

FOOD CONSUMPTION

The ConsEnSus (Consumption, Environment and Sustainability) Project is a four-year research project involving collaboration between TCD and NUI, Galway. The ConsEnSus Project is funded by the EPA under the STRIVE programme. This project focuses on four key areas of household consumption: transport, energy, water and food.

As part of the ConsEnSus Project, the Lifestyle Survey was conducted over a ten-month period between June 2010 and April 2011. The aim of this Lifestyle Survey was to gain an understanding of people's attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable household consumption and sustainable lifestyles. A total of 1,500 households (750 urban based/750 rural based) were surveyed in 30 EDs across Galway City and County Council areas, Derry City Council area, Limavady District Council area, Dublin City Council area and Fingal County Council area.

Further information is available at: www.consensus.ie



Food Consumption

Food has been identified as one of the key areas for consideration in the challenge of sustainable consumption due to the increased debate over the impact of the prevailing food system on the environment, local communities, and social justice. The OECD estimates that food consumption constitutes one third of household consumption impact and between 10-35% of household consumption expenditure (OECD, 2011). These problems manifest themselves in Ireland with effects on agriculture, public health and planning, and there is a dearth of information that examines how consumers in Ireland contribute to this or may be instrumental in solving these problems. This factsheet highlights the priorities of householders in Ireland with regard to food shopping, specifically their perceptions and considerations of food origins and production methods.

Influences on food choices

Respondents were asked to rank their top three considerations when making food purchasing decisions and these findings are based on the accumulated number of top three rankings. For people in Ireland the following factors proved to be the most influential when buying food (see Figure 4.1):

- Price 73% (n=1101),
- Health 73% (n=1097),
- Taste 47% (n=712),
- How and where the food is produced 43% (n=639),
- Brand 33% (n=502),
- Convenience of foods 11% (n=169).

Trust of eco-labels

- Approximately two-thirds (n=988) of all respondents agreed with the statement, 'I trust eco-labels'.

Regard for food's origins and production methods

Respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement: 'I pay attention to where and how the food I buy is produced' and a majority (66%, n=987) agreed with this assertion. In the Republic of Ireland, a trend of increasing income correlating with increasing agreement with this statement is evident (see Figure 4.2), while in Northern Ireland, a similar link does not seem to be apparent.

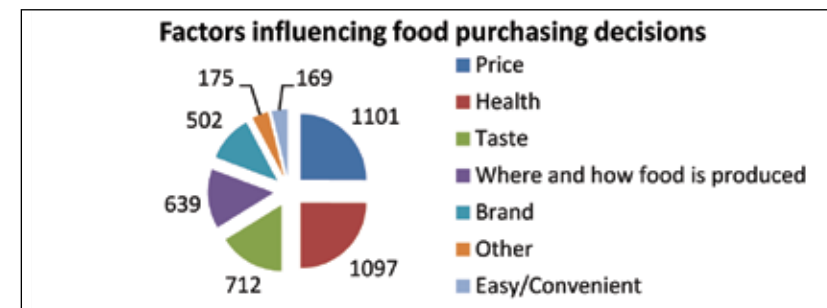


Figure 4.1: The breakdown of respondents according to the factors that influence their food purchasing decisions.



Figure 4.2: The breakdown of respondents (in the Republic of Ireland) according to their corresponding income category, and whether they paid attention to where and how the food they buy is produced.

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Avoidance of meat products

33% (n=495) of all respondents agreed that they tried to avoid eating meat as much as possible.

Perceptions of expense of organic and fair trade food

When asked if they agreed that 'food which is organic or fair trade is too expensive to buy', just over two-thirds of all respondents concurred (n=1,007).

Meaning of 'local food'

The majority of respondents across the island of Ireland consider 'local food' to be:

- 'Food which is produced within my country' 44% (n=664)
- 'Food produced within 30km of where I live' 21% (n=313)
- 'Produced within my county' 19% (n=290) (see Figure 4.3).

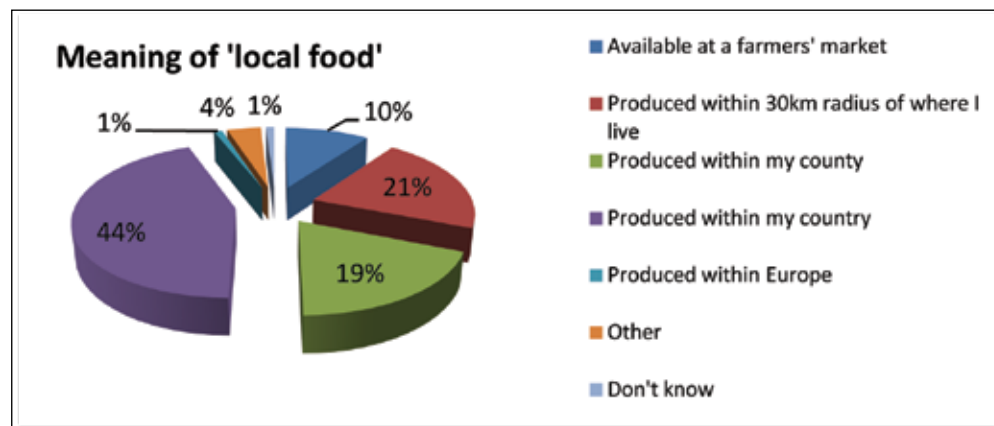


Figure 4.3: Respondents' perception of the meaning of 'local food'.

Implications

Irish householders appear to base their food purchasing decisions on largely tangible and pragmatic issues rather than on the more abstract and altruistic considerations of food sustainability. Although one third of respondents reported making a conscious effort to avoid meat, it is unclear whether this decision was as a result of the environmental burden caused by meat production in terms of the related greenhouse gas emissions at all stages of production, as well as its comparative inefficient use of water and land to produce equal quantities of crops for livestock. A further conflict is evident between respondents' regard for eco-labels and the perceived expense of organic and fair trade food. This suggests a gap between the esteem in which sustainable food is held and actual food buying, caused by issues of sustainability losing in the trade off of various values against one another. Further research on how to bridge this value-action gap is necessary. Respondents' perceptions regarding the expensive nature of organic and local food reflect the results of a recent OECD survey of over 10, 000 households across ten countries (OECD, 2011). This study noted that high prices appear to be the most important factor restricting market share of organic goods. A significant majority of respondents surveyed in our study, concurred on the meaning of 'local food', but other understandings were also popular, showing a lack of consensus. As the given definitions were mainly limited by spatial parameters, the extent to which 'local food' could be defined by the social interactions involved in its sale should be examined further to provide a more nuanced understanding of 'local food' and aid in the more effective marketing of this potentially sustainable food product.

References

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