

FACTFILE: GCE NUTRITION & FOOD SCIENCE

CHANGING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR 2



Changing Consumer Behaviour

Learning outcome

- Discuss the barriers that prevent consumers from making food choices that have a positive impact on food security and sustainability.

Course Content

There is no legal definition of 'sustainable food'. Sustain's working definition for 'good food' is that it should be produced, processed, distributed and disposed of in ways that:

- Contribute to thriving local economies and sustainable livelihoods – both in the UK and in the case of imported products, in producer countries
- Protect the diversity of both plants and animals and the welfare of farmed and wild species
- Avoid damaging or wasting natural resources or contributing to climate change
- Provide social benefits, such as good quality food, safe and healthy products, and educational opportunities

A sustainable food production system supports food security, making sure that there is enough food in quality and quantity to meet the needs of the growing population and to conserve natural resources for future generations.

Barriers to making food choices with a positive impact on food security and sustainability

1. Accessibility

Accessibility to shops is an important physical barrier influencing food choice.

Access to sustainable options may be limited. For example, locally produced food sold at farm shops or farmers markets are not a viable option for some consumers as it is dependent on resources such as transport and geographical location.

For those who do not have access to adequate public or private transport, not being able to get to a diversity of outlets is a defining factor in their ability to buy healthy, sustainable, affordable food. Smaller, independent community shops may not stock healthy options, such as fruit and vegetables, due to a shorter shelf life. They may not carry sustainable options due to a lower profit margin or a perceived lack of interest.

2. Availability

With 80% of the grocery market controlled by just four supermarket chains, food choices are dominated by what they sell and promote. Supermarkets 'choice edit' sometimes in a positive way, such as only stocking Fairtrade bananas; more often in a way that promotes over-consumption of foods where the most profit can be made, which often happen to be the least healthy and the least sustainable.

Throughout the food production system special offers and forceful marketing strategies encourage people to buy food they may not need, with little attention to promoting ethics or health.

3. Resources

The cost of food is an important determinant of food choice for many consumers. Healthy sustainable choices such as Fairtrade products, organic products and animal products produced to high welfare standards are often more expensive than the alternatives and are certainly perceived as such making them an option that is just not considered by some consumers. Sustainable food is associated with offering higher quality and consequently more expensive options. Those on a lower income may well just rule it out of their purchasing decisions.

Low income households are less willing to experiment with foods they are not familiar with which can be a barrier for dietary changes that could have a positive impact on food security and sustainability for example consuming more vegetables and fruit, grains and pulses and smaller amounts of animal products.



Consumers perceive a healthy and sustainable diet such as one using fresh produce to take longer to plan, prepare and cook which may be too much of a time commitment. Planning ahead to avoid waste is also time consuming.

4. Skills and food culture

For many, food that would once have been made from scratch, has been replaced with a ready meal or fast food. The result is a decline in basic food preparation skills which is a barrier to healthy sustainable food choices for some consumers. For example, seasonal food use requires knowledge and skills on the part of the consumers. A shift to a plant-based diet requires a willingness to experiment with recipes using grains and pulses. Not many consumers know how to use leftovers to avoid waste.

Cultural influences play a significant role in food choice through the habitual consumption of certain foods, preparation traditions and religious restrictions. In this way cultural habits can be difficult to change. For example, eating less meat and dairy produce may be difficult to achieve in NI where the food industry is heavily dependent on beef and dairy farming.

Over dependency on highly processed foods has led to a disconnect from food production. This has made a significant impact on how food is valued and consumed. Many consumers do not have an understanding of where food comes from and the cost in both time and resources that it takes to produce healthy sustainable food. We need a culture that understands food and ensures food is valued and enjoyed.



5. Consumer understanding of the issues

One of the barriers to the wider uptake of more sustainable food production systems and healthier diets is a lack of understanding of the often complex issues relating to what constitutes sustainable production, what constitutes a healthy diet and how these two aspects can be better integrated so that healthy food consumption is both compatible with, and helps to encourage, sustainable food production and distribution.

Many issues fall under the broad banner of food sustainability: environmental, health, social and ethical issues. As well as greenhouse gas emissions, food production and consumption impacts on the environment by contributing to water scarcity, food waste and pollution, biodiversity, including declining fish stocks and deforestation as a result of the way that crops such as soya and palm are grown. In addition, more food needs to be produced to feed a rapidly expanding global population and to meet changing food demands in developing economies.

It can be difficult to see how consumer food choice fits into this complex set of issues. Reducing

environmental impact may not always be consistent with ethical issues, such as Fairtrade or supporting local producers. In the production of a food, one part of the supply chain can be environmentally friendly while another part is not. All of this makes it difficult to establish basic advice for individual foods.

It is challenging for consumers to see how food purchased in their local town or supermarket has any impact upon the complex issue of food security and sustainability.

6. Supermarkets

Supermarkets are convenient and goods are competitively priced. However, shopping at supermarkets supports many unsustainable practices such as intensive farming methods that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and poor animal welfare.

Supermarkets damage local communities and undermine local economies. Farmers and other suppliers are often treated unfairly by the major retailers who impose strict contracts for ever lower prices and very stringent cosmetic standards for fresh produce such as fruit and vegetables.

7. Labelling schemes

The proliferation of sustainable labelling schemes means that they can become confusing – or simply mean that they are just not noticed. Most do little to help consumers make more informed choices across a broad range of foods because they have been developed to deal with specific elements of sustainability.

Some overlap or make similar claims; others are narrowly focused. Consumers have to choose which issues they think are most relevant to particular products if they even spot the schemes. Though some people may want to focus on a single, specific issue, such as Fairtrade for example there is little joined up sign-posting of products to enable sustainable choices based on several issues.

Many of the schemes take account of environmental issues, but look at it in different ways, and may deal with different parts of the supply chain. Fairtrade standards, for example, cover the use of chemicals, disposal of waste, protection of natural resources and prohibit the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Rainforest Alliance standards cover ecosystem, soil and water conservation as well as wildlife protection.

Schemes include environmental impacts, but the evidence base for how these are assessed and what is likely to have most impact is still evolving.

Sometimes the certification logo applies to a specific ingredient, rather than the overall product. Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance certification, for example, may just apply to a particular ingredient used in the product.

It is impossible for the individual consumer to verify the truthfulness of such claims so they must trust that the logo and the scheme is honest and credible. Some claims are not regulated and are less than honest which can cause the consumer to become cynical and resist buying genuine environmentally friendly products.

Even where schemes are sound, they may certify nothing more than that required minimum standards have been met—something consumers should be able to take for granted without the need for assurance by an external, private body. Most consumers are likely to assume that the fact that a food carries an assurance scheme mark means that it has exceeded legal requirements in some respect.

Vague green terminology such as ‘responsibly farmed’ or ‘sustainably sourced’ can actually be a barrier for consumers as they are too vague to be useful. ‘Sustainable’ is a wholly unregulated word and appears in advertising claims without any formal definition. In the absence of enforced international standards with a clear and robust definition of the word, the food industry is defining sustainability in their own terms, leaving consumers to come to their own interpretations – which tend to vary widely.



8. Government policy

Government action still often encourages the wrong kind of production systems and often the wrong types of food. Health, biodiversity and economic indicators suggest we are not progressing towards a sustainable system of farming and fishing.

It is clear we need a new farming and fishing system - coherent with healthy food policies, and a fair supply chain - which protects nature as well as farm and fishing jobs, ensures high animal welfare and which produces enough of the food we need.

Revision Questions

1. Explain some of the barriers that prevent consumers from choosing organic products when shopping for food.
2. Explain how cost can prevent consumers from making healthy sustainable food choices.
3. Discuss the barriers that prevent consumers from making food choices that contribute positively to local economies.
4. Discuss the barriers that prevent consumers from making food choices that have a positive impact on climate change.

