

What do YOU think about the future of food?

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Introduction

Citizens in Almere think healthy food options are too expensive and there is the need to make healthy food more affordable to the average consumer.

Many experts agree that we need to change the way we eat. However, there is a lack of sufficient understanding on how people envision this change. The individuals are increasingly seen as consumers of knowledge about food rather than producers of knowledge. Against this background, we approached Almere's citizens as knowledgeable consumers aiming to explore what people think about the future of the food system.

What we did



Figure 1: Location of the photography exhibition: Forum Almere.

We were present at the Dutch Food Week (DFW) (see Figure 1) with an interactive photography exhibition on the 14th of October 2020. Prior to the exhibition, we carried out an exercise with students at Aeres (mostly teenagers) in which they presented their views about the present and the future of food through photographs. During the DFW exhibition, we presented the students' ideas about the future of food (Figure 2), and cordially invited the general public to join in conversations. The objective of the exhibition was to use the photographs to generate discussions that will get people to compare what they think about the future of food to what others think. We also designed negatively framed prompts about healthy and sustainable food and asked visitors to comment on these prompts. It has been shown that negatively framed messages are more effective than positively framed ones in prompting consumers to engage in environmentally sustainable behaviors. We received over 35 visitors. The visitors were a diverse group of Almere residents from several ethnic backgrounds.

What we found out

Almost everyone agreed that eating locally produced food is healthier and more sustainable. Also, most people recognized the importance of eating healthier and sustainable food. However, key barriers to healthy food transition centered around the price of healthy and sustainable food options. Despite the value of healthy and sustainable food, most people felt that healthy and sustainable food options are too pricey. The following people we spoke to had this to say:

I grew up in Aruba and there, snacks are sweet potatoes and pumpkins. But when I came to the Netherlands, I realized snacks here are unhealthy products such as candy. In Aruba, healthy food options are cheap, but here in the Netherlands, healthy food options are expensive, and that's the problem. So, people's priority here is affordable food before healthy and sustainable food. (Roline, Almere)

When you are a single mum with 4 children and you want to feed your children, and it is 10 Euros for example per piece of organic chicken, then you really don't have any options. You

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Dit is een foto van een heerlijke cocktail met perzik, prosecco en roze marjolein. Voor mij betekent dit dat ik kies voor kwaliteit boven kwantiteit (hoeveelheid). Ik voel me er beter bij om één cocktail te drinken en daar echt van te genieten, dan 3 biertjes die goedkoper zijn, maar die ik eigenlijk toch niet echt lekker vind. Ik denk dat het in de toekomst belangrijk is voor mezelf en voor iedereen om na te denken over waarom je iets eet of drinkt."

Julien, Aeres Almere

Nepveles heeft dezelfde smaak en textuur als echt vlees en is zelfs gezonder voor je. Het productie-proces voor nepveles is ook een stuk dier- en milieuvriendelijker

Kevin, Aeres Almere



Figure 2: Example of students' photographs about their visions of the future of food.

just have to go for the cheaper option to feed your family even if it is unhealthy and unsustainable. I think a lot of people will like to make healthy food transitions but lack the financial means to do so. (Marjolein, Almere)¹

These concerns about the price of healthy and sustainable food options led some of our visitors to view a healthy and sustainable eating habit" as a class habit, reserved for the educated and high- or middle-income citizens. One visitor said;

A lot of people here are not rich or very educated. In cities like Amsterdam and Den Haag, where people are richer and more educated, they will be more interested in healthy and sustainable food projects than here in Almere. (Jeroen, Almere)

Therefore, when discussing **future pathways** with the visitors, we gathered that most people's idea of a healthy and sustainable future centered around making healthy and sustainable food options cheaper and accessible for the lower-income groups.

Some other people felt these changes have to begin with the micro (the individual) before getting to the macro (policymakers). One visitor said;

I think healthy food transitions need to happen from two sides. Firstly, people need to individually want to eat healthier and more sustainable food. Secondly, supermarkets should pick up on this change in consumer habits and provide the healthy options. The government is not as powerful as people think when it comes to driving healthy food transitions because the government cannot make it compulsory for anyone to eat anything. It has to start from the individuals. (Leroy, Almere)

One other observation from talking to the citizens of Almere is that healthy food is often limited to vegetables and fruit. This is corroborated by a related study we conducted which revealed that 50 percent of people in Almere consider healthy food to be vegetables and fruits. Therefore, this limits access to a range of other food options which are not fruits and vegetables, are healthy, and could be more affordable to the consumers.

Conclusion

This exploratory study revealed how the importance of eating healthy and sustainable food is a well-known concept across our sample, and is widely associated with local food production. Therefore, this result suggests that local/regional food systems could represent a concrete way to improve food consumption patterns. Additionally, despite the recognized value of eating healthily and sustainably, a feeling of exclusion emerged. Being recognized as pricy, healthy and sustainable food was perceived as 'reserved' for a population niche consisting of high or middle-income citizens. This feeling of exclusion also shaped participants' views of the future. Their visions mostly centered around making healthy and sustainable foods cheaper and accessible for the lower-income groups. Therefore, more efforts are required to make healthy and sustainable options more affordable across different groups in the population.

¹ The names used at the end of quotes are pseudonyms to conceal the identities of respondents

Figure 3: Engaging with Almere citizens about the future of food at the Dutch Food Week



