

The future of meat consumption — Expert views from Finland

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Abstract

Meat consumption with large environmental and ethical implications is expected to grow in the future. Some studies, however, take the opposite view, that meat consumption is at a turning point because of a growing number of vegetarians and other factors in industrialized countries. This paper examines thirty nine Finnish experts' views on the development of meat consumption and analyses the explanatory grounds used by the experts in order to identify possible factors affecting meat consumption in the future. To ensure that different types of views would be represented, a new method of categorization of the experts was developed. In answer to the question; "What would constitute a preferable amount of meat consumption in Finland in the year 2030?", the average answer given by the experts was 66 kg per person per year and the median 71 kg, both of which would mean a drop from the current level of 72 kg. However, the average probable consumption foreseen by the experts was 75 kg and the median was also 75 kg. By analysing the grounds presented by the experts, the discussion part of the paper presents a selection of strategies that can be used to help decrease meat consumption: 1) aid the technological development of products that could replace foodstuffs that originate from animals, 2) use ad campaigns to increase consumer knowledge about animal rights and vegetarianism, 3) make political decisions to transfer agricultural production away from meat production and promote the broadening of the selection of alternatives to meat products in stores, and 4) place higher taxes on meat products.

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Abbreviations: kg, kilograms.

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1. Introduction

1.1. *The current understanding of the future of the meat consumption*

Most meat consumption forecasts have been approached from the simple perspective that when income levels rise, meat consumption also rises because meat is generally considered a normal good, meaning that when consumer income increases, meat demand increases [1,2]. This approach is understandable because meat has been traditionally regarded as a desirable and expensive food product in Western countries [3,4]. The most important attributes that consumers give to meat are taste, value for money and health [5,6].

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for example estimates that the trend towards the increased consumption of livestock products will continue in the following decades in the developed countries. The FAO estimates that in the year 2030 meat consumption will be as high as 100 kg per person per year in industrialized countries [7]. According to a World Bank report [8], the total global demand for meat is expected to grow by 56% between 1997 and 2020. Currently the variation in consumption levels is quite large. For example among the EU-15 countries, Spain consumed the most meat in 2004, a total of 135 kg per person. In Finland the amount of meat consumed is the lowest in the EU-15 countries, 72 kg per person [9].

The assessment for an ever growing trend in meat consumption is not, however, shared by all experts. Vegetarianism is seen by some as a factor that can affect meat consumption in developed countries [10]. Some even see the potential for a quite rapid end to the meat economy because of rising vegetarianism and the influence of the animal rights movement [11,12].

This paper investigates changes in future meat consumption that Finnish experts see as probable and preferable [13]. The objective of the study is to find out whether the continuation in the growth of consumption is seen as a generally preferable development or not by a large group of experts. The explanations stated by the experts are analysed by dividing them into those favouring an increase and those favouring a reduction in meat consumption. The purpose of this analysis is to achieve a holistic view of the factors affecting meat consumption in the long run. The discussion part of this paper outlines action that could be taken to achieve the preferable consumption levels. The type of research presented here thus represents that called for by Myers [14] where we try first to identify relevant factors and then assess the barriers to changing attitudes and behaviour in the direction of more sustainable consumption patterns.

1.2. *The importance of meat consumption to sustainable development*

Sustainable consumption practices have been traditionally approached from the narrow perspective of humans [15] or humans and ecosystems [16]. In the case of meat consumption, however, studying sustainability from this type of perspective can be limiting. A more holistic view is presented for example by Eckersley [17]. Dividing the natural world views into zoocentric and ecocentric viewpoints can help to better understand consumption practices. Furthermore, by dividing the human world views into humanistic and utilitarian, we can even better understand consumption practices.

People holding zoocentric world views have negative attitudes towards meat consumption in general as well as to the growth of meat consumption in industrialized countries. One example of zoocentric environmental discourse is the animal rights discourse. People holding ecocentric world views see growth in meat consumption as harmful, but they do not consider using animals as food to be harmful *per se*.

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