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TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FOOD CONSUMPTION IN THE EU: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of sustainable food consumers and their role in securing the transition to a sustainable food system in the European Union. Drawing from studies of governmentality and employing the P.A.C.T. routine theoretical model of consumer responsabilisation, the aim was to analyse the ways in which the responsabilisation for making sustainable food choices has been formulated through the Farm to Fork Strategy. This strategy emphasises the importance of educating and empowering consumers to make sustainable food choices, as reflected in discursive formations and initiatives like the improvement of the EU food labelling system. However, the paper stresses that promoting sustainable consumption as a matter of consumer choice-driven responsibility could disproportionately burden consumers and deepen social inequalities without successfully addressing environmental issues.

KEY WORDS: consumerism, individualisation of responsibility, sustainable food consumption, farm to fork strategy, governmentality

Oblikovanje trajnostne potrošnje hrane v EU: kritična analiza individualizacije odgovornosti

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek raziskuje konstrukcijo trajnostnih potrošnikov in potrošnic hrane ter njihovo vlogo pri zagotavljanju prehoda na trajnostni prehranski sistem v Evropski uniji. Izhajajoč iz študij vladnosti in z uporabo P.A.C.T. rutinskega

teoretičnega modela odgovornosti potrošnikov, je cilj analizirati načine, kako je bila odgovornost potrošnikov in potrošnic za sprejemanje trajnostnih odločitev o hrani oblikovana s strategijo od vil do vilic. Strategija poudarja pomen izobraževanja in opolnomočenja potrošnikov in potrošnic za trajnostno izbiro hrane, kar se odraža v diskurzivnih formacijah in predlaganih pobudah, kot je izboljšanje sistema EU za označevanje živil. Vendar dokument poudarja, da bi lahko spodbujanje trajnostne porabe hrane kot vprašanje odgovornosti, ki temelji na izbiri potrošnikov in potrošnic, nesorazmerno obremenilo posameznike in posameznice ter poglobilo družbene razlike, ne da bi uspešno obravnavalo okoljska vprašanja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: potrošništvo, individualizacija odgovornosti, trajnostna potrošnja hrane, strategija od vil do vilic, vladnost

1 Introduction¹

Our food system is responsible for some of the most pressing global sustainability issues. The current principles guiding the operation of the food system are putting pressure on the environment, society and economy. The food system is also under pressure from climate change, pollution and geopolitical dynamics (IPCC 2019; Martinez et al. 2019: 204). On one hand, although global food production can provide enough food for the entire population, approximately 800 million people still suffer from hunger, with more than two billion struggling with micronutrient deficiencies. On the other hand, there are more than one billion obese people worldwide (Garnett et al. 2015; WHO 2022). This leads to the conclusion that a more sustainable food system is needed to ensure that sustainable food is available, accessible and affordable to everyone.

With a focus on sustainable food consumption as a vital component of the sustainable food system, there is increasing attention on individual consumers as critical actors in demonstrating positive environmental and social change through their choices of buying and eating sustainable food (Miller and Rose 1997; Lockie 2009; Allen 2010; Pyysiäinen and Vesala 2013; Avelino 2021). Recommendations and suggestions on the steps that consumers can and should take to exemplify positive environmental and social change are pervasive in the media, business and policy contexts. At the European level, consumers are encouraged to “choose wisely” and “travel responsibly”, and through slogans such as “You Control Climate Change”, their actions are portrayed as crucial

1. This work was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) within the “Young Researchers” program.

for the well-being of the planet (EC 2012² in Soneryd and Ugglå 2015: 918). These steps most commonly revolve around consumers purchasing responsibly and opting for sustainable, local and seasonal food instead of unsustainable food options (Lyon 2006; Dowler 2008; Isenhour 2011).

Through policies and marketing campaigns, consumers are attributed significant power in shaping the food system. The expectation is for individuals to use this power to purchase and consume sustainably and take small steps to rearrange their everyday lives to accommodate sustainable practices (Lemke 2001; Soneryd and Ugglå 2015; Jackson et al. 2020). By doing so, sustainable consumption traverses the economic sphere and expands into the creation of subjects and their identities, areas that were previously considered non-economic (Soneryd and Ugglå 2015: 924; van den Berg 2016: 3). It is not just about buying and consuming but also about fulfilling oneself, caring for others and the planet and securing a certain way of life (Žižek 2009: 53).

Nevertheless, some researchers (Rose 1999; Lemke 2001; Hansen and Jespersen 2013) have emphasized that this extended focus on individuals and their responsibility to choose, buy and eat sustainable food needs to be regarded and discussed as a reformation of political rationality. The continuing emphasis on sustainable food consumers as critical agents in enabling the change of the food system tends to normalize this discourse, while the increase in policies, campaigns or advertisements that highlight the responsabilization of consumers are considered necessary and appropriate (Soneryd and Ugglå 2015: 922). According to Lemke (2001: 203) and Isenhour (2011), what used to be part of welfare state services is now a personal project and an individual responsibility, and what was protected and enabled by governments is now a question of supply and demand.

This paper builds on the work of researchers (Miller and Rose 1997; Isenhour 2011; Evans et al. 2017; Pyysiäinen et al. 2017) who understand the construction of the sustainable consumer as an act of governance exercised indirectly and subtly by directing individuals towards sustainable options. The analysis expands into the sphere of sustainable food consumption in the European Union (EU) and focuses on addressing the process of consumer responsabilization through a crucial strategy that forms the basis of the transformation of the EU food system until 2030 – the Farm to Fork Strategy. Consequently, this paper aims to critically assess the ways in which the consumer's responsabilization for making sustainable food choices has been formulated through the Farm to Fork Strategy. The significance of this analysis emerges from the fact that it establishes

2. European Commission (2012): You control climate change campaign.

a foundational framework for identifying possibilities and priorities regarding the transition to sustainable food. It emphasizes expectations from actors within the EU food system, influences the creation of funding opportunities and shapes how the strategic elements outlined therein align with upcoming legislative propositions. Therefore, understanding how the Farm to Fork Strategy, a core EU strategy that deals with sustainable food transition, constructs consumer responsibility is relevant. Not only does it outline the consumer's role and position in transforming the EU food system, it also holds the potential to reshape how various stakeholders perceive consumers and how consumers perceive their own role in shaping a more sustainable food system.

The paper comprises three sections. The first section presents the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research, which applies governmentality studies to explain the political and economic rationalities behind the construction of a discourse of responsabilization and the way in which it operationalizes what it means to be a sustainable food consumer. To do so, the paper utilizes Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) model of consumer responsabilization, that is, the P.A.C.T. routine. Second, the paper analyses the Farm to Fork Strategy to illustrate the spectrum of opportunities it offers and the specific actions it anticipates from EU consumers in order for them to actively engage in responsible and sustainable food consumption practices. Lastly, referring to my own analysis, statistical data and research across social sciences that addresses food consumerism, the paper highlights the shortcomings of the discourse of responsabilization and focuses on the issue of power struggles and the inequalities being perpetuated through the adoption of the consumer responsabilization discourse. To do this, the paper assesses the environmental and social responsibility of large agricultural and food companies and the importance of one's socio-economic status in engaging in sustainable consumption practices.

2 Sustainability and consumer behaviour through the lens of governmentality

In his books (1991a, 1998), Foucault began developing an understanding of power in modern politics and government, as the previous focus on the sovereign and the rule of law had been accompanied, and somewhere gradually substituted, by a novel form of power. Power, according to this understanding, does not order and prohibit action but guides and manages life by influencing beliefs and decisions (French 2004: 297; Azer 2022). As such, power directs the functioning of everyday life through social organization, human interaction and actions of self-discipline (Gaventa 2003; Fuchs et al. 2016: 300; Azer 2022).

Furthermore, it is much more than an action of the sovereign as it manifests through various institutions and societal norms. A person is inspired and motivated and, thus, "obeys the suggestions and the orders given to him by advertising, sales agencies or demands of social prestige" (Lefebvre 2014: 305). As emphasized by Quastel (2008: 27), Foucault explored the creation of a subject and their performance through a range of institutions, such as schools, mental hospitals or prisons. However, his research could be expanded towards understanding the logic behind responsible and sustainable food consumption.

Even though power is dispersed throughout "advanced liberal societies", it is still crucial to understand that it is politically motivated and enabled through political rationalities (Miller and Rose 1997; Rose 1999). As our life experiences are socially constructed through relations with others, and as influences on our everyday life are mostly beyond our perceptions, we accept them as natural causes or the results of free will. Therefore, subtle and often unrecognizable forms of governmental action that shape our lives are crucial for those in power to achieve political objectives without imposing direct intervention such as legislation or taxation (Rose 1999; Lemke 2001; Hansen and Jespersen 2013: 4). As Foucault (1991b: 95) states, "government is a question /.../ of employing tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics – to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved".

These governmental tactics are numerous and innovative, encompassing everything from governing others to governing oneself (Lemke 2001: 192). For this reason, Foucault viewed governance as the "conduct of conducts" (Burchell et al. 1991). This formation explains that management or control is more than a simple restriction relating to traditional forms of state policy. It encompasses the management of both the population and the self through the optimization of surroundings and opportunities and enforcing certain ways of knowing and doing (Dean 1991; Foucault 1991b: 102).

The crucial turning point that proved the importance of these governing strategies was the act of intertwining political practice with economic goals. People's habits and consumption practices became important for the well-being of the economy, and since the 18th century, they have been regarded as crucial for the well-being of the state. Thus, these practices became an important factor in oversight and organization (Foucault 1991a, 1991b). With the introduction of free trade, barriers and regulations were framed as undesirable and harmful, a framing that was also transferred to the food consumption sphere, where restrictions and obligations were replaced by guidelines and recommendations (Allen 2010; Isenhour 2011; Soneryd and Ugglå 2015: 916).

However, with the scaling down of state interventions from the control of resources, social services and security measures, the responsibility for supporting and managing these resources fell partly into the hands of individual consumers (Lemke 2001: 203; van den Berg 2016: 2). This shift can also be observed in the area of sustainable food consumption, where buying and consuming sustainable food are perceived as a project of responsabilization, while the state is expected to provide consumers with the necessary information and education for them to make “correct” and “sustainable” choices that are perceived as beneficial to them, others and the environment (Rose 1999: 87; Lockie 2009: 195).

I define responsabilization in accordance with Pyysiäinen et al. (2017) as a practice of governance that grants consumers the freedom of choice to conduct their choice-making. By utilizing the theorization of governmentality, this paper understands the process of responsabilization for sustainable food consumption not as a “natural” process but as a power tactic intended to shape human thought and behaviour through the act of self-management or, as Foucault called it, “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988). Individuals are no longer addressed as citizens but as consumers who need to choose their food wisely and responsibly to enable the functioning of a sustainable food system (Giesler and Veresiu 2014: 842). Through a mixture of education, empowerment and advice, the government exercises its subtle power over individual consumers’ decisions regarding their food choices, even without the need to be responsible for securing these choices every step of the way. By endorsing consumers’ free will and rational decision-making when it comes to choosing or buying sustainable food, the governing power positions individuals as responsible for the social risks of their food consumption or lack thereof, such as illness, poverty or environmental damage (Lemke 2001: 201; Isenhour 2011).

Giesler and Veresiu (2014) presented a framework for analysing the process of responsabilization. According to them, responsabilization occurs through four steps – personalization, authorization, capabilization and transformation – referred to as the P.A.C.T. routine. The first step, personalization, involves formulating the problem of the unsustainability of the current food system as something that is beyond the scope of state action or corporate responsibility alone and, instead, framing it as a consequence of and opportunity for individual action, thereby demanding increased sustainable individual conduct (Hodgson 2002: 314; Giesler and Veresiu 2014: 843). This first step highlights the power of a discourse, which, as a social practice, shapes human actions as well as their knowledge and perceptions of truth (Foucault 1991c).

The second step, authorization, aims to support and legitimize the responsabilization of individual consumers through available economic, psychological

or other scientific expert knowledge, which is transmitted through various educational or informational channels (Giesler and Veresiu 2014: 843). The responsible management of the self is regarded not only as logical but also as having moral and economic benefits for the individual and the environment (van den Berg 2016: 3). Therefore, the approaches to authorization may range from emphasizing the norms and values of well-being and sustainable consumption to the economic rationalities of sustaining and greening the food market.

Third, responsabilization requires the “infrastructure of products and services that support individuals’ active self-management” (Giesler and Veresiu 2014: 843), which they refer to as *capabilization*. Through these products and infrastructure, sustainable food consumers can exercise their responsibility and manage their everyday lives accordingly. These constructions may be diverse, ranging from the market of sustainable food options and the stores where they can be found to education and empowerment methods. The fourth step is transformation, which entails not just the acceptance of new responsibilities but also an entire change in attitude and behaviour, as the project of sustainable food consumption is regarded as an enriching and moral personal project.

3 Responsibilization in the Farm to Fork Strategy

The individualization of responsibility has become a popular discursive tool of green governance, particularly in the Global North (Soneryd and Uggla 2015: 916), and the same trend can be observed in the EU. To accommodate the commitments from the Paris Agreement³ to limit global warming to or under 1.5 °C, and address the interrelated environmental issues impacting member states, the European Commission (EC) introduced the European Green Deal. Set in motion as the “new growth strategy” aimed at achieving net-zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, and based on the principles of just transition, the European Green Deal commits to a systemic restructuring of the EU’s *modus operandi* to be more inclusive and sustainable, thus ensuring the well-being and protection of its people and nature (EC 2019: 2).

Inside the scope of the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy was designed to tackle sustainable food transition in the EU in order to “make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly” (EC n.d.a). The strategy sets various goals to combat climate change and other environmental concerns impacting water, land and air while pledging to ensure sufficient, nutritious and

3. Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, adopted at the COP 21 on 12 December 2015, entered into force on 4 November 2016.

sustainable food for everyone in the EU (EC 2020: 4). The strategy recognizes that every actor within the food system has a role to fulfil in achieving the sustainability of the EU food system, including “food production, transport, distribution, marketing and consumption” (EC 2020: 4–5). Accordingly, it has announced forthcoming EU political endeavours and proposed recommendations exemplifying how distinct sectors can actively reshape their approaches, including embracing novel prospects that facilitate the enhancement of sustainability in their practices. Thus, the Farm to Fork Strategy exemplifies potential actions within the grasp of consumers, emphasizing the indispensable role individuals play in facilitating the transition to sustainable food.

The responsabilization of sustainable food consumers starts with personalization. The EC website introducing the Farm to Fork Strategy asks the reader, “Do you have the appetite for change?” (EC n.d.a), setting the stage for a reflection on people’s dietary patterns and the will to transform them to secure necessary structural changes in the EU. Dietary patterns are presented as more than just satisfying hunger, as they drive environmental, social and economic problems. Additionally, they are the underlying cause of non-communicable diseases and other health problems that burden European society (EC 2020: 2). Thus, sustainable consumption has multiple benefits that not only impact the individual but the wider community and environment. While the importance of other actors participating in the food system in securing sustainable food options is acknowledged, they are portrayed as highly dependent on consumers, since “they cannot be successful if consumers do not choose to buy these products” (EC Scientific Advice Mechanism 2022: 4). Therefore, as the Farm to Fork Strategy concludes, “it is clear that the transition will not happen without a shift in people’s diets” (EC 2020: 3).

Owing to the critical position of consumers in the food system, emphasis is placed on ensuring that consumers can consume sustainably and opt for sustainable food choices. This includes food producers and retailers, actors who influence consumers’ choices by deciding on the type and nutritional aspect of the food they manufacture or sell (EC 2020: 11). However, consumers residing in the EU are also regarded as a major force in terms of “driving significant change in the food market” (EC 2020: 3), mainly through the demand for sustainable food options. They are presented as key actors that can exert influence over production and retail practices in the EU by demanding sustainable food (EC Scientific Advice Mechanism 2022: 3).

The Farm to Fork Strategy stresses that the process of sustainable transition has already begun: “people pay increasing attention to environmental, health, social, and ethical issues and they seek value in food more than ever before” (EU

2020: 4). By emphasizing the consistent and pervasive adoption of sustainable consumption practices, the strategy not only directs the focus of other stakeholders towards meeting the sustainable requirements of EU consumers but also cultivates the perception of sustainable consumption as an increasingly popular endeavour. As such, it aims to encourage further commitment by emphasizing the necessity of a profound collective commitment towards the goal of sustainable consumption. After all, “it is clear that we need to do much more to keep ourselves and the planet healthy” (EU 2020: 4).

Following the personalization of the responsible consumer discourse, the Farm to Fork Strategy engages in the process of authorization by emphasizing the role of scientific knowledge – environmental, medical and economic – in supporting the changing dietary patterns. Sustainable food consumption can have an influence on the safeguarding of land, water and air, prevent the decline of biodiversity, help in reducing climate change and curb food waste (EC 2020: 3–4). Furthermore, choosing and buying sustainable food are intricately connected to health since healthy food is also less burdensome on the environment and, thus, more sustainable (EC 2020: 11). Poor diets are a serious threat to health and well-being in the EU, especially those that are largely based on processed and red meat. They are behind half of the cardiovascular disease cases in the EU, and it is estimated that more than 50% of adults are now falling into the overweight category (IPES food panel 2019; EC 2020: 3). Accordingly, consumers are informed of the urgency of consuming a “more plant-based diet with less red and processed meat and with more fruits and vegetables” and are expected to reduce “not only risks of life-threatening diseases, but also the environmental impact of the food system” (EC 2020: 13).

With the above in mind, the health benefits of sustainable food are translated into a healthy lifestyle, positively influencing individual well-being. The Farm to Fork Strategy draws attention to the advantages of engaging in sustainable food consumption practices for people’s health, lifestyle and natural environment (EC 2020: 2). By bringing lifestyle into the sphere of sustainable food consumption, responsabilization takes the form of an identity project and questions who we are as people and who we want to become if we act in a “moral way” (Foucault 1997: 264). As Žižek (2009: 54) claims, “we are simultaneously doing something meaningful, showing our capacity for care and our global awareness by participating in a collective project”.

Besides health benefits and lifestyle improvements, sustainable food consumption is portrayed as potentially influential in sustainable economic growth and the placement of sustainable food options on the food market. The Farm to Fork Strategy points out that “citizens’ expectations are evolving and driving significant

change in the food market” (EC 2020: 3). An increasing number of consumers in the EU are asking for sustainable food, which is emphasized as the opportunity for food producers to change to more sustainable production methods, thereby ensuring that the demand exists and it is growing. Consequently, responsible consumers derive added advantage from their sustainable actions, not only through the positive impact on the environment, their health and well-being but also through the provision of income for farmers engaged in sustainable practices. As the EC pledges to engage with citizens and encourage their active involvement in the transformation of our food system (EC 2020: 19), the institutions and initiatives that support the capabilities of sustainable food consumers in the EU are crucial. Nevertheless, in order to create “a favourable food environment that makes it easier to choose healthy and sustainable diets” (EC 2020: 2), emphasis is placed on the need to empower consumers to make that choice. Therefore, the empowered consumer, or a consumer in need of empowerment to be able to choose “healthy and sustainable diets and reduce food waste” (EC 2020: 12), represents a core of the capacity-building and choice-making that lead to sustainable consumption practices. The idea of an empowered consumer builds on the presupposition that if consumers are well-informed and encouraged, they will make rational and responsible food choices and consider sustainability and health when making these choices.

The Farm to Fork Strategy briefly mentions two initiatives – sustainable food procurement and tax incentives – as potential options in empowering consumers towards sustainable dietary choices. For example, tax incentives that support organic food and that are indicative of correct food prices, that is, that take into consideration the environmental impact of food, have been suggested for member states (EC 2020: 14). Furthermore, schools, public canteens and hospitals have been identified as spaces that provide good opportunities to engage individuals in sustainable eating practices with the aim of initiating “changes needed for a successful transition” (EC 2019: 19).

However, the Farm to Fork Strategy gives primacy to strengthening food labelling tools and standards as a promising initiative to empower food consumers into making sustainable choices. First, the strategy proposes a revision of the EU regulation on food information to consumers,⁴ with the goal of ensuring “better labelling information to help consumers make healthier and more sustainable food choices” (EC, n.d.b). The new regulation will strive to unify the mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling and extend the mandatory origin or provenance

4 Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers.

information. Second, the EC intends to propose a Sustainability Labelling Framework to “empower consumers to make informed and sustainable food choices” (EC, n.d.b). Through this framework, it is envisaged that consumers will be able to decide based on the sustainability information on food products, which represents a novelty in labelling schemes (EC 2020: 13). Through what is envisioned as an informative and substantial labelling system, the consumer is provided with tools to act responsibly and sustainably, although it is the role of the EU or individual member states to provide and control all of this information and guide the consumer towards the optimal choice (Narciso and Fonte 2021: 56).

The reproduction of the discourse on the responsibility of the individual consumer in choosing sustainable food options has a tremendous potential to mobilize people’s transformation and acceptance of their responsibility for securing a sustainable future for themselves and others. Since consumers are framed as rational and conscious, sustainable consumption should be appealing to consumers across the EU who wish to re-design their identities to be consistent with these values (Ferrer-Fons and Fraile 2013: 468). According to the Eurobarometer (2020), European consumers welcome a favourable environment that allows them to choose sustainable and healthy food. On the question of the necessary means through which to encourage healthy and sustainable diets, most European consumers name the affordability of healthy and sustainable food (49%), availability (45%) and clear food labelling information (41%) as crucial. However, European consumers still do not see themselves as primarily responsible for securing a sustainable food system. They stress that producers (farmers, fishers, aquaculture producers), food manufacturers and national governments are crucial agents, followed by consumers.

4 Sustainable food consumption – discussion and implications

As imagined by the responsabilization of sustainable food consumers, through empowerment, substantial information and favourable institutional support, people will choose sustainable food options and pursue sustainable lifestyles because they are rational beings and understand that sustainable food is beneficial from the perspectives of health, social well-being and the environment. This presupposition is based on the assurance that sustainable consumers are one of the crucial actors with the power to transform the food market and re-establish the producer–consumer nexus through demand for sustainable food options (Goodman and Goodman 2001: 98). Moreover, this way of rationalizing the special importance of individuals in securing a sustainable food environment is

largely based on the assumption that peoples' dietary patterns are a question of choice (Dowler 2008: 764).

Even though choices play an essential role in an individual's life when it comes to food consumption, they are not the only factors determining consumption patterns and options, as people are influenced by food accessibility, availability, their habits, preferences and economic opportunities. Thus, this paper concurs with the conclusions of scholars (Miller and Rose 1997; Summers 2016; Evans et al. 2017; Pyysiäinen et al. 2017) who stress that an extensive focus on consumer choice while disregarding the larger food environment is overly simplistic.

If we look back at the example of the emphasis on a reinforced labelling system in the Farm to Fork Strategy as way to ensure that consumers are able to make sustainable and informed food choices, it would be questionable to expect that providing more information would suffice as a tool through which EU consumers would be empowered to change their consumption patterns and participate in the design of the sustainable food system in the EU. While labels serve as a useful instrument for orientation and obtaining information, they are insufficient in initiating transformative change since consumers are, as explained by Narciso and Fonte (2021: 56), constructed by cultural, social, economic, generational and other influences. At the same time, the food consumption arena is constructed through a combination of actors and their relations.

Instead of focusing on the responsabilization of consumers to remedy environmental and climate degradation by choosing sustainable food and boycotting unsustainable options, van den Berg (2016) stressed the importance of tackling these issues at the source – at the level of production and supply. Many of today's environmental issues relating to the food system are caused by large food and agricultural companies. For example, industrial farming is highly dependent on industrial chemicals and fertilizers, which can pollute the environment through wastewater and nutrient run-offs and cause loss of biodiversity. Furthermore, the meat industry is causing land degradation and deforestation, health issues through the usage of antibiotics and is responsible for a majority of greenhouse gas emissions in the food industry. Large food manufacturers, in particular, are implicated in numerous social and ecological crises in their quest to maximize profits (Nestle 2013, 2018; Mann 2021).

Furthermore, Garnett et al. (2015) reported that production and provisioning decisions are made by a handful of actors. The top 10 food companies together earn more than one billion euros daily, while millions of people who depend on agriculture for income and food live in poverty at under 1.13 euros a day (IPES food panel 2019). Likewise, in the EU, around three percent of farms now own 52% of EU farmland, and 20% of farms account for 80% of payments under the

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This means that the most polluting producers continue to receive CAP subsidies, and assessments of the member states' CAP spending plans indicate that they are likely to continue receiving them in the new CAP 2023–2027 (BirdLife, ClientEarth, EEB, Greenpeace 2021; EEB 2021).

While the Farm to Fork Strategy draws attention to the importance of various actors in transforming the food system towards greater sustainability and emphasizes the role of the food industry, there is no mention of the differences in the magnitude of the sustainability impact between small and large producers, processors and retailers. Thus, large food companies are not targeted as actors that should take additional responsibility in remedying the environmental issues caused. Furthermore, there are a lack of suggestions when it comes to adequate binding obligations for large food and agricultural companies. For the reorganization of food companies' work to be in line with the sustainability measures of the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork Strategy implemented the EU Code of Conduct on Responsible Food Business and Marketing Practices.⁵ The EC requires commitments from food corporations and groups to implement tangible measures towards promoting health and sustainability while giving them full freedom to structure their actions according to available knowledge and means. However, there are no legal obligations in place (EC 2020; EC 2021). The voluntary code of conduct was evaluated in SAPEA's⁶ 2023 evidence review as largely ineffective in securing the sustainability of the EU food system (SAPEA, 2023).

Furthermore, the focus on governing strategies that emphasize and support consumers in their decision-making regarding "good" food options implies that consumption is a matter of personal choice. However, this premise neglects the impact of different factors that determine and limit rational choice-making, particularly differences based on socio-economic status (Fuchs et al. 2016; Evans et al. 2017: 1398; Mapes 2018: 269; Vega-Salas et al. 2022). Buying organic or fair-trade food is not an option for everyone, as research has shown that foods considered sustainable and healthy are often more expensive than unsustainable, nutrient-poor and high-calorie options (Reutter et al. 2009: 303; Ferrer-Fons and Fraile 2013: 471; Penne and Goedemé 2021). Consequently, low-income consumers are more likely to consume a less healthy and unsustainable diet, which burdens their health (Narciso and Fonte 2021: 60; Vega-Salas et al. 2022). According to the OECD, women and men in the EU who fall into

5. The EU Code of Conduct on Responsible Food Business and Marketing Practices, as envisaged by the Farm to Fork Strategy, entered into force on 5 July 2021.

6. SAPEA (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies) is a consortium of academy networks that provide independent scientific advice to the EC.

the low-income group are “90% and 50% more likely to be obese, compared to those on the highest incomes” (OECD 2019: 14).

Furthermore, the price factor is only now gaining significance in the EU. According to Eurostat, food and non-alcoholic beverages, alongside housing, water and energy accounted for the majority of household expenditure in the EU (Eurostat 2022b). On top of that, consumer prices in the EU increased from a 4.8% rise in January 2022 to an 11.6% rise in June 2022 compared to 2015 prices (Eurostat 2022a). As reported by the latest statistics from 2020, 11% of the population in the EU is unable to afford a quality meal every second day, and 21.5% of people are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat 2022b). It is not surprising then that EU consumers identify price as the first barrier when making decisions about making more sustainable food choices (BEUC 2020).

Therefore, many low-income consumers are often unable to afford to pay more for sustainable food; at the same time, they face barriers to adopting a sustainable lifestyle. Access and availability are significant obstacles for low-income consumers, and many low-income communities lack the time and resources to learn how to cook more sustainably or grow their food (Dowler 2008: 763; Costa et al. 2019). Nevertheless, when the understanding of individualized sustainable consumption is framed around the question of choice instead of insufficient resources, the way we define the issue and form solutions changes significantly. According to van den Berg (2016: 4), when consumers are expected to choose responsibly, those who do not make sustainable choices are seen as making “wrong” or “harmful” choices. This further differentiates individuals and reproduces social inequalities.

5 Conclusion

The paper has explored the political interest in the responsabilization of individual consumers to influence the transformation of the food system by choosing a healthy, environmentally friendly lifestyle through sustainable food choices. By addressing people as consumers who need to act sustainably and ethically and choose responsibly, they are influenced through moral obligations. This promotion of responsible choices in determining which foods people are going to eat also conditions the understanding of the policies needed to facilitate dietary shifts. However, consumers’ food decisions are structured and managed by various actors simultaneously, from international organizations, governments, food and agricultural companies to farmers and consumers, while consumer choice is hardly a sufficient factor in determining sustainable food consumption when people on low incomes struggle to secure sufficient food.

As demonstrated in this paper, the discourse of responsabilization features throughout the Farm to Fork Strategy, which serves as the basis for current and future EU food and environmental policies. It indicates the need to educate and empower consumers to make informed choices, as demonstrated by the emphasis placed on improving the food labelling system in the EU. Unsustainable food not only harms the environment but is a cause of numerous non-communicable diseases. However, it is oftentimes cheaper and more readily available to people on low incomes. As such, even with the improved food labelling system, the choice will not be the only factor influencing consumption patterns. Therefore, policies focusing on empowerment and choice-making must be accompanied by socio-economic options that not only address the food income constraints faced by consumers but also consider the costs of essential expenses that burden people and other overlapping systems of influence.

Furthermore, this paper emphasizes the need to increase the responsibilities of other actors participating in the food system, most notably large food corporations. Even though they are addressed through the Farm to Fork Strategy, concrete mechanisms such as the EU Code of Conduct on Responsible Food Business and Marketing Practices need to be strengthened with ambitious binding policies. This could encompass financial or regulatory steps that increase the tax burden of companies that manufacture non-sustainable foods, or it could stipulate the obligatory inclusion of an essential share of sustainably sourced foods within their products, irrespective of specific labels, such as organic. To conclude, it is important to emphasize that practicing and promoting sustainable consumption as an individual choice without considering the plurality of influences that structure and condition the food system might only deepen current social inequalities and prolong environmental problems.

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