri-food industry to modify their offer. The figure of the "actor-consumer" sums up this vision: through his or her individual choices, accompanied by public authorities (information, labels, etc.), the committed and responsible consumer would translate the transition into action.

However, this narrative is based on an oversimplified vision of society and lifestyle changes.

- **Relying on the automatic translation of concerns into action ignores the rigidity of food environments**, i.e. the physical, economic, socio-cultural and cognitive conditions that influence our eating habits, and on which public action has not been sufficient (Brocard & Saujot, 2023).
- **Imagining the spread of this 'committed' consumption in a society supposed to be uniform ignores the effects of segmentation or differentiation between social groups** (Dubuisson-Quellier and Gojard, 2016). This form of consumption, perceived as militant, is 'deeply associated with a social group in which the majority of people do not necessarily recognise themselves', which automatically limits its diffusion (Dubuisson-Quellier,

[2018, conclusion](#)).

- **The logic of driving, through the action of a 'referee' consumer, private supply actors** ([Dubuisson-Quellier, 2016, chap 5](#)) underestimates the asymmetries of power, information (multiplicity and complexity of labels) and influence (means allocated to marketing) within food systems (SAPEA, 2020) and often to the detriment of the consumer.

The theoretical limits of this narrative translate in real life into tangible reasons for frustration for the consumer-citizen. Caught up in contradictory injunctions, bearing the responsibility of leading the transition in a society where the food environment (see diagram below) remains unchanged, consumers face either a practical difficulty in bringing their actions into line with their convictions (especially the most constrained citizens), or the gap between the evolution of their own behaviour and the inertia of society ("I do change but nothing changes"). Furthermore, this gap between the expectations of the agricultural sector regarding food and the reality of consumer practices can also lead to resentment on the part of these actors towards consumers who do not want to pay for the transition they are demanding (e.g. quality labels, promotion of animal welfare and the environment when making purchases). All these frustrations are highly counterproductive for the transition.

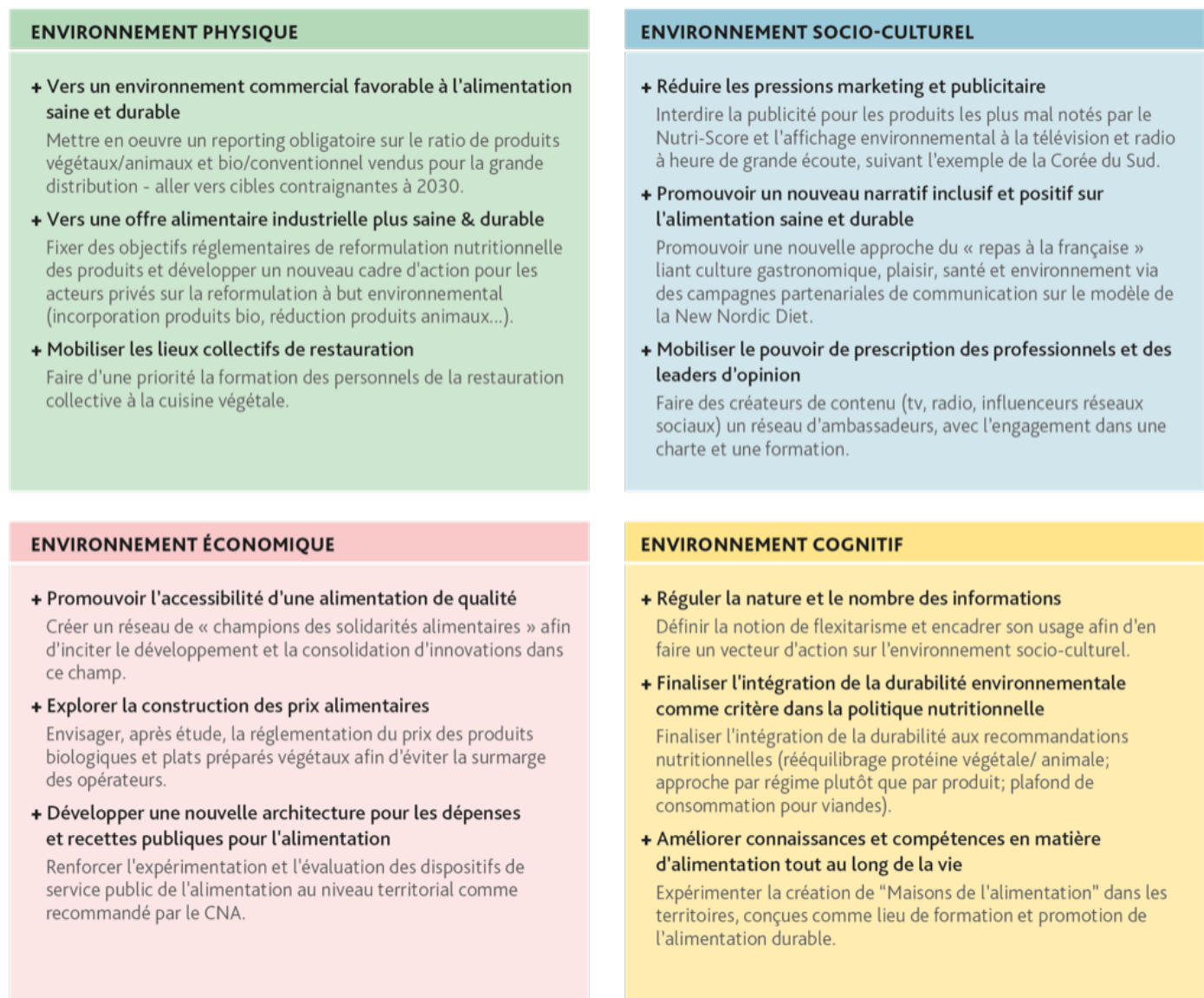
Does the responsible-consumer narrative ignore this "consumer-citizen gap"? It does not, but because of the simplified view on which this narrative is sometimes based, it tends to reduce this gap to a form of irrationality or behavioural bias, which can only be remedied at the individual level through information, persuasion or 'nudges' for example ([Bergeron et al., 2018](#); [De Bakker & Dagevos, 2012](#)).

Changing the transition narrative: from individual to public responsibility

Our interpretation of this discrepancy is quite different: it is rather the consequence of a significant lack of collective action commensurate with the issues at stake, i.e. public policies and private strategies, and enabling action to be taken on the three limits identified: i) the food environment that determines our consumption, including in particular ii) the socio-cultural representations of food; and iii) the available and promoted offer. However, the responsible-consumer strategy does not really lead to mobilising this type of public intervention, and not with the right level of intensity.

It is therefore time to change the strategy: the transition requires much stronger action on the food environment and the action that public authorities could take in this direction has a strong legitimacy insofar as they act in the name of the necessary preservation of our ecosystems and our health. The public authorities must assume their responsibility and orchestrate changes that will not only respond to the concerns currently held by part of society, as we have seen, but which will above all be up to the challenges. Action on the food environment is likely to have a 'wider' impact, i.e. it will also concern social categories that are far from these concerns. In a related way, public action on this scale would lead to a reduction in the phenomenon of a two-tiered diet—with certain sections of the population able to access a 'committed' sustainable diet and others who are deprived of it. Moreover, action on the food environment does not mean dictating new eating habits, but rather acting on the intermediary actors (manufacturers, distributors) in order to give consumers back some room for manoeuvre and facilitate the adoption of sustainable and healthy eating practices. It is therefore a question of fundamentally changing the discourse on the food transition, as well as the strategy used to make it happen.

Proposals for action on the food environment, drawn from the study "Environment, inequalities, health: what strategy for French food policies" ([Brocard & Saujot, 2023](#)) (*in French*).

FIGURE 2. 12 propositions pour enclencher une action cohérente et ambitieuse sur les environnements alimentaires

¹ See also Saujot, M. et Thiriot, S. (2022). "10 misconceptions about lifestyle changes", <https://bonpote.com/10-idees-recues-sur-la-sobriete-des-modes-de-vie/>

² For example, in 2022, according to the Bio Agency's Barometer, 74% of French people said they were sensitive to the naturalness of raw materials in their food, but only 13% consumed organically produced products every day; similarly, in 2019, according to an IFOP survey, 92% of French people said they thought respect for animal welfare was important - which could have led them to question their consumption of products of animal origin. https://www.agencebio.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Barometre-de-consommation-et-de-perception-des-produits-bio-Edition-2022_VF.pdf ; <https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Infographie-BIEN-ETRE-ANIMAL-IFOP-e1574676620326.png>

³ Nearly half of French people and between 1/3 and 3/4 of French people respectively (cf. Harris interactive 2021 for Réseau Action Climat; Ifop 2021), while FranceAgriMer's latest supply balances (<https://www.franceagrimer.fr/Actualite/Filieres/Viandes-rouges/2023/PUBLICATION-DU->

BILAN-ELEVAGE-2022-Les-marches-des-produits-laitiers-carnes-et-avicoles) show a stagnation in the average quantities of meat available for consumption.

4 In the FranceAgrimer-Ifop study on French diets, a significant proportion of declared flexitarians are in fact omnivores (Végétariens et flexitariens en France en 2020, Enquête IFOP pour FranceAgriMer, 2021); Verain et al. (2022: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S095032932100327X>) point out in the case of the Netherlands the discrepancy between the increase in the number of declared flexitarians and the stability in meat consumption.