

## **WHY I THINK 'EATING YOUR LOCAL' IN ITS CURRENT FORM IS NOT A PANACEA FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

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EAT YOUR LOCAL IS A GOOD INITIATIVE TO BOOST SUSTAINABILITY BUT IT NEEDS TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE IN ORDER TO BE TRULY SUSTAINABLE. Eating your local has been a popular slogan particularly in the period following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns which exposed how vulnerable our food chains can be to global shocks. These 'eat your local' initiatives have been promoted by eco-centric consumers who have been branded 'locavores'. The idea of 'locavorism' is to only eat food that is produced locally or nearby with the belief that it has better quality and it leaves less carbon footprints. While I do not dispute the benefits of these initiatives, eating your local still has some disadvantages that warrant looking into.

Focusing on eating your local on mainly ecological grounds could be failing two other pillars of sustainability - the economic and the social. Sustainable development, defined in 1987 as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Report, 1987), is now more important than ever. Since the coining of this concept of sustainable development, there has been an increasing shift from a conventional 'business as usual' perspectives in many domains of day-to-day life to more sustainable models comprising three interdependent and interrelated components or dimensions in operations: the society, the environment and the economic. These components are consistent with the notion of the triple bottom line (TBL) of sustainability: people (the social), planet (the ecological) and profit (the economic).

According to a study conducted by the Wageningen Economic Research and Statistics Netherlands (CBS) for the ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, the Dutch agriculture sector holds an enviable leading position in the global market. For example, according to this study, in 2019 the Netherlands exported up to 94.5 billion Euros worth of agricultural products - a sector which had grown by 8 percent from the preceding years (90.4 billion Euros in 2018). What could be the impact of every nation focusing on 'eating own local' on this much needed revenue from agricultural exports? That will lead to some form of international food independence and isolationism which will greatly impact global trade, revenues and jobs. I acknowledge the fact that many countries in the world can simply not afford to survive on consuming their locals (due to poor agricultural lands, political instability etc), and there will always be the need to eat food produced in other countries. However, the main countries the Netherlands exports to are quite capable of surviving by 'eating their own locals' too - to an extent at least. For example, in 2019, 54% of the exports from the Netherlands went

to Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom and France - countries which are relatively capable of surviving on 'eating their own locals'. Therefore, isn't it ironical that we emphasize on eating our local and yet expect others with their own 'locals' to buy our exports?

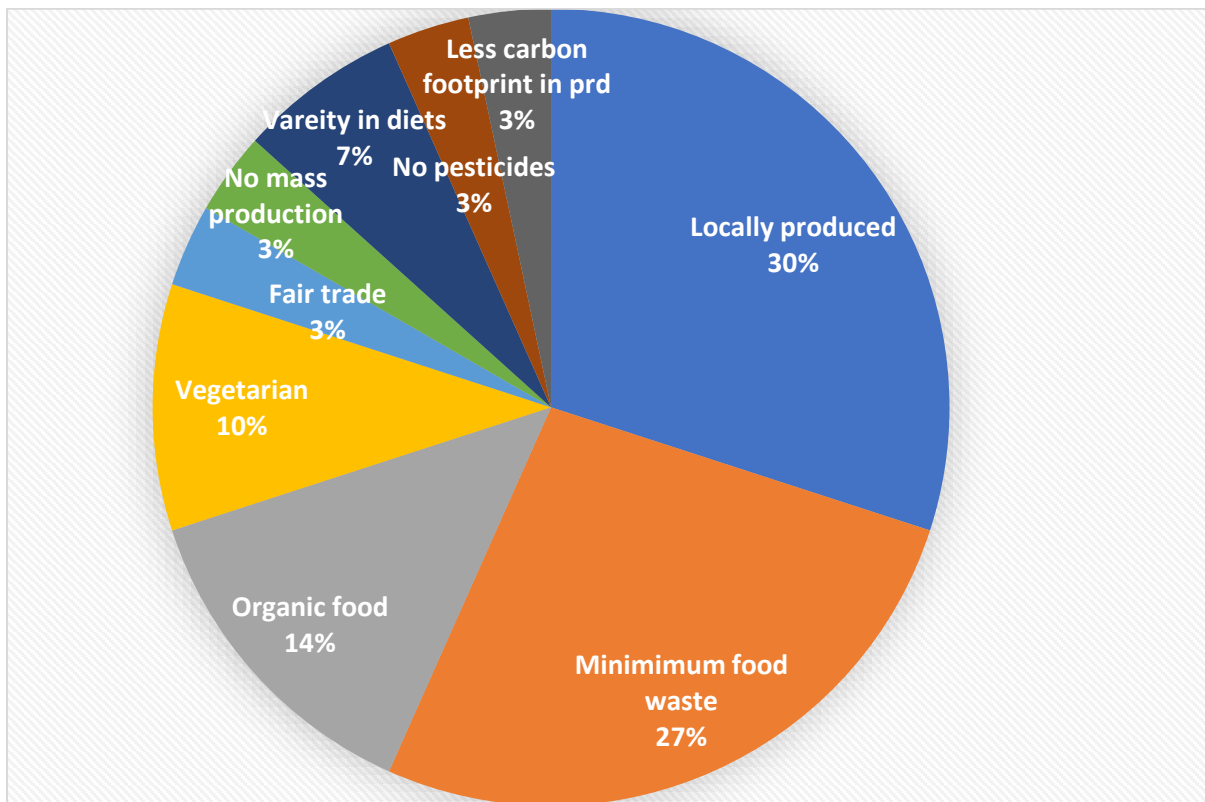
Furthermore, while early models of sustainability questioned the exclusive focus on the economic in many domains, there seems to be a paradigm shift in contemporary times with a slightly exaggerated focus on the ecological. In this new paradigm shift, the ecological seems to be taking forefront in debates about sustainability with the other pillars of sustainability taking backstage. Sustainability is becoming a concept which is increasingly seen only in ecological terms. This paradigm shift is also predominant in a recent survey I conducted among citizens of Almere (city in the Netherlands) which revealed that 30% of citizens attached local production to the concept of food being sustainable (See Figure 1). That accounts for the exaggerated or overhyped prominence of 'eat your local' initiatives which although good in ecological terms in that they shorten the food chain, fail to adequately address economic issues at a larger scale and social issues at a local scale too. The only vision of sustainable food which directly relates to the social on the Figure 1 is 'fair trade' and this accounts for only 3% of responses. That shows that even in popular discourse, social sustainability is significantly pushed to the backstage. This is also unsurprising considering that a lot of people are not really sure what sustainability actually means. One of my respondents JF said:

*It is not always easy to see which food is sustainable or not. If you haven't read a lot about it then it becomes hard to know which is sustainable or not in the supermarket. People don't usually have all the information needed to determine if products are actually sustainable or not. Producers or sellers often present a one-dimensional view of sustainability in products they sell.'*

Another respondent HX said:

*The problem is first to understand what sustainability is to each person. Some people don't even know what sustainable is. If you know what sustainable is then it could explain that to me, please? It could be easy to be sustainable if you know what sustainable is. If you don't know what sustainable is, then it could be difficult.*

**Figure 1: Citizens' understandings of sustainable food**



Concerning the local, there is generally a smaller selection of locally-grown food available because either certain foods can only be grown during certain times of the year, or certain foods cannot be grown at the 'local' at all. Therefore, if everyone starts eating local food only, there will be a significant number of people who will not have access to the foods they desire or need. The Netherlands, like most of Western Europe is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. According to the Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, at the end of 2015 one in eight people in the Netherlands was of non-western origin. This figure is expected to have increased in recent years with more global migration patterns. Eating your local could exclude the food desires of people in the Netherlands with non-western origins because cuisines in most of the households of these people is still largely based on cuisines in their countries of origins. A recently completed studies I conducted with FlevoCampus researchers revealed that traditional Dutch cuisine is only prepared in 45% of households in the Netherlands (from a predominantly ethnic Dutch sample). This means even ethnic Dutch people enjoy eating foreign dishes with ingredients that can either not be grown locally or can be best grown in other countries and imported to the Netherlands. See Figure 2 for a map of the distribution of the countries of origin with the most prevalent cuisines in households in the Netherlands. Focusing exclusively on promoting eating your local in the literary sense of the word will exclude the wishes of these households which desire to eat foreign produced and imported food.

**Figure 2: Origins of cuisines which people prepare at home in the Netherlands**



I recognise there are some local initiatives which have kick-started the production of some foods which form the basis of some of these foreign dishes in the Netherlands. One of such initiatives is *Onze Volkstuinen* in the Almere area (Flevoland, The Netherlands) which translates as ‘our allotments’. The word ‘onze’ in the initiative symbolizes the inclusiveness in the initiative. Originally a glasshouse for the growing of roses, *Onze Volkstuinen* is an example of how establishments in the Netherlands can adapt to dealing with open market competition from producers elsewhere.

Competition in the rose flower business has grown strongly in the past 10 years due to an increase in production in African and Asian countries. This has made growing roses in the Netherlands increasingly less competitive and it is based on this that *Onze Volkstuinen* was established. The former glasshouse for roses has been converted to a glasshouse with gardening allotments which citizens can rent and grow their own tropical crops. This has become an opportunity for citizens (from Suriname, Asia and Africa for example as well as ethnic Dutch citizens) to grow and consume foreign food in their own ‘local’ in Flevoland. This is a perfect illustration of inclusiveness in ‘eat your local’. More initiatives as such will considerably make ‘eat your local’ more inclusive and boost the sustainability element in the initiatives. However, as it stands, such initiatives are still in their infancy and much more will need to be done in this respect in order to make eat your local in the Netherlands more inclusive and more socially sustainable.

EAT YOUR LOCAL NEEDS TO BE MATCHED BY INCLUSIVE ‘GROW YOUR LOCAL’ INITIATIVES WHICH CATER TO THE NEEDS OF THE CONSUMER IN THE NETHERLANDS WHO PREFERS FOREIGN DISHES WITH FOREIGN INGREDIENTS.