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Swedish food retailers promoting climate smarter food choices—Trapped between visions and reality?

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ABSTRACT

Food retailers are important actors in the development of a more environmentally sustainable food system. They are powerful in their procurement role and have the potential to promote and encourage consumers to buy climate smarter food. While food retailers have developed environmental visions, policies and goals, a major question is to what extent these commitments translate into action in the products sourced and promoted. This paper aims to explore the ways and extent to which food retailers assist consumers to make climate smarter food choices, more specific to reduce their meat consumption, and to identify potential and perceived difficulties towards doing this. The empirical data is based on interviews with 17 Swedish food retail representatives. The findings indicate that food retailers address climate change in their environmental policy statements and have environmental targets for retail operations, such as energy and transport efficiency and recycling of waste. Moreover, retailers promote and encourage consumers to buy organic, local, and seasonal food and to minimize food waste. No initiatives are taken to help consumers reduce their meat consumption. Yet, there is a growing consensus among scientists that meat production is a large contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. Food retailers seem reluctant to guide consumers to climate smarter food choices if it means reducing the meat range or the promotion of meat. To broaden the range of high quality and more expensive meat is seen as a more feasible option. The meat category is perceived as important to attract new and keep loyal customers.

1. Introduction

Climate change is recognized as a major global threat to the environment as well as to societies and human kind (Sundblad et al., 2007). One of the main contributors to anthropogenic climate change is the food system (Neff et al., 2009). According to a report by the European Commission *Environmental Impact of Products (EIPRO) – Analysis of the life cycle environmental impacts related to the final consumption of the EU-25* (Tukker et al., 2006) food and beverage cause 20–30 percent of the environmental impact of private consumption. Food production affects the environment in various ways, for example through emission of greenhouse gases (GHG), stressing the global nitrogen cycle, affecting biodiversity by deforestation and monoculture practices, and leaching of toxic substances into groundwater and surface water through the use of pesticides (Röös et al., 2013). Within the food category, meat and meat products as well as dairy products are recognized as having the greatest environmental impact. Meat and meat products alone are estimated to cause between 4 and 12 percent of the total environmental impact of private consumption within the EU (Tukker et al., 2006). While technical solutions have been investigated, Garnett (2011) argues that they alone are not sufficient to mitigate GHG emission along the food value chain. Hence, consumers need to change their food consumption habits, away from GHG intensive diets such as those based on meat, meat products and dairy products, towards more vegetarian foods and/or protein alternatives such as legumes (Weber and Matthews, 2008). However, empirical studies have shown that the awareness among consumers of the environmental impact from different foods is limited (Lea and Worsley, 2008). Moreover, most consumers are not willing to alter their food habits if this means eating no or less meat (Brook Lyndhurst, 2012). To rely on responsible consumers might not be sufficient. Rather, to succeed with such a shift in consumption habits the whole food value chain (from farm to fork) needs to be involved. Food retail represents an important actor along this chain. Food retailers are not only powerful as buyers but also as potential promoters of

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climate smarter food in their stores as well as in their external communications. As the (European Commission, 2012) *Retail Forum for Sustainability*[1] notes:

> The rationale behind the Forum is that retailers are placed in a strategic position at the intersection between producers upstream and consumers downstream to promote more sustainable consumption and production processes. In the balance of supply and demand, there is the need to do even more to influence demand. Retailers can play a significant role in provoking positive changes in patterns of consumer demand through their partnerships with suppliers and through their daily contact with European consumers. Retailers are a part of European consumers' every day life and through their partnerships with suppliers can have an unrivalled influence on promoting sustainable consumption and production.

In spite of a growing recognition of the important role of retailers in achieving more sustainable consumption, empirical research addressing this issue within the food area is scare. The most useful studies we have found are UK-based and build on data obtained by internet search of retailers' websites and in-store observations. These studies show that the large food retailers claim they are committed as well as concerned about the impact their businesses have on society, the environment and the economy; and that they communicate their commitments and achievements to consumers through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports and statements (Jones et al., 2005a, 2005b, 2007b). However, observations within stores show that, rather than promoting sustainable consumption, the dominant point-of-purchase message is value for money and to encourage continuous consumption (Jones et al., 2007a, 2007b). Moreover, regarding environmental issues it is argued that food retailers are focusing on their direct environmental impact from their retail operations rather than on their indirect impacts from the food they sell and promote; matters which have been left to producers and consumers to deal with (Iles, 2007). On one hand, there seems to be an increasing will among food retailers to act in a socially and environmentally responsible way. On the other hand, it has been argued that they are, at best, engaging in a weak model of sustainable consumption which fits well together with common business goals (Jones et al., 2011).

Given that meat production is recognized as a major contributor to climate change; the aim of this paper is to explore and assess the ways and extent to which Swedish food retailers assist consumers to make climate smarter food choices, i.e., reduce their meat consumption, as well as try to identify potential and perceived difficulties towards doing this. Thus, the main focus is on food retailers' indirect impact from the food they supply. Contrary to the above mentioned studies, which are based on internet search and in-store observations, this paper mainly builds on personal interviews with representatives of Swedish food retailers.[2]

2. Review of literature

2.1. Climate smarter food choices

There is no general agreed-upon definition of climate smarter food (cf. Reisch et al., 2013; Brook Lyndhurst, 2012). Moreover, research on consumers' food-related environmental impact mostly deals with decision-making within a product group (e.g., meat) rather than between product groups (e.g., meat versus vegetables) (Jungbluth et al., 2000). Although some meat (e.g., beef) accounts for more GHG emission than other meat (e.g., chicken) the amount is still much more than for vegetarian protein alternatives. For example, The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) (2010) estimates that a serving of beef accounts for 4 times as much GHG emissions compared with pork, 12 times as much compared with chicken, and 60 times as much as a portion of vegetarian pea soup. Thus, Life-Cycle Assessments[3] (LCA) show that the most important food choice the average consumer[4] can make to reduce his or her food related climate impact is to consume less meat and dairy products (Steinfeld et al., 2006; Garnett, 2011).

According to statistics from the Swedish Board of Agriculture, the total consumption[5] of meat has increased in Sweden by more than 40 percent to 86 kilos per person and year during the period 1990–2010 (Swedish Board of Agriculture, 2013). From a health perspective the average Swede could decrease his or her meat consumption, without risking protein deficiency, and as a result contribute to a lower climate impact and probably also to better personal health in some cases (Swedish Board of Agriculture, 2013). However, consumers do not seem to relate environmental problems to food consumption (i.e., the food they eat and/or not eat but throw away) but to production (e.g., Lea and Worsley, 2008); and they rather blame marketing than view themselves as responsible for possible over-consumption (Pereira Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012). Besides, food choice is a complex issue, also for the environmentally concerned consumer. In particular for meat the issue of GHG emission may conflict with other environmental and/or ethical issues, such as biodiversity loss and animal welfare (Röös et al., 2014). Furthermore, findings from consumer research on organic food consumption show that consumers' environmental attitudes do not always transform into actual food choices and consumption behaviors (attitude–behavior gap) due to perceived higher prices, strong habits, perceived low availability, lack of marketing and information, lack of trust in the labelling scheme, and low perceived consumer effectiveness (Röös and Tjärnemo, 2011). It can be argued that the comparison between purchasing organic food and buying less meat is not entirely fair; however, it illustrates the important role of food retailers in fostering more environmentally sustainable food choices, not least with regard to changes in food consumption and buying habits.

2.2. Food retailers' corporate social responsibility

The idea that food retailers have a responsibility to assist consumers in making climate friendlier food choices can be derived

[1] Retail Forum for Sustainability is a contribution in the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy.

[2] The piece of research which is presented in this paper is part of a larger project, *Climate Labelling in Food Retailing,* which addresses the question in what ways food retailers can encourage consumers to make climate smarter food choices (see also Acknowledgment).

[3] For further explanations of LCA we refer to the literature in this field.

[4] By the average consumer we mean consumers in the developed and wealthy part of the world. The FAO's report *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options* (Steinfeld et al., 2006) highlights the need for a balanced view upon livestock food production. On one hand, livestock food production causes severe environmental problems but on the other hand, it provides livelihood as well as nutrition for many poor people in developing countries. While, an expected increase in meat and dairy product consumption in developing countries is favorable from a socio-economic and health perspective, (too) high intake of animal source foods (in particular red meat and animal fat) is associated with cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer in the developed part of the world (Steinfeld et al., 2006). Thus, Steinfeld et al. suggest a reduction in meat consumption in the developed and wealthy part of the world.

[5] Total consumption of meat is measured as carcass weight and includes the total amount of meat produced in and imported into Sweden minus the meat exported and meat not available for human consumption, as well as an estimation of the amount of meat in processed products (for example cured and canned meat, and frozen ready-cooked food).