



LV CONVEGNO DI STUDI

METAMORFOSI VERDE
AGRICOLTURA, CIBO, ECOLOGIA

Complesso monumentale di San Pietro
Dipartimento di Scienze agrarie, alimentari e ambientali
PERUGIA 13-15 settembre 2018

Changing food consumption to increase its environmental sustainability: an application to Italy.

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Abstract

Agriculture and food production are strongly linked to the natural environment, on the one side they are highly dependent on natural resources and on the other they pose strong pressures on natural systems. Such pressures are also expected to increase with the need to feed a growing world population and with diet changes shifting towards more animal-based food products, especially in developing countries. This strengthens the need to involve single consumers in the search for solutions to global environmental problems like, for example, climate change. Indeed, there are interesting opportunities for reducing the environmental and climate change impacts of the food system by engaging with food consumers. Consumers themselves are increasingly becoming aware of the impacts of their everyday choices and there is an increased awareness for individual social responsibility. Moreover, knowledge society trends are empowering citizens and consumers that are becoming more and more used to having an active role in many different sectors. Indeed, change in the food system cannot be driven only by technological innovation but also by social innovation. In this context, it is important to study consumer attitudes toward environmentally sustainable food-related behaviours.

This work analyses the frequency of adoption, the motivations, and the barriers of 16 actions that consumers may undertake to reduce the environmental impacts of their everyday food choices. Such actions include decisions that are taken at the retail store and at home, before and after consumption. The aim is to evaluate feasible pathways to increase the environmental sustainability of food choices finding policies that might engage on the matter very different types of consumers. Indeed, the focus is on identifying a variety of behaviours that require different types of resources to be adopted, which may be available to different types of consumers. The originality of the work is to investigate jointly a large set of actions, focusing not only on those that require higher expenditures. Especially in urban contexts, money is not the only (or main) scarce resource. Another aim is to evaluate, for each action, the perceived likely outcomes of undertaking the behaviour (in terms of environmental, economic, and social impacts, and/or health-wise, or in terms of social and personal recognition) as these shape consumer attitudes toward the behaviour.

Data were collected via face-to-face interviews with 320 respondents in charge of food shopping and dietary choices of their household in two large cities in Italy: Milan and Palermo. A further data collection will take place also in Florence. Data was analysed by means dimensionality-reduction tools, and multinomial regression models. Preliminary results indicate that the most widespread actions are: not to buy from firms with a bad environmental reputation, to be careful of the quantities of food purchased, to be willing to change store to find more sustainable products. The main barriers are related to costs, time and effort depending on the action. However, attitudes, preferences, drivers and barriers change with socio-demographic and individual characteristics, highlighting that different types of consumers are willing to be sustainable – not only at different levels – but also in different ways. Indeed, differently from previous literature, given the larger variety of actions considered, our results show that not only ‘richer’ people are willing to be sustainable. The research provides policy recommendations on how to promote changes in consumption behavior.

Keywords: environmental sustainability, food choices, consumer attitudes