

Sustainable diets: a new perspective to include the less affluent

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While the transition to sustainable food has become a major political issue, the level of its ambition is under discussion, as shown by the recent debates around the Climate & Resilience Law. Arguments against the sustainable transition often invoke the working classes, portraying them as resistant to the notion of sustainable food, or emphasizing the economic or even nutritional risks that may result from a shift in diets. This tactic helps to maintain the status quo by highlighting the negative impact of any changes on the most vulnerable households.¹ At the same time, the frame of reference for thinking about and implementing sustainable food policies does not always consider the living conditions of low-income people, who exhibit certain specific constraints and representations.² Dietary recommendations can thus be a source of tension for these populations, as they highlight the mismatch between an aspirational social norm and their ability to reach it (economically, culturally, geographically, materially). In contrast, the wealthy and high-educated classes are often inaccurately considered as the reference group in terms of their ability to meet food sustainability standards.

Based on a literature review on the diets and food behaviours of lower-income individuals – defined here as the poorest 40% in terms of standard of living (or equivalised disposable income)* – this Issue Brief presents key elements on the practices and relationships of this population category with regard to sustainable food. The objective is to better qualify their dietary behaviour and aspirations, particularly in relation to the rest of the population, in order to characterize the participation of this social group in the transition to sustainable food. Lastly we aim to identify the conditions for a true co-construction of sustainable food paradigms, from a food justice perspective.

KEY MESSAGES

Regarding the main objectives of sustainability (reduction in animal product consumption, sustainable food production), food consumption among the poorest 40% does not differ from the rest of the population.

Less affluent people aspire to more sustainable diets that borrow from the dominant food standards while showing certain particularities. This means that the current discourse on sustainable food may be ineffective at mobilizing these populations, and may even be guilt-inducing.

Beyond the price issue, less affluent people have specific constraints (economic, cultural and those related to their food environment) that limit their ability to be receptive and to follow the "eating better" recommendations.

An ambitious food transition is possible if it takes into account the capacities of each social group. Thus, less affluent people should no longer be considered as an obstacle to the transition, but as actors. It is possible to define sustainable diets that include their representations, aspirations and capacities. In parallel, the capacity of public action to exploit the potential desire and the economic capacity of more affluent classes to be drivers of the transition is a question to be addressed.

1. THE PRACTICES OF LESS AFFLUENT PEOPLE ARE AS (INADEQUATELY) SUSTAINABLE AS OTHERS

The issue of access to sustainable food for the most financially limited seems to be a major concern for the French government. Evidence for this includes, for example, the adoption of the law for “[...] healthy, safe, sustainable food for all” (known as the EGAlim law) in October 2018, and the presentation of the third National Plan for Food in March 2019, one of whose three thematic axes is based on social justice. These actions aim to make sustainable food accessible through food education measures that target the poorest, or the transformation of public mass catering to become the primary battlegrounds in “the fight against food inequalities”.³ Less affluent groups⁴ are therefore a key target group for public action in the area of food, with the aim of raising awareness of “sustainable eating” among these populations, which are thought to struggle in terms of achieving this aim. But do they really struggle in this regard? And if so, why?

Organic agriculture is one pillar of a certain vision of agricultural transition. For example, the TYFA agro-ecological scenario sets the objective of having 100% of land cultivated organically by 2050.⁵ For its part, the Ambition Bio 2022 plan aims for organic produce to account for 15% of the useful agricultural area cultivated by 2022, and 20% of purchases in mass catering. However, despite a rapid spread, organic food still only represents 6% of household purchases.⁶ While organic produce may be showing a certain degree of democratization, in the sense of a diversification of consumer profiles (i.e. an increasing number of the lower socio-economic groups)^{7,8}, it remains a niche area of the food market. The top 20% of consumers, characterized by high living standards and high levels of education,^{9,10,11} account for the vast majority of organic purchases (80%).^{7,8,1} However, consumers in low socio-economic groups are not absent from these trends: according to the 2016 Epem survey, 11% of people with the lowest levels of formal education say they regularly buy organic (compared to 18% of the most educated)¹². Similarly, according to the BioNutrinet study, one fifth of those whose diets contain more than 50% organic earn less than €1,200 per month.¹⁰

However, organic consumption is limited by economic (the price of such products is both higher and perceived as higher)¹³ and also by cultural barriers (lacking a basis in consumption habits). Qualitative surveys reveal two contradictory movements: firstly, some less affluent consumers do not eat organic food as a way of identifying with their specific social norm;¹⁴ and secondly, some poorer population groups seem to appreciate the sharing of information, recipes and daily practices regarding organic products at locally organized workshops which demonstrates an interest in these products.²⁸ Organic consumption is therefore not the prerogative of the affluent classes, but the willingness of lower income populations to adopt organic consumption is limited by economic and cultural barriers.

The debate on sustainability then focuses on reducing the consumption of meat products. This is undeniably one of the

most effective levers for reducing the environmental footprint of agriculture, as various transition scenarios have shown.^{5,15,16} However, consumption among the less affluent is subject to contradictory interpretations in the public debate: some consider that the financial situation of the less affluent prevents them from consuming enough meat, while others emphasize that they eat too much meat to be in line with sustainability objectives.

The literature primarily shows that the most financially limited do not suffer from a lack of meat: the 20% with the lowest standard of living consume about 122 g of meat (including poultry) per day, while the richest 20% consume about 116 g.¹⁹ This very small difference (5%) shows that income level is not a strong differentiating factor in regard to meat consumption, which is more influenced by the level of education, even though their effects are cumulative.^{18,20} According to this criterion, those with lower formal education eat about 26% more meat than the most educated.¹¹ Nevertheless, it should be noted that the most relevant approach from an environmental impact perspective is to consider this issue in terms of animal products and not only meat. The share of such products in terms of energy intake shows that the richest 25% of the population now buy 4.4% more animal protein than average (while the poorest 25% buy 4.1% less than average).²⁴ Considering animal products as a whole thus allows to re-establish a fact: currently no social groups are aligned with the sustainability objectives. Therefore, the differences in animal protein consumption between income and education groups are small compared to the magnitude of the required change, i.e. a reduction of animal protein consumption by half by 2050 in Europe (TYFA).¹ Efforts to change our eating habits towards greater sustainability are therefore similar across the socio-economic spectrum.

Finally, it should be remembered that a major component of nutritional inequality concerns fresh produce, fruit, vegetables and fish, more so than meat products.²³ The most financially limited groups consume 19% less fruit and vegetables than the most affluent, a gap that increases to 23% if we consider the difference between the least and the most educated.¹¹ For seafood products, the differences are of the same magnitude, with the least affluent consuming 23% less than wealthier people, and the least educated consuming 18% less than those with more education.^{11,19}

2. ATTITUDES OF LOWER INCOME PEOPLE TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FOOD

The concept of healthy and sustainable food that governs public policies promotes a decrease in the consumption of animal products and an increase in the consumption of products

1 The TYFA objective is to reduce the amount of animal protein consumed to 29 g/day, compared to approximately 48 g/day in France today (INCA 3). This is in line with the nutritional guidelines, since the total amount of protein in TYFA (about 80 g) is higher than the amount recommended by ANSES (about 50 g). The ratio of animal protein to vegetable protein in total protein is therefore close to 1:2.

from sustainable production methods. However, the outlook of those on lower incomes is only partially recognized by this definition, which although based on scientific evidence, is massively appropriated by the most educated and affluent groups.²⁵ The risk for these groups is twofold: first, they suffer from multiple difficulties in accessing healthy and sustainable food. Secondly, the policies that target those on lower-incomes are based on simplified observations while rooted in a value system that is not their own. A striking example²⁷⁻²⁹ of this is the failure of nutritional messages to reach the working classes and the most disadvantaged due to their "elitist" nature.²⁶ Such policies can thus produce demobilizing effects. Finally, they represent a "symbolic violence" against the less affluent,² which can make such messages counterproductive and inappropriate.

Like the rest of the population, less affluent people express an interest in healthy, good quality and sustainable food. Their understanding of "eating better" is partly in line with current consumer trends and the vision of sustainable food portrayed by the media: natural, ethical, healthy, local, organic and more plant-based products.³⁰⁻³² But they also express their own vision, characterized by new practices and the importance of social dimensions. In fact, these groups particularly value the conviviality of the meal and the strengthening of social ties. Inviting friends and family, sharing the preparation of the meal, enjoying "home-made" cooking or showing solidarity with producers are among the key values of their vision of quality food.^{25,34,72} At the same time, they express a strong distrust of agribusiness products and supermarkets,^{28,72} which reflects both an internalization of nutritional standards and the search for a fair and responsible diet.³⁵ The desire to return to healthy and balanced products, as close as possible to natural production (quality), is coupled with the desire for a diversified diet (variety). Households that rely on food banks also express a desire for access to fresh, varied and healthy products.³⁶ The importance of eating organic vegetables is further mentioned by the poorest households when asked to define a "dignified and sustainable food basket",³⁵ as well as by moderate-income families.²⁵ The example of organic vegetables is interesting in that it highlights the complex attitudes induced by the cultural norms associated with food. Thus, at the same time as they are valued by less affluent families, vegetables are the focus of strong symbolic tensions, particularly related to nutritional messages (e.g., the French National Nutrition and Health Programme), which can lead to resistance.^{35,37} In addition, organic consumption has been established as a "symbolic frontier" by the high-educated and affluent groups who use it as a tool for social differentiation,^{25,38} and associated with the value of health, which is especially important to the wealthiest classes.^{8,39}

The aspiration to eat healthily and responsibly is therefore not limited to the most well-off, even if the cultural meaning generally given to these practices tends to exclude those on lower incomes. A local study showed that while only 12% of households said that they have changed their eating habits

to limit their environmental impact, this figure remains stable across income levels.⁴⁰ However, for the most financially limited, "sustainability" is as much about respect for ecosystems as it is about food security.⁴¹ They then define their own frame of reference for virtuous actions that contribute towards sustainability, which are sometimes explicitly labelled as "sustainable", while other times responding to different motivations (economic, practical, social...).^{25,42,43} This vision prioritizes the consumption of seasonal products, home-grown food, the reduction of food waste or the moderation of consumption (especially of meat)^{44,45} rather than the consumption of organic or vegetarian products for example.^{14,25,28} The promotion of these practices therefore allows us to open up sustainable food to new audiences. Generalizing responsible food practices among all social classes therefore requires the representation of more diverse sustainable food, reflecting the food behaviours of less affluent population groups.

3. BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND PRACTICES, SPECIFIC LIMITATIONS

People on a lower-income, like the rest of the population, express a demand for sustainable, quality food. However, there is a value-action gap between attitudes and practices. The reason for this gap relates to a series of three types of obstacle: economic factors (income, price); cultural and symbolic factors (knowledge, values, tastes, peer group); and issues related to the food environment, i.e. the food supply structure in a territory and the circumstances of food purchase, preparation and consumption.⁴⁶

The main issue is the affordability of sustainable dietary practices. 30% of individuals, those with the lowest standards of living, spend between €130 and €160 on food monthly. This represents about €4.25 per person for the first decile, compared to an average of over €7.⁵⁵ These figures, based on public statistics,³ are consistent with the findings of a survey (Opticourses), which shows that participating households spend an average of €3.65 per person per day on food at home.⁴⁷ Furthermore, people receiving food support from the state have an average of €2.30 per day to spend on food.⁷⁵ However, current estimates of the cost of a nutritionally balanced diet is at least €3.85 per person per day.¹⁹

For many households below the poverty line, nutritional guidelines are already impossible to meet.⁴⁹ The price impact of more sustainable diets must therefore be analysed and monitored, particularly in the medium term.⁷⁴ This issue is the subject of an increasingly rich body of literature, although a consensus has yet to be reached (see ^{7,10,50,51,52,53,54,55}).

In addition, income affects the level of household equipment, which affects the ability to cook fresh products, the pleasure involved in doing so,⁶⁰ and the minimization of cooking time.

² For example, the feelings generated in response to the recommendation to consume 5 fruits and vegetables per day for a family that does not have sufficient budget.

³ The figures from the Rogissart et al. study (ref. 55) adapted from the Family Budget Survey 2017 are here converted to expenditure per person (not expenditure per consumption unit) using the average number of persons per household estimated by INSEE.

There is also evidence that the indirect effects of poverty (poor sleep, housing insecurity, etc.) can contribute to a poor quality diet⁵⁶ and limit the time available for food preparation. Sustainable practices are often more time intensive, such as cooking fresh and raw produce, growing your own food, buying directly from producers, etc. However, over a 30-year period, the time spent on cooking has dropped across all population categories,⁵⁷ although it has remained higher for less affluent people.^{58,60} Should we conclude that their leeway in this area is more limited, or that this increased time devoted to cooking is an asset?

If we assume that financially accessible sustainable food baskets can be a reality, the question arises as to the socio-cultural accessibility of such food. Sustainable food projects often assume that lower-income populations lack the necessary skills for the transition and promote changes in practices through activities such as collective vegetable gardens or cooking workshops. This principle is the basis of social supermarkets and community shops,³⁷ but also, for example, of the food strategy of the City of Paris.² However, while there is a noticeable trend towards learning certain skills (cooking with less meat, the preparation of pulses, eating organic, growing your own vegetables),^{28,45,61} studies show that lower-income adults already know how to cook healthy meals⁶² and do not have a particular lack of knowledge or disinterest in "cooking better".⁶⁰ However, symbolic barriers remain fundamental for these groups. This is manifested in comments such as "it's not for me" or "I'm not interested", which are indications of voluntary or involuntary social distancing. This is the case for the consumption of organic products and vegetarianism: hence, 35% of those who dismiss vegetarianism do so because they "do not share the convictions" of vegetarians,⁴⁵ while 47% of non-organic consumers see no "value" in such food.⁸ Cultural dynamics have two inhibiting effects for less affluent people. Firstly, "symbolic boundaries"⁶³ that highlight the discourses, attitudes and cultural representations of other social groups prevent them from participating in certain spaces or practices.^{34,64,65} And secondly, they distance themselves from certain aspects of sustainable food⁶⁶ which leads them to assert their own food style, based on an range of alternative actions.^{14,25,43} Consequently, one priority is to enhance the range of possible perspectives in which to frame the subject of sustainable food.

The last issue concerns the nature of the food landscape,⁴⁶ limited here to practical and spatial accessibility. Studies in the USA where the notion of "food deserts" has been mobilized show that the lack of quality supply in an area is a major obstacle to responsible consumption.^{67,68} While the validity of this concept in France remains to be established,⁷⁰ attention to the availability of food on the territory is necessary.⁶⁹ However, the physical presence of sustainable shops is only a prerequisite. In addition to prices, sustainable food stores respond to the codes and social norms of affluent customers, which discourages the less affluent from shopping in such outlets.⁷¹ In spite of a certain reluctance, people with less formal education tend to shop more often than others in supermarkets and discount stores to buy their fruit, vegetables and meat.¹¹ Encouraging the appropriation of sustainable suppliers by less affluent people requires less socially

BOX. WHO ARE THE 40%? *

To broaden the scope of poverty analysis beyond the monetary poverty indicator defined by INSEE, we apply the convention defined by DREES**, that "the less affluent" "are the 40% with the lowest standard of living. This population comprises two subgroups: we refer to "the less affluent" or the "most financially limited" to encompass the entirety of this group, and "people in poverty" when they are below the poverty line (i.e., 14.8% of the population in 2018).

* Source: Lelièvre and Remila (2018) (see below).

** The Directorate for Research, Studies, Assessment and Statistics for health and social services, under the supervision of the Ministry for Solidarity and Health, the Ministry for Labour, Employment and Economic Inclusion, and the Ministry for the Economy, Finance and the Recovery.

demarcated spaces (for example, by following the conventions of the large supermarket chains), but also sometimes maintaining a protective inner circle (for example in the case of cooking workshops or access to a sustainable grocery stores).^{71,72} Thus, the triggering of a first purchase can be facilitated by the presence of organic products in discount stores, which is generally followed by new purchases.⁷³ In a similar way, facilitating access to organic fruit and vegetables sold at lower prices (e.g. solidarity boxes) in retail outlets that show no indication of a particular social class, tends to increase the regular consumption of these products. It also encourages beneficiaries to feel that they can legitimately engage with alternative places such as AMAPs (Association for the maintenance of peasant agriculture).⁶⁴ Accompanying measures that facilitate the overcoming of symbolic and economic boundaries could thus have long-term effects.

To conceptualize and implement the transition, it would be a mistake to assume that less affluent people eat less sustainable diets, that they do not share aspirations of sustainability, or that to improve the sustainability of their diets it is sufficient to "equip" them with knowledge (e.g. cooking workshops, education, information) or economic resources (food vouchers). There is a culture of responsible eating within these groups, constructed both outside and within the dominant cultural frame of reference. A priority is therefore to recognize that low-income groups offer useful values and practices that can enrich the establishment of a sustainable food system and facilitate its implementation. Finally, the focus on low-income groups, while useful for thinking about a fair transition, should not divert attention away from the role of wealthier classes in the transition. It is an oversight that currently no public policy exploits their potential desire and greater economic capacity so as to turn them into drivers of the transition, nor induces greater responsibility. A careful analysis of the experience of the less affluent is therefore key to considering the dietary transition.

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