Sustainable Food Consumption
some contemporary European issues
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1 Introduction

Food has received considerable attention in recent years regarding its sustainability. Food production and distribution have major impacts on the environment in terms of the use of land and resources, pollution and emissions, genetic diversity, etc. Consequences are to be found in the external environment as well as “internally”, in health hazards and the satisfaction of basic needs. It is an area of large significance for social life and welfare – on the supply side as well as on the consumption side. Sustainability issues are on the agenda for food producers and market actors, politicians and regulators, in public discourse and collective mobilisation, and for ordinary people as citizens and as buyers and eaters of food. It has also received considerable attention among experts and scientists of various kinds. A large number and variety of efforts to reduce environmental threats and increase sustainability have been instigated and numerous studies, research programmes and publications have addressed such issues. Food issues have also been prominent in the evolving definition of what ‘sustainability’ means, what should go under the umbrella of sustainability.

This paper will address consumer and consumption aspects of food and sustainability. As commonly found for studies of sustainability, most attention has been directed towards the supply side and related regulatory issues. Consumption appears first of all as a “market” or “demand”, more rarely as action taken on the consumer side. The approach here is to discuss some selected food consumption related issues and dimensions with relevance for sustainability. Several questions can be raised regarding the identification and discussion of relevant issues:

First, what issues and aspects are to be included in the concept of “sustainability”, possibly ranging from the use of natural resources (like land and energy) to social welfare and solidarity? Food and eating are deeply involved in social life and in political and regulatory issues of social equality and welfare. That can make sustainability issues difficult to delimit from all other issues that are not directly commercial. On the other hand, it will not be possible to suggest practical measures without considering social and welfare issues. The idea in this paper is first of all to observe how issues of sustainability are brought up and handled in relation to food consumption, emphasising the social and institutional framing of sustainable food consumption. This will allow not only a discussion of conflicts and implications, but also to problematize the framing of the issues, i.e. the aims and perspectives that are being employed for various relevant issues.

Second, what efforts are to be associated mainly with food consumption and consumers rather than other areas and actors? What are the criteria for this reference to consumption; is it behavioural change at the point of purchase, household activities, or is it initiatives taken by people in their capacity as consumers (political/ethical consumerism)? Instead of choosing one of these positions, the approach is here to see consumption as sets of normatively and institutionally regulated practices associated with procuring, preparing and eating food and opinions and actions taken with reference to such activities. This is outlined in some more detail in the second section of this paper.

Third, knowing that conditions for and ways of understanding food and food consumption are so diverse, how can experiences from initiatives and cases be generalised? In spite of globalisation of markets and technologies and regulatory harmonisation, we know that institutional conditions,
experiences and expectations are, even within a European setting, highly diverse. Food consumption in Italy or Bosnia is simply not the same as in Norway or the UK, nor is “the consumer” the same figure. It is not possible to understand food consumption and consumers in isolation from interrelations with and between particular food provisioning systems, public policies and public discourses. The local/global dimension is as important on the consumption side as it is on the production side. However, sustainability issues often appear in rather different ways from a consumer point of view compared to those of suppliers. For the consumer, food items and issues are often bundled together and embedded, implying that links to sustainability may be difficult to single out and to ascertain. We eat dishes and meals that combine a number of food items with highly diverse characters and origins. This “bundling” is reflected also in marketing strategies where references is often not to particular sources or production methods, but to wider conceptualisations and symbols like a country of origin, organic food, or “naturalness”. These references appear as “good causes”, sometimes with good reasons, sometimes as ulterior motives. Many consumers are well aware of the pitfalls, but it may make it rather difficult to take action. The handling of sustainability in the relationship between suppliers and consumers will also bring up conflicting aims, between producer concerns and consumer concerns, between various dimensions of sustainability, and balancing sustainability with other demands and aims of eating and everyday life.

Fourth, unlike many other items of consumption, reduced total consumption cannot be an aim in the case of food. What kinds of changes are then to be focussed? Food is a basic necessity and overall there is little to gain from reducing consumption in terms of calorie intake. Combating obesity is a matter of eating a few calories less every day, but also about exercising more, consequently to spend more calories. This will save neither the world’s poor nor the environment. There is also another point related to the physiological aspects of food. We ingest food, take it into our bodies. That means that in terms of sustainability, food consumption represents a two-way dynamic, with consumption affecting the environment and a poor environment affecting our health and wellbeing through what we eat. This basic character of food is not limited to physiology, but also has a deep influence on how we conceptualise food. Consumer responses and actions have to be understood within this two-way perspective, where external and internal effects are seen as interconnected. There is not clear distinction between self oriented and other oriented consumer action. Securing natural resources are associated with satisfying needs of food and drink, pollutants affect the physical environment and our bodies, and viable local communities are not “external, but something people are members of. Good treatment of animals is good for humans and animals. That should of course not make us overlook conflicts and effects of social distribution within and across countries and regions of the world.

The paper will outline some selected issues regarding sustainable food consumption; that is issues that are being raised in debates on food with some reference to sustainability. This means that environmental implications are discussed only indirectly and without making judgements about the impacts. Moreover, the point of departure is not one single theoretical or analytical perspective, because the issues being discussed have been analysed using a variety of scientific approaches. It is on the contrary an aim to identify some major standpoints in the debates which, in turn, may reflect different theoretical perspectives. Some important dilemmas and paradoxes involved in debates on sustainable food consumption are outlined. While for example the general debate on sustainability emphasises reduced consumption, what are then the implications of food being a basic necessity for everybody everywhere? Food consumption patterns may be modified in all sorts of ways, but a minimum intake of energy and nutrients is needed. Considering the structure of food provisioning, can
consumers take on responsibility beyond symbolism in an area which is subject to so extensive, complex and strongly regulated divisions of labour along the food chain from primary production to ready-made meals? And what about the conceptualisation of sustainable food as produced on local small farms, are we then talking about improved sustainability, or instead romantic, anti-modernistic currents, - or interest politics?

The selection of issues is quite pragmatic, including a number of issues which have been prominent on the public and political agenda and which also have been addressed in research projects. This means that the list of relevant issues is far from complete and many more could be added.

2 Sustainable consumption – different levels

Three levels are often outlined for the impacts of sustainability concerns on consumption activities:

- substitution without other consequences;
- changing the organisation of own consumption without affecting the level of welfare; and
- reduced consumption and reduced welfare.

The first and “easiest” level indicates changes in our habits in terms of buying the same types of food items with the same qualitative properties, but with a shift towards products with less negative environmental impacts (externally or internally). This is assumed to have little impact on overall consumption patterns or welfare.

Some general reflections can be made initially on substituting conventional food items for items that are more environmentally (and/or socially) sustainable. In the case of food, substitution will in most cases mean purchasing goods that are more expensive, sometimes much more. Being significant for overall household expenses, welfare effects of such substitutions cannot be disregarded. In the following, effects on everyday habits and on economic welfare will be discussed separately. Moreover, swapping from one product to another can only take place if there are relevant and convincing alternatives that are easily available. As will be demonstrated in this paper, availability and properties of the food distribution system are of major importance for understanding sustainable food consumption. There must also be sufficient, comparable information about these alternatives (often concretised as generic and codified labelling). Written, codified labelling is not always relevant or feasible. When buying fresh, not pre-packaged food over the counter represents a very different form of interaction and condition for communication. Significant proportions of food are sold in that way, much more so in some countries than in others. Different types of interaction and communication are associated with different forms of retailing and distribution. Labelling based substitution is usually closely associated with highly differentiated, supermarket based distribution systems providing mainly pre-packaged food. And even if we take labelling as a condition for substitution, the significance for sustainability is often difficult to assess. Numerous labels exist that are being associated with

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1 The debate on the ‘willingness to pay” appears to view the acceptance of higher prices only as a moral issue of taking responsibility as an individual buyer. Food prices will in most cases have moral overtones, with socially formed opinions about what is proper and just, including also significant elements of learning. That means that economic effects and acceptability of prices cannot be kept completely separate.
sustainability in one way or the other, but a majority of them address multiple issues in rather embedded ways and documentation of the claims is in many cases missing.

In practice, substitution is not easy to separate from more involving strategies, strategies with larger impacts on own habits. As will become evident in the following discussion, different approaches to the issues that are presented will generally imply different levels of effort. For example, turning to food items provided via other types of distribution channels may imply organising purchasing activities differently, thus going beyond simple substitution. Substitution (based on selecting certain labels) is associated with distinct forms of production and distribution as well as consumption. Switching to other forms of provisioning is paralleled by organising even consumption activities differently, perhaps even influencing the level of welfare – positively or negatively. However, some aspects or issues related to sustainability seem unavoidably to require major changes on the consumer side, such as eating less meat, which many will see as reduced welfare.

Sustainable consumption is not only about making people do the right thing when they “consume”, it is also related to people themselves making use of their capacity as consumers to influence suppliers and regulators to make their actions more sustainable. This is often referred to as “political” or “ethical consumerism”, where people make use of their purchasing power and actions as consumers to influence societal issues, such as conditions of production or political issues.

Environmental challenges are global and food is an area with significant impact. The questions posed here are not meant to state the impossibility of getting an overview, but to help organising the argument and to improve its realism. Food consumption represents important activities with respect to sustainability and actions taken by people in their capacity as consumers need to be taken into consideration. But these activities cannot be studied in isolation. Consumption needs to be studied as basically social activities, in interaction with an institutional and discursive environment. The issues and examples discussed in this paper are meant to illustrate this point. The levels and dimensions of consumer action will be used to concretise and characterise these efforts.

3 The conceptualisation of food consumption

As already indicated, when discussing sustainability of food consumption, it is important to have a clearer understanding of what is meant not only by sustainability, but also ‘food consumption’ (See also Kjærnes and Holm 2006, (Kjærnes, et al. 2007)). (Kjærnes, et al. 2007)While the notion of the European citizen is still important in the discourse on food regulation, over the last years there have been increasing references to “the consumer”. In several fields of food related policy, consumers are attributed agency and are seen as responsible, through their choices, for a number of societal issues: health, food quality, animal welfare in the agro-business and environmental sustainability. Policy papers are explicitly referring to consumer choice and consumers’ own responsibility through ‘informed choice’ and labelling strategies (EU 2000; Reisch 2004). The widespread usage of the term ‘consumer’ has coincided with neo-liberal precepts, thereby envisaging the consumer as an isolated self-interested individual. Indeed, this kind of consumer has been the model for neo-classical Homo Oeconomicus, an abstract and universal agent, conceived of as a set of preferences constrained by a given budgetary level and linked to an environment defined in terms of the goods available, the
relative prices of these goods, and information made available about them. Such ideas seem, explicitly
or implicitly, to have influenced studies of sustainable consumption. We argue that this model is
insufficient and even misleading for understanding the roles and responsibilities of consumers. It is
evident from several studies of environmental and ethical issues that there are vast variations in
consumption practices – across countries and between social groups. An individual, utilitarian
approach is of little use to analyse such variations, nor is it helpful for understanding the stability and
consistency in food choice often found within national and cultural contexts - or the large-scale shifts
in food choice that also occur. A conception of food consumption understood as socially and
institutionally created sets of practices represents a viable approach to such questions.

Many contemporary theories of consumption suggest that the consumer is far from being a champion
of individualistic forward-looking choices, based on deliberate calculation of self interest. Food
consumption can be fully appreciated as a form of social action only by leaving behind the idea that
such action may be modelled exclusively as a conscious decision at the point of purchase. So as to
avoid conceptualizing consumption as a series of abstract and individualistic decisions, we have to
consider that consumption practices happen within social institutions like the family, work, and the
marketplace and that these practices are themselves institutionalised. By this we mean that there are
predictable societal patterns of behaviour related to food provisioning and consumption, emerging
from social structures, norms and conventions, and formed by the particular contexts and situations
within which consumption takes place. Food represents an intersection between public arenas and the
private sphere, the collective and the individual. Meal structure and cuisine will affect how people do
their food provisioning, but the character of various forms of supply as well as governance structures
will also have significant influence on people’s expectations and actions. Sustainable food
consumption takes place within and with relation to these arenas.

There is a need to start discussing what implications the concept of practice may have for the study of
food consumption. Alan Warde has presented a discussion of consumption as practice, which we see
as a valuable starting point. His suggestion is, that consumption be best understood as embedded in
particular practices and not as a practice in itself (Warde 2005). Whereas much research on food
consumption (and consumption and sustainability) limits its interests to the choice situation, i.e.
basically to market exchange – Warde’s suggestion implies that food consumption must be
understood as a much broader phenomenon to be examined as an integral part of daily life.
Consumption is thus a process whereby “agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether
for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or
ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (ibid, 137).
Consumption is understood as embedded in practice, and practices are constituted outside the
individual. Consumption thus occurs as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular
practices. This notion of practices can therefore account for both social order (emerging from the
coordination and the norms that a practice represents) and individuality (differentiation and

In the context of food, the range of relevant practices may be very different in character and will vary
according to historical circumstance. Eating is something that everybody does – usually several times
every day in a highly routinised manner. It is just something that we ‘normally do’. The normalisation
implies predictability and taken-for-grantedness as well as strong normative regulation (Kjærnes and

2 Warde’s contribution builds partly on the conceptual framework developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1990).
Holm 2007). Still, practices that involve eating are also very diverse. They may, for example, include the practices of making and consuming family meals, of maintaining health, strength and functionality as part of doing other things – work or leisure activities, as well as socialising with others, of pausing and resting, of celebrating, etc. (Gronow 2004). Unlike eating, food procurement and preparation may or may not stand out as particular and significant parts of practices in which the individual is involved (because somebody else can take care of it). This introduces an important issue of division of labour and responsibility. Focus is therefore directed towards the logic of situations where food is purchased, cooked, served, and eaten. It also shifts focus from attitudes and gender, age or social class seen as individual properties to institutionalised practices, and how they shape food and eating. The attention is more on how activity generates wants, rather than vice versa.

This understanding does not exclude influences of socio-demographic or cultural background or of personal skills and interests. There is certainly no determinism, but variation, perhaps also fragmentation, as well as individual flexibility. The point is that this influence takes place within a practice which is already established before the individual enters the scene. This is, of course not deterministic or static. People may and will often challenge or alter practices through their actions, but they will do so with reference to the established practices and the structures which form these practices. Attention is directed towards how groups of people understand a practice, the values to which they aspire, and the procedures they adopt within practices. Social categories will then be socially conditioned rather than representing individual properties. Social differentiation and inequality are not a matter of randomly choosing a lifestyle, but a structurally contingent disposition influenced by economic resources, upbringing, social networks, and cultural codes.

Generally, we have described consumption practices as normalised and highly routinised. But it is important to be aware of processes of change. Following our line of argument, such processes are assumed to be initiated from changes in any of the poles that we have described as well as in the interrelationships between them. In a period of change, links between public attention and mobilisation and individual market behaviour may be important. (Swidler 1986) argues that in some situations routinised practices suddenly become explicit and contested, and routines can intermittently break up. New and alternative, often ideologically justified, sets of practices may be established. These will, however, tend to be gradually routinised, eventually also tacit and taken for granted. It follows from our understanding that organic food consumption (in various forms) will also tend to undergo this kind of routinisation and institutionalisation, rather than remaining as a new kind of more ‘reflexive’ consumption. The practice of recycling has been described in this way.

Practices have a trajectory or path of development, a history. The substantive forms that practices take will always be conditional upon the institutional arrangements characteristic of time, space and social context. The focus is directed towards the routine, ordinary, collective, conventional nature of much consumption, but also towards the fact that practices are internally differentiated, depending on situational factors (lunch at work, Sunday family dinner, snack with friends) as well as social distinctions. Focus is on use of goods rather than (only) on acquisition. In the area of food, attention is then directed towards menu planning, food preparation, and conduct of meals in different social contexts, which also form an important background for the selection of specific products in a shopping situation. In this paper, however, we will not discuss the role of social norms related to eating any further (for more on this topic, see Kjærnes & Holm, 2007). Keeping the perspective of consumption
as sets of practices, we will instead address how institutional contexts influence our routine everyday dealings with food.

Purchases form the most direct connection between commercial systems of provisioning and what we do outside the market sphere. It is one act in a chain of decisions on both the consumer and the supply side. We can only purchase what is available in the shops. The purchase situation and the selection of items on offer are strongly influenced by the character of the distribution and retailing system, whether it is a supermarket, a small shop, or a farmers’ market – which, in turn, is influenced by the structure and character of production and distribution. Purchases are of course not completely predetermined, as commercial actors do what they can to make people select their products instead of those from their competitors. And people will not buy anything - indiscriminately. Consumption practices are not to be reduced to acquisition and most certainly not to the choice of products or to commercial consumption, which is only one way in which goods and services are obtained for the purposes of use (Harvey, et al. 2001) 45). Eating and cooking practices represent an appropriation of the purchased goods that, in turn, will influence what we want to buy. A parent will shop for pizza, soft drinks and ingredients for a cake for her/his child’s birthday party, most of us stock up with bread, coffee, jam and milk for breakfast, while the gastronome will hunt down a special oil or an item that most people haven’t even heard of, intending to spend a day in the kitchen preparing for a very special meal.

Patterns of food consumption vary in time and space, shaped by, and in turn shaping, the specific context formed by the food provisioning system. This is why we argue that food consumption should be analysed as processes of institutionalisation. The ways in which consumption is institutionalised - the daily routines, the directions and priorities of food consumption, as well as the responsibility, power and resources of ‘the consumer’ – are not static preconditions, but are structures which form the ways consumers’ actions may influence the provisioning system. The socially embedded consumer role forms the foundation for individual and collective action and mobilisation, as well as influencing how consumers appear in broader political alignments.

Instead of analysing markets and politics as a matter of an external ‘context’ our analysis focuses on institutionalised relationships between societal actors. Interrelations influence on and are part of the institutionalisation of consumption. We need to consider the relationships between consumers and the provisioning system and market actors, as well as interrelations with the state and public authorities and, more indirectly, interrelations between the market and the state. Together they form what can be called ‘triangular affaires’ (Kjærnes, Harvey and Warde, 2007) (see Figure 1), characterised by particular divisions of responsibilities, relations of power, as well as forms and levels of trust. The understanding of the triangular affaires is built up by characterising the poles as well as the complex direct and indirect relationships between them. Each pole of the triad of relationships has its own internal organisation, an organisation that varies considerably if we look at different countries and regions. Consumers of food, for example, are organised in households in ways that vary between countries. Provisioning systems, including the way retail shops sell food to consumers, differ greatly. And finally, state regulatory and political systems are strongly contrasted between countries. Differences in the organisation of the poles internally are developed in interdependency with the other poles of the relational complex. It should be emphasised that the concept of ‘triangular affaires’ is an analytical device. The schematisation and simplifications are deliberate. So too are the exclusions from the analysis. If we were to do full justice to the complexity of relationships, many other societal actors
would be involved, and there would be a much more differentiated picture of different levels, micro- to macro-, of relational configurations.

**Figure 1** The ‘triangular affaires’ of food consumption

Sustainable food consumption and related issues will partly refer to such triangular affaires as described by the food sector in a country or region, partly create their own sets of institutionalised relationships. Such relationships will be highly decisive for how organic production, consumption and regulation are organised and framed. For example, organic food is sold mainly from ‘reform shops’ in Germany and from the major supermarket chains in the UK (Torjusen, et al. 2004). Supermarkets in the UK are competing on a range of issues, including organic food, while the German supermarkets compete mainly on price. Many German consumers are, on their part, highly sceptical towards what the conventional system can deliver, while the British are generally more confident in that respect (Poppe and Kjærnes 2003).

Issues of sustainability in relation to food emerge in our everyday lives in many different ways. But it is with the purchase that we are most often encountered with such issues. For food, environmental issues are first of all related to modes of production and transportation; ranging from the use of pesticides and fertilizers, use of water, deforestation, and energy required for meat production to the distance and mode of transport. Contamination and energy are at the focus of attention, but they are very often socially bundled together with other issues, such as animal welfare, social rights, the viability of local communities, food quality, etc. Whether food production is sustainable or not have impacts on the physical and social environment as well as on the human body. In-depth studies of food consumption demonstrate that from the consumers point of view, such effects are often combined in complex ideas of ‘the healthy’ versus ‘the unhealthy’, ‘the natural’ versus ‘the artificial’, ‘the good’ versus ‘the bad’ (Halkier 2001; Holm and Kildevang 1996). Consequently, people develop strategies addressing these issues, which ensure that the foods brought into the household are ‘clean’ or ‘pure’ (Holm 2003). Symbolically and practically, this is often combined into ‘organic’ food production, but with close association to social mobilisation around ‘slow food’, ‘food miles’, ‘local food’, ‘fair trade’, and ‘farmer’s markets’. All of this is for ordinary people first of all a matter of buying foods with particular labels, from particular food suppliers, or from particular shops. ‘Organic food’ is therefore not a stable and uniform category, but strongly dependent on the situations in which it is produced, presented and used.
Following from this argument, purchase cannot be seen in isolation. Acquisition raises issues of division of labour, relations between the household and other institutions and between members of the household. Still, purchase represents a social context that has to be considered. First, what is available? And how are the various food items sold (type of shop, presentation, price differentiation, etc.)? Also a wider set of interrelations have to be considered, for example, what is the societal distribution of responsibility for environmental and ethical issues? Is this a matter of state policy or is it mainly dealt with on the market via commercialisation? Is it considered to be a private responsibility for ‘the consumer’? Is there any collective mobilisation – and does this mobilisation address consumption issues? The answers to such questions may be taken for granted within a given setting, a given set of triangular affairs, but when looking across for example countries or periods we expect considerable variation.

Sustainable consumption also refers other practices than purchase. Disposal is of course a result of consumption which raises its own set of questions and issues. Food preparation normally requires water and energy, limited resources in some places, but for the rich Western consumer hardly a major contributor to the overall over-consumption of energy. But in this discussion of sustainability food preparation and eating should probably be seen first of all as important for determining and framing, practically and normatively, the food items that we acquire. Detailed and often overlooked social norms regulating eating practices are important for the structure of meals and dishes and thus for example for the relative proportions of animal versus vegetable products and the degree of processing. However, such norms are not static. Sustainable consumption is a matter of politics and social mobilization. Studies of political and ethical consumerism indicate that in many cases there is a link between individualised ‘mobilisation’ in the market in the form of political or ethical consumption, collective mobilisation and public attention (Micheletti, et al. 2003). This may also be the case with regard to the development of sustainable food consumption.

4 Choosing local over globally sourced food

The first issue with reference to sustainable food consumption to be presented here is that of the distance between producers and consumers of food. Compared to other aspects of food and sustainability, this is a relatively limited and well-defined issue while, at the same time, clearly illustrating how food consumption is part of and depends on the character of food provisioning systems. Transport is important for environmental sustainability in that it increases the use of fuel, emissions of CO₂, and pollutants, has effects on the global distribution of food resources, etc. As such, the transport of food constitutes a major element of the sustainability of food consumption. The questions are how far, by what means, and in what quantities (grains must be more important than spices). As such, transport distance thus introduces a spatial dimension to the question of sustainable food consumption. As will be illustrated in this section, it is difficult to isolate distance and transport from other aspects of origin and organisation of supply chains. The provenance of food items is a heavily discussed and politicised issue. This is, in part, a question of distance between production and consumption, but it is being brought up in close association with in a number of efforts to promote food produced locally, from a special region or a country. Still, initiatives to produce such labels of authenticity (like PDO and PDI) and traceability schemes rarely seem to make direct reference to the
distances that food travels. So the questions are, first, how the issue of transport distances appears, alone or as part of broader themes and, second, how this refers and is of relevance to food consumption and people as buyers and eaters of food.

Global trade in food is very old. Fish and salt have been transported over long distances for nearly a millennium. Inter-continental markets for tea, coffee, sugar, grains, oils, and spices were established centuries ago, in many cases governed through centralised stock exchanges where sourcing fluctuates with outputs, prices and quality. The markets for grains and other major food items and the implied division of labour have been constitutive for the relationship between states and continents as well as for relationships within states and public policies.

Contemporary changes are characterised by more food being subject to global trade, such as more kinds of fruits and vegetables and larger proportions of meat, and changing forms of transportation. In order to understand such changes, it is important to recognise how transports are involved in overall shifts in the organisation and technology of food provisioning. As illustrated by a report on “food miles” in British food distribution, the logistics of current food provisioning involves a large number of steps, and transport often takes place between many of these steps (Watkiss 2005). Allegations are first of all directed towards increased transports of food by air, but in terms of quantities of food, transport on roads contributes much more to energy use and emissions. The report finds that the most significant contributor to CO2 emissions is domestic transport on roads, from imports or suppliers via hubs and out to the shops. The second most important contribution comes from people using cars for shopping, enhanced by supermarkets being situated at the margins of cities and residential areas.

Sourcing can also be discussed by following the provisioning of one food item. The production of hamburgers has been described in detail: To begin with, feed for animal production involves complex, globalised provisioning systems. Animals are increasingly transported several times – over long distances. The meat will be brought from the place of slaughter through steps of storage and processing to central retailer hobs and then out to the shops or fast-food outlets. But this is characteristic not only for the infamous hamburger business. Pigs used to produce high-quality cured ham typical for a local region can be reared far away from that region, where the piglets are bought from yet another faraway place. Fish caught in the North Sea is brought to China for processing (because of lower labour costs) and then back to a Norwegian processor, and out to European supermarkets. Seasonality is almost done away with in European retailing through complex systems of global sourcing, where integrated efficiency can ensure the much wanted freshness that is part of contemporary quality expectations. The effects on fuel use and emissions may be significant. But it may be difficult to find a clear indication, a starting point. A simple mark of the place of origin cannot reflect all of this complexity and labels can easily be totally misleading.

As indicated in the introduction, there are considerable variations in the discursive (and institutional) framing of the question of reduced transport distances. Often, but not always, it is closely linked to provenance, but the framing is quite diverse. In Scandinavia, distance has often been understood as a matter of domestic sourcing versus imports, while studies from the south of Europe tend to focus strongly on the local or regional place of origin. The debate in the UK seems share this focus, but much more strongly framed by the dominance of the British supermarket chains and their integrated

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1 Even within the discussion of sustainability, there are food related issues regarding provenance which do not problematise distance as such, like for instance fair trade.
supply chains with extensive global sourcing. What we see is first of all a positioning that reflects important (but not necessarily dominant) features of the food sector in the various countries. Actual transport distances and means of transportation will have very different meanings and significance within these different kinds of distribution systems and their discursive and political contexts.

So how can transport distance as a characteristic of provisioning systems and involved in a variety of social causes be of relevance for what people do as consumers? Choosing food items according to few “food miles” can easily be categorised as substitution. To a British or Norwegian consumer, a potato from a neighbourhood farmer and one produced in South America may not be different in use, perhaps not even in taste, and efforts involved in swapping may be insignificant. But everything else will probably be different, in terms of environmental impacts as well as the distribution of power and economic consequences. Consumer demands related to transport distances may not have large implications on the consumer side, but may produce major and deep effects because they address the organisation of food provisioning. While not necessarily threatening to our mode of food consumption, addressing issues of sourcing may definitely challenge dominant modes of food provisioning.

To the consumer, the chooser of for example potatoes, the availability of alternatives regarding source and “food mileage” will generally depend on domestic and local production structures and resources as well as forms of trade and retailing. The dominant agenda over the last couple of decades has been to develop regulatory frames that enhance trade between countries and continents, as a way to increase global prosperity and wealth. It is this that forms the main backdrop for the growing thematisation of provenance, linked to support to domestic or local producers and processors. Sourcing is brought up as an issue related to wider issues of social, cultural, geographical and economic importance. It is therefore difficult to find isolated efforts on the consumer side to reduce the use of fuel for transporting food. In many cases sourcing constitutes one aspect of alternative products or distribution systems, for example organic food, “slow food”, “local food”, food sold at “farmers’ markets” or through box schemes. There are also numerous examples (Austria, United States...) of directly collaborative efforts between local farmers and local consumers. With its limited geographical scope and, importantly, the reduced complexity of the supply, the implicit effect is considerable reduction in the distance that the food has “travelled”. Sourcing will therefore have a range of ideological and political connotations intertwined with arguments related to sustainability.

From a consumer perspective, the implications and scope of behavioural change will depend on how the mileage issue is reflected in not only product information, but also product diversity, quality, price, and mode of distribution. And these issues must be studies specifically and locally.

People’s concerns for the increasing distance that our food travels should not be overlooked, such as reactions to the tendency to move processing (far) away from the places of production and consumption. But growing references to place of origin in the marketing of food must be understood within the very complicated picture indicated above, where other reasons for action are probably at least as significant. There are also a number of conflicts embedded in these strategies, first of all related to what they may imply in terms of protectionism, preventing for example competitors from third world countries. Moreover, local production is far from always more environmentally

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4 Typically, the UK and British retailers are at the forefront in developing new labelling initiatives. A label on food miles is being discussed (see Watkiss, 2005)
sustainable, like when tomatoes are produced almost all year around in Norway, depending on large quantities of fossil fuel. Finally, local sourcing alone cannot feed the populations in many regions and countries of Europe or the world. London was developed under the condition that food could be sourced from faraway regions. And is intensive animal farming in the Netherlands more environmentally sustainable than procuring meat from extensive farming in South America?

Taken together, where food is produced and processed is always of significance, economically, socially, politically – and environmentally. Whether this gives meaning at the point of purchase will vary, depending on the area/country of purchase, the kind of product and the type of retailing. Some countries and regions are more self sufficient than others, the provisioning systems of some items are more complex and globally sourced than others. There are strong tendencies towards standardisation, centralisation and global sourcing, producing items that are more or less anonymous as to where and how it has been produced (and transported). But there is also increasing focus on provenance, traceability and local sourcing. This section has illustrated that what people buy and eat may have significant effects on food production and provisioning, in some cases requiring little effort or loss of welfare on the consumer side, in other cases much more.

Two sets of questions emerge from this. The first set is related to whether this latter tendency has any environmental significance beyond its symbolic value, in quantitative, absolute terms and relative to other aspects of sustainable food consumption. The second set of questions has to do with interaction between consumers and provisioning systems:

- What are the realistic and concrete options that shoppers have in terms of reducing transportation?
- How can they know? In particular, how are transport and food miles handled in food advertising and labelling of foods involving complex supply chains?
- What is the relative importance of what people do as consumers – in their selection between goods as well as their contribution via the means of transport to/from shops?
- What is the relative importance of “food miles” referring to imported goods and national logistics of food distribution?
- What is the more strategic and political role of consumption and consumers in the case of “food miles”?

5 Organic food

To Western consumers, organic food has come to represent the clearest alternative for people who wish to make their own food consumption more sustainable. From a start among very limited and strongly ideologically motivated groups of farmers and households, the issue is now represented by a strong, global sector, regulated and partly integrated in conventional provisioning systems.

“Organic” often refers to a wide range of issues and its meaning has changed over time. All along, the use of fertilizers and pesticides has been central. To consumers, this is important in terms of effects on the physical environment as well as on the body. But, in addition to that, organic food has come to represent an alternative form of provisioning in terms of animal welfare, genetic diversity, sustainable land use, viable local communities, fair trade, and other issues. The initiation of organic production
has been described as much in terms of a social movement as a type of production or, more recently, as serving a particular consumer “segment”. Many producers as well as consumers tend to focus on even more holistic, but also less precise aspects, such as “naturalness” (see eg. Torjusen et al, 2005).

In recent years the market for organic food has changed considerably. First of all, the volumes of production and the size of the market have increased. There is more diversity in terms of product ranges and processing as well as in forms of distribution. Reliability has been improved through certification and labelling schemes, which has also implied a stronger codification of what “organic food” means, expressed in technical, measurable terms (as illustrated by the OrganicHACCP project). In spite of this, organics has a highly diverse status and significance across Europe, varying in terms of availability and modes of distribution as well as ideological orientation. Organic food is sometimes defined very strictly, representing an alternative, relatively isolated mode of provisioning and distribution with strong ideological overtones. In other cases, organic food is part of very pragmatic and commercial, but also strongly monitored, segmentation strategies of big supermarket chains. Organics is then an alternative choice at the product level rather than embedded in a particular and dedicated lifestyle and shopping strategy. The products are in this latter case more or less the same as the conventional ones in terms of variety and level of processing, and sourcing can be global (re The New Yorker). A third, even less demanding, position is found in those who focus directly on environmental effects of food production, where certain, less intensive forms of production are seen as “almost organic”. Examples here are sheep rearing in Norway and olive production in Southern Italy. Such arguments are, with rather variable foundations, widespread among producers and consumers alike.

The definition of organic food has been subject to intense conflict in recent years, often revolving around the issue of “conventionalisation”. Many proponents claim that the term should be delimited to outputs satisfying very strict criteria, including production, processing, sourcing, social issues, and form of distribution. Counter-arguments have been that the strictness prevents growth of the organic market. With more lax criteria sales through conventional channels and a much larger scale of organic food can be obtained, implying also larger environmental benefits. The involvement of people as consumers will be very different in these two modes.

The first case emphasises mutual dependence and obligations between producers and consumers, usually expressed in personal interaction and local networks. This is also being associated with a much wider set of household practices linked to sustainable consumption. Sometimes even wider concerns are involved, like links to the development of local communities. As such, this mode often implies that the organisation of consumption is affected. But implications are not necessarily far-reaching, as exemplified by the growing success of many box schemes that deliver ordered food on the doorstep. Both the selection and distribution are adjusted according to wishes of the buyers.

The second case of supplying and distributing via conventional channels implies quite different kinds of interrelations. On the one hand, the selection will make choice and also use easier. But there will, on the other hand, be much larger imbalances of power and information. Public responsibility is framed as a matter of “a conscious choice”, separated from citizen engagement and collective mobilisation. In order to obtain that, it is necessary to offer stable supplies all year around (requiring long-distance sourcing) and products which fit into contemporary styles of eating, including for example organic coke and frozen pizza. This approach challenges the meaning of organic food,
including ideas of “freshness” and “naturalness”, but the outcomes are in some countries, like in Denmark and the UK, that large proportions of the populations buy organic food items “always” or “sometimes”. On the consumer side, it corresponds with the idea of substitution, namely that no major changes of lifestyle are involved.

These two forms represent very different conditions and expectations. They are not easily combined. For example, just scaling up from what has here been described as alternative production may imply problems for the producer to meet retailer requirements and also, from a consumer perspective, reduced transparency and predictability.

Studies of organic consumption seem to present a mixture of these perspectives (see for example (Getz and Shreck 2006; Granquist 2002; Grunert, et al. 2000; James and Milton 1993; Magnusson, et al. 2001; Michelsen 2001; Torjusen, et al. 2004). Small-scale studies of local initiatives often focus on the first perspective while large-scale studies, including most EU funded projects, tend to emphasise the second. Placing these perspectives and studies into our categorisation of levels of change, it is the supermarket based “choice” of organic alternatives that seems to fit best with an idea of substitution. The buyer can select organic varieties intermittently or always, including some product categories, but not others. The more encompassing and demanding concept of organics will often require more efforts on the consumer side, both in terms of changing to a different place and kind of shopping (reform shops, farmer’s markets, on-farm sales) and expectations of coherence and dedication, not only in shopping, but also in food preparation and eating (different/fewer varieties and seasonality will influence the kinds of produce on offer and fresh foods and lower degrees of processing will imply more efforts to be put into cooking, perhaps even storage).

It must be emphasised that only rarely do these forms appear as clear options within a given setting. The market shares for organic food are highly variable across Europe and so is the political support and public attention paid to organic production. Moreover, while changes in countries like the UK, the Netherlands and Denmark seem to represent shifts from intensive, conventional farming and supply towards certified organic production sold to a large degree via supermarkets, organics in countries like Austria and Germany often seems to represent alternative provisioning systems, including sales via special shops. In a country like Hungary, organic production is developed mainly to serve wealthy export markets in Western Europe. And particular conditions characterising a protected agricultural sector are important to explain why the organic production and market shares are very low in Norway. Generally, consumption of organically produced food is growing in Europe, including countries like Hungary and Norway. But the development is far from even and steady.

6 Purchasing to support good practice: the case of farm animal welfare

In contrast to the question of organics that will often affect cooking and eating patterns, there are also issues associated with sustainable food consumption that may be linked mainly to the purchases as such. We are talking about issues associated with the ways in which the food is produced and distributed, but which are not directly linked to the selection or quality of the food as such. We might therefore say that this is first of all a matter of using purchases to influence social, political and
economic conditions without other consequences on consumption practices than what is implied by sometimes paying a higher price. As for the other issues discussed here, such practices are influenced by the character of the distribution system, distinguishing mainly between supermarket based distribution and labelling as the key, on the one hand, and alternative distribution where product labelling is less central. In the following we will concentrated on labelling of products sold via supermarkets, as this has dominated on the agenda and is also most extensively studied.

As indicated in the introduction, sustainability has come to include a range of ethical issues and “good causes”. One example is animal welfare. In recent years, concerns for the welfare of farm animals have emerged as an issue on the public, partly also political agenda in many European countries. But in this case there are also more particular reasons, related to new ways of understanding what good animal rearing means. From a focus on animal health and production measures, there has been a growing recognition of animals as sentient beings. To some people, bad welfare is being associated with intensive, large-scale farming. To others, modernisation is viewed more positively, providing technological improvements and knowledge for better stockmanship. What makes this issue relevant within the context of this paper, however, is that welfare conditions for farm animals are being linked to what people do as consumers of food, influencing negatively by over-focussing on low prices, positively by demanding animal based foods based on good animal treatment. This shift is promoted by or reflected in new policy initiatives, mobilisation and public debates, as well as marketing efforts. These issues have recently been addressed in many publications (see e.g (Bennett 1997a; Bennett and Blaney 2002; Bennett 1995; Bennett 1997b; Berg 2002; Blokhuis, et al. 2003; Bock and van Huik 2007; Buller and Morris 2003; Franklin 1999; Harper and Henson 2001; Hughes 1995; Kaufer 2004; Kjærnes 2005; Kjærnes and Lavik 2007; Kjærnes, et al. 2005; Kjærnes 2007; Kjørstad 2005; Korthals 2001; Lea and Worsley 2001; Miele and Parisi 2001; Nibert 1994; Risan 2003; Roe and Marsden 2007; Roex and Miele 2005; Rollin 1995; Vialles 1994) and through a series of EU-funded projects, the most ambitious one being Welfare Quality (www.welfarequality.net).

The focus on the role of consumers can be said to reflect a shift in the governance of farm animal welfare, changing from being mainly the responsibility of producers, monitored by vets according to public regulations. It used to be a rather closed field, dominated by technocratic, productivist approaches. Few people had insight into the treatment of animals on the farm, during transport or, in particular, in abattoirs. The opening up that we have seen in recent years has far from replaced the former approaches completely, but social mobilisation, consumer engagement and new expertise seem to have introduced some new questions and also new solutions.

Also pushing in new directions is the restructuring and redirection of focus in the food market, with increasing emphasis on quality differentiation and segmentation strategies. A range of aspects, sometimes including even animal treatment, are being addressed in schemes and labelling programmes. Looking across Europe, however, there are very few schemes and labels which concentrate on farm animal welfare as a separate issue. Most often this constitutes an integrated element of meat quality, a place of origin, or organic schemes. We also find marketing initiatives addressing some special aspect of animal welfare, such as treatment during transport. The documentation and monitoring of the accountability of such marketing initiatives are very variable. In addition, animal welfare schemes are increasingly becoming part of retailer branding strategies and corporate social responsibility, meant to improve the credibility of the company. The importance of
such strategies is growing. This may have large implications on demands placed on producers and suppliers, but they are not opening up for consumer choice between alternatives from the shelf.\(^5\)

Public opinion surveys indicate widespread concern for the treatment of farm animals. But the understanding of farm animal welfare and how to improve it among ordinary people is often found to be quite different from that of farmers and animals scientists. This is not necessarily an expression of general scepticism towards expert knowledge, but seems instead to reflect different ways of conceptualising what a good animal life means. While the association between food purchases and the standard of animal welfare is increasingly acknowledged, the proportions making such connections are still quite limited. To the degree that people are engaged as consumers, many tend to emphasise “naturalness” expressed through less intensive forms of production. Naturalness is expected to be good for the animal and good for human health, perhaps also giving better taste. The links made between animals and food are very broad and, for those who wish “to do good”, many people go for species or regions which are associated with more extensive farming, such as sheep, or special modes of production, such as organic farming.

In some countries we can also find more explicit market oriented activism addressing particular welfare issues, such as in the cases of eggs and broiler chicken, veal production, using special high-output breeds of cattle, etc. This kind of political consumerism is often closely associated with collective mobilisation and consumer activism will to a large degree depend on what is on the agenda of NGO’s and is getting attention in the news media. On the other hand, in some regions of Europe, especially in the Scandinavian countries, there is widespread consensus that farm animal welfare is a non-competitive issue and standards should be raised first of all by state initiated efforts – in collaboration with the agricultural industry. It should also be noticed that expectations of state involvement is found in the whole of Europe, partly to establish and enforce minimum standards, partly to ensure the accountability of market based initiatives, including assurance schemes and labelling programmes.

Looking across Europe, we find tendencies of distinctions between embedded and more disembedded strategies. On the one hand, animal welfare is part of an encompassing concept of food quality, including characteristics of the purchased food item as well as social issues and interrelations. On the other hand, we find animal welfare as part of differentiating strategies in supermarket-based provisioning systems, where labels are at the focus of attention and consumers are encouraged to select between relatively similar kinds of items. While some are backed up by documentation and monitoring schemes, others have a more immediate marketing purpose. Products are differentiated by certain particular quality aspects and price. These aspects are often based on marketing research, selecting those aspects that the segment of more “demanding” consumers with a bigger purse would like.

Taken together, what we see is that while good animal welfare has emerged as an additional “selection criterion” for food, both marketing and consumer strategies very rarely presents this as a separate issue. It is embedded in wider conceptualisations of good food and good food production in terms of gustative quality and/or ethical and sustainability considerations. The idea of the consumer making

\(^5\) It should be noticed that the best known market based initiative to improve animal welfare, namely eggs from barn and free-range hens, seems to be rather contested in terms of effects on animal welfare and animal health. The interpretation of these forms of production is also quite variable across Europe.
rationally based priorities between product properties does not really fit with studies of (food) consumption and how it evolves. One of the lessons from studying this particular case of “ethical consumerism” or “sustainable food consumption” is that it is important to understand the social, political and economic aspects involved in such embedding processes, both on the supply side, in politics and on the consumer side. There also seems to be an interesting dynamic between these arenas.

7 Reducing the consumption of meat

7.1 Meat pushing, increased economic welfare and environmental effects

Meat and other food items of animal origin generally have a high status in our food cultures, as reflected in the central position that meat has in the structure of meals, in more ritualistic meals and celebrations, and in the conceptualisation of what good and proper food is. This high status was reinforced with the agricultural revolution taking place at the end of the 19th century, supported also by the emerging nutritional science focussing on energy, protein – and meat. The high status of meat became reflected within mass consumption especially in association with the growing levels of economic welfare (and lower relative price levels) after World War II. In spite of the growing acknowledgement of nutritional problems associated with these dietary patterns, with high proportions of fat and animal protein, the status does not seem to have been significantly challenged. In some countries, however, the food safety crises, and the mad cow disease in particular, did influence the consumption of meat. There were large-scale shifts in the short term, and some groups have retained these more sceptical attitudes, with effects mainly on the eating of red meats. The demand for white meat, especially poultry, has been growing steadily, mostly unaffected by intermittent attention towards threats associated with the bird flu.6

We can here see a meat oriented everyday food culture emerging in close association with the development of an animal oriented provisioning system in Europe, supported also by various policy measures. Animal production in Europe, especially in the North, is generally associated intensive, often large-scale farming, based on cheap fodder, partly supplied overseas. For some countries, meat production turned into a large export oriented industry with big economic impacts. In other countries, the meat and dairy industries have represented a powerful lobby for protection and economic support to agriculture. These issues have been central to the development of agricultural policies at the EU level, especially as reflected in the Common Agricultural Policy.

The polluting effects of intensive farming have been acknowledged for a long time, and measures have been implemented to reduce emissions from pig farming, to control the use of medicines and growth-promoting substances, reduce the use of pesticides, etc. Such efforts are often controversial because of their economic costs, but after negotiations some results have been obtained, even though some would

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6 Many have pointed to the paradox that while people are concerned about animal welfare in industrial meat production, with broiler chicken and eggs as generally the most problematic in people’s minds, this is at the same time what is in most demand. Influences on trends in eating patterns are complex, and what appears as a paradox may be associated with tendencies pushing in other directions, like reduced prices, convenience and nutritional considerations. Moreover, links between public opinions and food consumption practices are far from evident and may even be opposed.
say they are far from sufficient. Responses on the consumer side, often in association with concerns for human health, have played a role here.

However, and this is the main point here, most of these measures are directed at reforming existing forms of production, to some degree even consumption. With the vocabulary used in the introduction, we could say that they are aiming at substitution with no major threats to what kinds of food items that are produced and eaten. What is now coming up in various studies of sustainable food provisioning, however, is that the most significant effect on environmental sustainability, as measured for example by CO2 emissions, is from the production of meat – as such. We have known for a long time that in terms of using natural resources, a lot is lost by letting vegetable food go through an animal. This has been counteracted first of all by increased efficiency in the production of crops. But recent studies make more direct attacks on meat production and consumption. Put even more strongly, meat production is the most important contributing factor to the unsustainability of food in Western countries. The potential economic, social and cultural impacts are large. So far, nobody seem to have launched broad campaigns arguing for people to reduce their consumption of meat or in other ways tried to counteract forces that promote meat consumption. Even the crises over the last decade have focused on safety problems and animal welfare (and issues of trustworthiness) rather than addressing the impacts of meat eating on environmental sustainability.

The high consumption of meat and other animal products in Western countries is taking up a large proportion of the world’s vegetable food resources. This may change in the coming years. The introduction of biofuels derived from corn, grains and sugar makes competition over land and food much tougher. We have already seen popular protests against increasing grain prices. While protection of grain for food may become politically necessary, feed prices may increase considerably, also making meat more expensive. This indirect effect of environmental concerns may thus, in turn, imply reduced levels of meat consumption. Regulation via higher meat prices will, however, also have consequences in terms of social inequalities.

Eating meat is strongly associated with welfare and standard of living in Europe. It is therefore difficult to imagine that the majority of Europeans will see a reduction in their meat consumption as a mere substitution. Yet, changing the relative proportions of meat, vegetables and staples is not a big deal in terms of practical efforts. The grammar of a meal (meat, potatoes/bread and vegs) does not need to be changed. The growing popularity of ethnic dishes, like curries, may make it even easier. The normative status of meat, promoted supply side factors, may seem as the major obstacle. The level of welfare and social status associated with eating is for large proportions of the population associated with ample amounts of meat. This is opposed only by some well educated groups (and more women than men). There has been little politicisation of the overall levels of meat consumption and no studies or initiatives seem to have been identified which address such issues explicitly. What has dominated is the generally much more private strategy of completely dropping meat from the menu. It is also in these groups that we first of all find the vegetarians.

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7 While ruminants can utilise grass and other cellulose sources, their feed is usually supplemented with concentrates, like grains and soy beans, and the conversion rates is generally much lower than for poultry and pigs. Contrary to what is often believed, it is therefore not given which species are most environmentally sustainable. That will depend on the kind of production.

8 Replacing meat with fish is relatively simple from a consumption point of view, especially in places where fish is already a significant part of the diet. Fish is also generally claimed to have better nutritional properties than meat. But such a replacement may be only a partial solution, as the world resources of fish for human consumption and as fodder for the fish farming industry are being depleted.
7.2 Vegetarianism and veganism

The concept of vegetarianism is based on a highly mixed set of ideas and quite varied practices. People may abstain from eating special kinds of meat, meats altogether, or even all products of animal origin, practiced generally, on particular days or in special periods of the year. Vegetarianism is usually used to characterise those who do not eat meat of any kind, at least most of the time, but who do eat for instance eggs and dairy products. Vegans, on the other hand, decline to consume any product of animal origin, for some including even hides used for shoes etc.

Restrictions on meat eating are well known from early on in history, first as religiously justified practices. Even though the association with religion still plays a role today, the contemporary vegetarian movement in Europe may to a large extent be traced back to the 19th century, when ideas emerged, especially in Germany, of vegetarianism as good for the body and for personal discipline. From the 1960s and 70s, ideas of animal rights led to resistance against keeping animals in captivity and killing them for human usage. More recently, conditional arguments have been added, making meat eating dependent on the ways in which animals have been treated and slaughtered, whether the animals have been treated well and not suffered. The effects of treatment on animal suffering are often being interlinked with effects on the human body. Some also refer to arguments related to the use of global resources, such as those described in the previous section. Moreover, we should not overlook vegetarianism associated with religious convictions - within and outside the Christian domain. The multitude of justifications is reflected in highly varied ways in which vegetarianism is practiced. Sometimes there are very practical or social reasons for not always following the dietary restrictions. But the rationality for dropping meat from the menu often combines this with highly personal, sometimes quite emotional motives. Meat, and especially raw, bloody meat, becomes repulsive. While seemingly a highly personal, embodied reaction, it is possible to link such responses to deeply rooted cultural divisions between humans and animals in modern Western societies. Live animals are brought through an institutionalised process of “de-animation” in order to be made edible. Responses of repulsion may indicate that this process is brought to the fore. This is also symbolised by the shifting wording in several languages; ‘pigs’ are turn into ‘pork’ and ‘calves’ into ‘veal’. In many cases, therefore, such reactions are being subdued by eating products where their meat (or animal) origins are better concealed than they are when serving a bloody steak.

These more recent ideas may be associated with a politicisation of meat eating, especially in countries like the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. Even in these countries, where the proportions of vegetarians are highest, the numbers are still relatively low (around 6-8 per cent) and limited to certain segments of the population. In many other European countries, the numbers of people dropping meat from their menu are stable at a very low level (1-3 per cent of the population).

It is of course perfectly possible to compose nutritious and tasty non-meat meals. However, in contrast to a reduction of meat consumption, totally omitting meat from the diet implies a range of obstacles, in particular for those who make reservations against all kinds of animal products. As the “grammar” of European meals is built around meat as the central item on the plate (with fish as an alternative), a vegetarian diet will require either products or dishes that can serve as meat substitutes (like nut burgers) or a different kind of meal structure. This introduces issues of availability, cooking skills,
knowledge of nutrition, and taste. Often it is embedded in an “alternative” lifestyle altogether (as mentioned also with regard to organic food). Increasing popularity of vegetarianism (and even veganism) may, however, gradually change all of that. Studies of vegetarians and vegans (which are numerous) have tended to focus on personal, emotional and cultural (sometimes political) aspects, while such processes of normalisation and institutionalisation, and also of influences on conventional supply and eating patterns, seem to be missing.

8 Food provisioning, consumer influence and trust

Sustainability issues make links between what people do as buyers and eaters of food, on the one hand, and food provisioning, on the other. Modes of provisioning are generally associated also with quite distinct types of interrelations between the supply side and consumers. The character of these relations is of importance for discussing the role of consumers in terms of influence and trust. There is no direct relationship between influence and trust, but both aspects are important in order to understand the degrees and ways in which people get involved in food sustainability in their capacity as consumers.

Consumer distrust in food has emerged as a pressing issue on the political agenda over the last decade or so. Many have tried to understand this, with a variety of approaches and explanations, most of them concentrating on what is happening to consumer preferences, risk perception, and responses to media “scare”. But if you look at pan-European public opinion poll data, there are systematic variations in levels of trust which cannot be attributed either to universal distrust among consumers, or to their inability to understand or evaluate risk. We have to look elsewhere than individualistic explanations. There is obviously something distinctive about each country; but it cannot be some sort of national character, since levels of trust also vary significantly over time.

Mostly people want access to food which is safe, nutritious, gives fair value for money, is consistent, tasty, etc. Trust could be seen as an expectation, a practical confidence, that other relevant actors in the food system will behave in such a way as to ensure that some or all of these objectives are met. The main point is that it is actors who can be trusted or mistrusted. Trust is thus a strand, or a dimension, of a relationship between actors. Trust depends on who they are, what they do, and the interaction involved. Three sets of actors are particularly important because they are directly involved – market actors who supply food, state agents responsible for regulation and governance, and consumers and their representatives. These may all be differently institutionalised in different countries. When talking of the institutional basis for trust in food, therefore, attention is directed towards the relationships between these three ‘poles’, a triad of relationships - or ‘triangular affairs’. All three poles may vary from country to country, but to understand trust, we need to understand the relationships between them.

Whether by big transnational food companies with worldwide brands or globally renowned retailers bringing an ever-expanding variety of counterseasonal produce from every corner of the world, food transcends national boundaries. So do panics and scandals. Avian flu knows no absolute barriers, geographical or biological. BSE provokes fear in Europe or Japan. And political responses and frameworks have become increasingly transnational. Yet, remarkably, deep differences and divergent
historical trajectories persist. This is not to argue, of course, that convergence and processes of
globalisation have no impact on the way different national societies develop. But, whether in terms of
public opinion, or the way that food is provided and consumed, or how states respond to change and
crises, societal patterns are powerfully shaped within national boundaries. There is a paradoxical
European reality of increasingly common models and frameworks and national divergence.

In treating trust as an emergent aspect of these societal relationships, three aspects are especially
important: the societal division of responsibilities between actors; the matches and mismatches
between the norms and expectations of the various actors, especially in relation to their practices and
performances; and the societal ‘configurations’ of these relationships, or how the relationships fit
together.

The first aspect involving the division of responsibilities for key food issues is crucial for
understanding trust in terms of social relationships between actors. There is no one particular type of
division of responsibilities that we can say will produce trust or distrust. The relationship between
state and market actors differs according to their respective responsibilities as they have been
institutionalised in different countries. In the area of food new roles of the state as well as of the
market are emerging, for example by making direct monitoring and inspection a market responsibility,
while public authorities take on a more indirect role as auditor. What we see is a process of re-
regulation rather than generally declining role of the state. Shifting responsibilities may also establish
new boundaries between the public and the private. Responsibilities may be redistributed between
market actors, the state and private households. Policies which centre upon ‘the consumer’ as a private
and individual figure tend towards the privatisation and individualisation of responsibilities and thus
potentially the de-politicisation of food issues. However, the very fact of there being consumer
policies implies the politicising of consumption. Handling consumer distrust then pulls food
consumption out of the private and into the public sphere.

For this type of reason, one of the most striking conclusions is that scandals happen differently in
different societies, not only in terms of magnitude of impact, but equally in terms of institutional
response or consumer protest. A food crisis may even reinforce trust if its resolution is achieved
through meeting consumers’ pre-existing norms and expectations of those it holds responsible for
handling crises. A crisis about food may be the occasion in which tensions and mismatches between
actors’ norms and expectations become manifest, discussed publicly and in the media. But it is longer
term changes in consumer behaviour, in the way food is provisioned, or the way the state is governed,
that often constitute the underlying dynamics of trust and distrust. After all, BSE was a scandal that
broke at a particular time, and in relation to a particular threat to human health, but it was predicated
on developments in agricultural technologies and production methods that had been taking place on
an historical scale.

Finally, as the third aspect of a socio-institutional explanation, we turn to the way relationships fit
together amongst the cast of actors involved in food provisioning and consumption. Between the
societally institutionalised consumers, national provisioning systems, and the state endowed with
different modes of governance and organisation of responsibilities, there are shared and nationally
typical relationships between consumers and provisioners; consumers and state; and state and
 provisioners. How these relationships fit together in the overall configuration is more important than
the strength of trust embodied in any one of the relationships taken separately. Even though Norway
and the United Kingdom are so different in terms of each of the three principal relationships, consumers manifest high levels of trust in food because of the concordance between norms and expectations running between them. Simplifying, what really matters is that everyone expects everyone else to be doing what they are doing with respect to everyone else in the triangular affair. What is actually expected of whom in Norway and Britain, and how responsibilities are organised, how and what different actors do, matters much less for the overall outcomes in terms of levels of trust than consistency and conformity of norms and expectations between our three polar actors. Governments, retailers and manufacturers must do what they are expected to do – and what they are doing must be acceptable to people as consumers and citizens. But the consumer roles are very different in these two cases. While the British situation sustains an active and critical consumer, as reflected in public policies as well as in the market, the Norwegian framing is much more paternalistic, with strong expectations of consumer protection and a passive consumer role with little influence via market choice or on governmental policies.

Likewise for distrust: actors differ between each other both with respect to what they expect of each other, and in the norms of what they do in relation to each other. Germany displays relatively high levels of distrust. There are conflicts of expectations and norms not only between consumers and the other two poles, but also in what the state expects of consumers and market actors. Its support of green and local food against the mass standardised foods of discount retailers aggravates the tensions. Italy presents quite a different configurational basis for even higher levels of distrust: a distrust of state regulation, and more importantly of rules imported from the European Community, meets a consumer torn between modernising lifestyles and conserving tradition, conceptualised as the local, the ‘typical’. Distrust is thus much more than an absence of harmony and concordance between actors and their norms and expectations. There are positive conflicts, reflecting the historical capacity of food to generate controversy, now fuelled by the rapid changes in consumption, regulation and provision of food. Even in these cases of high distrust, the consumer roles have evolved in distinct ways. The Italian consumer is more focussed on the household and household control, sustained by buying fresh food and the establishment of long-term personal relations and local networks. The German discontent consumer is sceptical towards all institutional actors and may protest by purchasing from alternative supply channels. In neither of these situations is feedback from people as consumers considered pertinent.

9 Dilemmas involved in making food consumption more sustainable

Making food consumption more sustainable raises issues of governance, of questions about how to regulate everyday food related activities so that they become more socially and environmentally sustainable. But it also raises issues of power and influence. It is far from given that it is consumers who should take responsibility and consumption that should change. I have in this paper pointed to the dependence of consumption on supply structures and public policies and also to the dynamic interconnectedness between these arenas. But we can also turn the perspective around, focussing on how people may make use of their role and capacity as consumers to make food provisioning more sustainable. As discussed in the previous section, in many situations consumer responsibility and influence will be interlinked. Building legitimacy of regulatory measures will generally require
recognition of consumer influence. Besides, many measures will need loyalty and partaking from consumers. But history has also shown that consumers are important not only on the implementation side. Consumer can be influential in pushing for the introduction of regulations or public financial contributions to sustainability related initiatives. Consumer support to a more sustainable food consumption is therefore not only a matter of personal commitment and ethical considerations, but is also the outcome of culturally and politically framed social interrelations between people as citizens and consumers, on the one hand, and markets and states, on the other.

Active, responsible consumers refer to and are in interaction with certain kinds of policies and markets and with collective mobilisation. At the same time, it is important to see purchasing, cooking and eating as sets of interrelated practices, strongly influenced by taken for granted normative classifications and forms of social coordination. Such practices are, in turn, strongly influenced by changes in the societal division of labour, where we have seen a relatively continuous shift from the household towards an increasing number of actors and steps in the food supply chain.

A number of dilemmas can be identified in relation to making food consumption more sustainable, some of them opening for bridging and compromises, others quite paradoxical.

1. Conflicting norms and expectations
   - What is sustainable? Including all “good causes” may open for a range of priorities between internally opposing aims and the most difficult ones may lose out.
   - Lack of accordance between various aspects of sustainability (for example, is support to animal friendly food production legitimizing continued high meat consumption, how can we combine buying fair trade, considering food miles and support local producers, what about supporting local production and considering energy efficiency?).
   - Conflicts between sustainability and other aspects of consumption (for example paying more for sustainable food vs goals of social equality and welfare, sustainability concerns vs issues of care, congeniality and pleasure, sustainability considerations requiring practical facilities of storage and cooking and also time and competence, organic production and basic demands of nutrition and safety).
   - Inconsistencies between expectations of consumer engagement and regulatory efforts pointing in other directions, like budgetary support to intensive meat production.

2. Tensions between expectations of consumer involvement and the opportunities formed by the character of the supply and coordination of everyday life

3. Little agreement between divisions of responsibility, on the one hand, and the societal division of labour and distribution of power, on the other.
   - What is for example the role of the food processing industry and their introduction of evermore advanced technologies – some of them more resource demanding, some of them less?
   - What can food consumers do about that?

4. Disparities between demands of consumer responsibility and a lacking recognition of consumers as legitimate actors in public discourse and in decision-making processes. The particular case in mind here is the widespread understanding of consumers as private, more or less rational,
5. Expectations of support and loyalty from consumers to market based solutions in conditions of widespread distrust towards market actors.
   • Are independent bodies and procedures in place which can check that market actors do what they promise?
   • Is there sufficient transparency in terms of openness about conditions that are of importance to consumers in terms of considerations about sustainability?
   • How is this communicated?

6. Uncertainties about solutions
   • Divisions of labour in terms of for example energy efficiency (for example producing tomatoes indoors in Norway or importing them from Spain)
   • Effects of promoting conditions of fair trade, like who is profiting most from consumers paying more, farmers or traders?

This list of dilemmas is of course not complete. It is mainly meant to illustrate the complexity and dynamic of the sector. Importantly, however, the multiplicity of aspects and questions raised shows the difficulty of dealing with single issues without considering the context in terms of the various aspects of food as well as the concrete institutional and political conditions in which an issue has emerged. If considerations such as these are disregarded, turning to food consumers to deal with sustainability can easily remain as symbol politics and repudiation of responsibility without substantial effects.

On the other hand, food related activities represent one of the areas where people feel that they can make a contribution. Such efforts, some of them coordinated and others fragmented and dispersed, will probably increase in the years to come. The effects can be considerable, but the directions and overall consequences are not easy to predict. Still, considering consumer expectations and actions in analyses of institutional change to promote sustainability seems to be a place to begin. An ongoing study of farm animal welfare suggests that the main impact of public interest in this issue (which is considerable) is not via consumer’s purchases in the market, but more indirectly by legitimising new production schemes, marketing strategies and policy initiatives (Roe and Marsden 2007).

10 References

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