

# European consumers' response to sustainability labelling on food and drink packaging

Grunert KG <sup>1</sup>, Hieke S <sup>2</sup>, Wills J <sup>2</sup>, Palascha A <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aarhus University, Denmark

<sup>2</sup> European Food Information Council, Brussels, Belgium



## Background

In Europe, over 120 public and private sustainability-related food information schemes have been identified at EU or national level. Dietary choices may make an important contribution to meeting current environmental challenges, and informed choice is hoped to empower people to consume more sustainably. However, label overload and gaps in the understanding of sustainability may result in consumer confusion and limit the use of such labels. This study looked at consumers and sustainability more closely.

## Research questions

- Meaning and relevance of sustainability
- Familiarity with and understanding of environmental and ethical labels
- If and how sustainability information on packaging influences consumer food choice
- Possible trade-offs between environmental and ethical information against other purchase criteria when buying food

## Methods

Web-based survey and focus group discussions

4,408 men and women aged 18-65

6 EU countries: UK, Germany, Spain, France, Poland, Sweden

## Conjoint Analysis:

- 6 products: chocolate, coffee, ice cream, cereals, ready meals, soft drinks
- 4 attributes: environmental label (Fair Trade, Animal Welfare), ethical label (Rainforest Alliance, Carbon Footprint), nutritional value (high, medium, low) and price (regular, +/- 10%)

## Results and Discussion

**Most consumers have heard about the term 'sustainability',** and they relate it predominantly to environmental issues. However, the term is abstract and diffuse and therefore difficult to deal with.

**Consumers express concern about sustainability issues and would like to be informed about them.** However, people find it difficult to understand where sustainability can/should influence their food and drink purchases.

**Awareness of sustainability labels varies a good deal between countries, but is generally low.** Nevertheless, many consumers can guess the meaning of these labels in a roughly correct manner.

**In the context of purchase of food and drink, sustainability issues are not (yet) a priority.** Compared to issues related to health and nutrition, 'sustainability' is more difficult to grasp and therefore also more difficult to make relevant for consumers in their food and drink purchases.

**The Fairtrade logo was the most well-known and well-understood** in the study; the other labels (Rainforest Alliance, Animal Welfare and Carbon Footprint) were less recognised and understood.

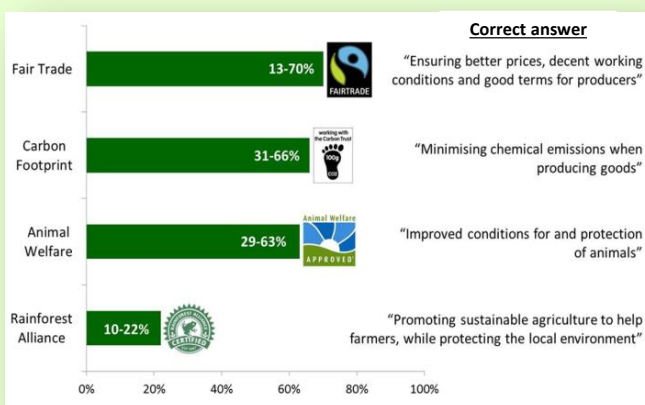


Figure 1: Sustainability labelling: percentage of correct answers across all 6 countries

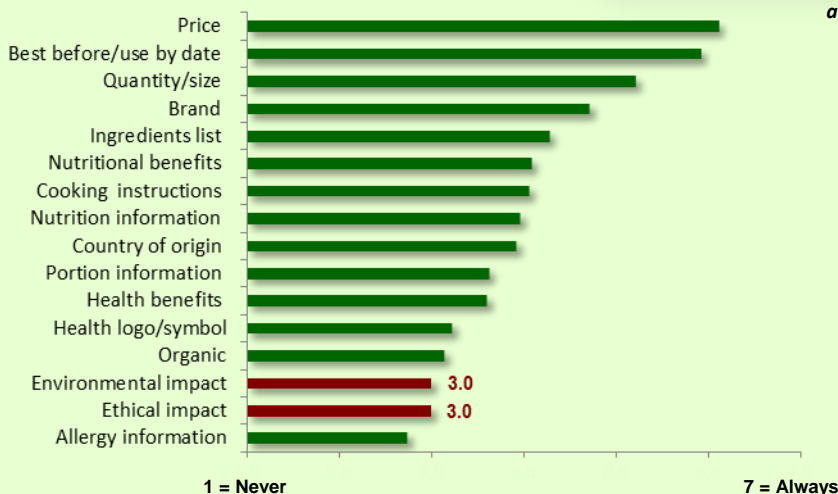


Figure 2: Information looked for when food and drink shopping

## Conclusions

This large-scale, representative European survey provides evidence that consumers are familiar with and show concern about sustainability and social awareness issues. However, results show that sustainability labels are less important when shopping compared to price and nutritional value. This could change when sustainability issues in the context of food and drink become more prominent in the public debate, as it has happened with issues of health and nutrition.