



**AERES**  
HOGESCHOOL  
ALMERE

Almere united voedsel club:

# Building inclusive healthy and sustainable food narratives

**Food and Healthy  
Living Group**

**Research assistants:**

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**Lead researcher:**

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## Aim and objectives

- **The aim was to study the needs, opportunities and effects of citizen engagement in the urban food system transition.** This addresses the issue of - 'how', 'in what ways' and 'through what methods' - citizens can be engaged in the developments towards a more sustainable and healthy regional food system. The research project sought to investigate the roles citizen engagement can take in the transformation of the urban food environment towards healthier and sustainable food consumption patterns.
- **Multiple methods are necessary to create spaces for forward oriented thinking and practice in food system transformation.** These spaces can help create an open dialogue in which different stakeholders can have their say on: what problems can be solved; how these

problems can be solved; and what the future of food consumption should look like. Inclusion methodologies should seek to open up such conversations and make participation easy to all types of stakeholders.

- **The following questions were answered in this study;**

1. What you understand by healthy food?
2. What you understand by unhealthy food?
3. How you see the future of healthy food?
4. What can facilitate this wish of a healthier food future?
5. What can inhibit the realisation of this healthier food future?



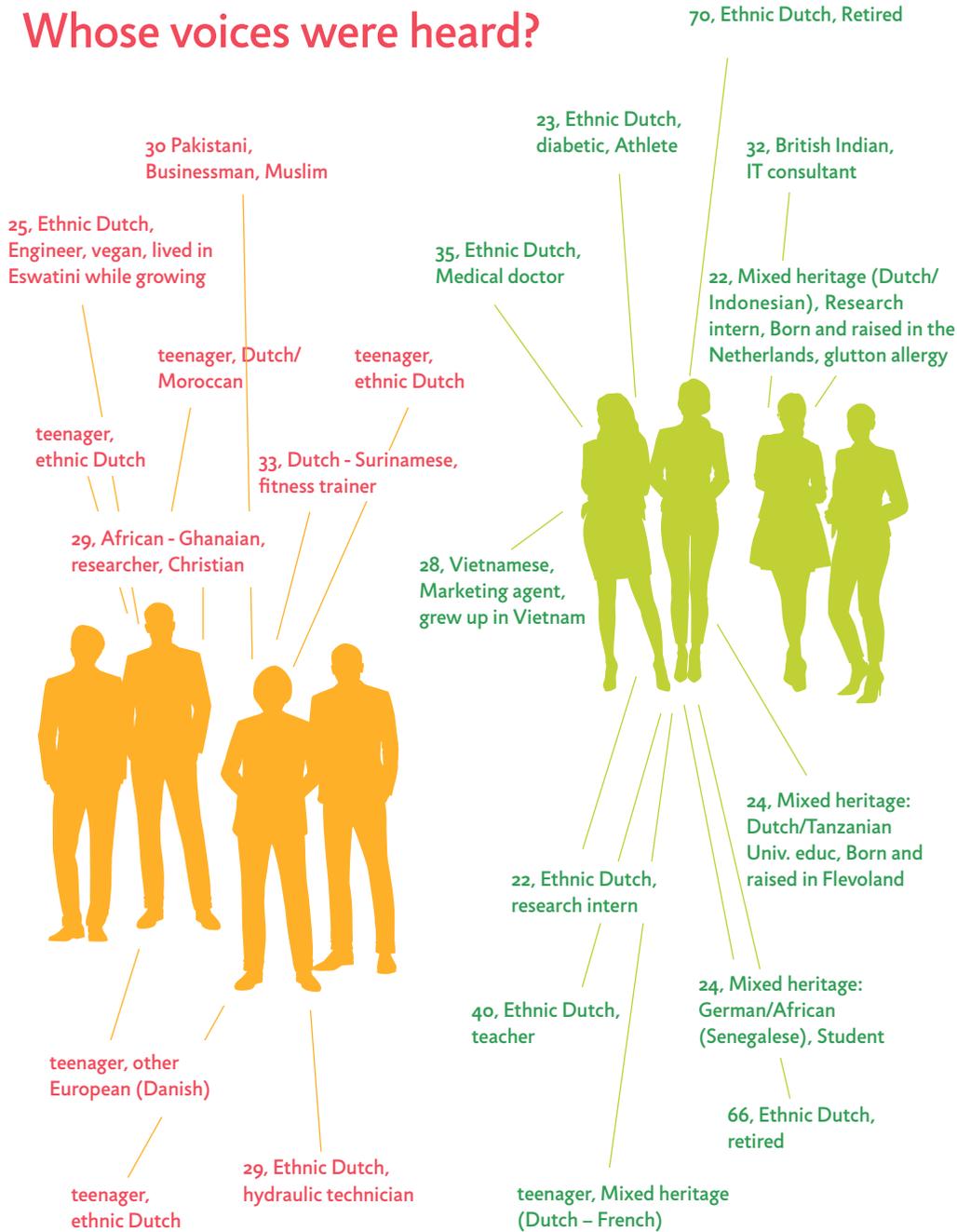
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## How the data were collected

As stated before, several methods were used to give citizens the opportunity to express themselves. This was done to ensure a diverse representation of citizens and also, because different places and times mean different things to people. Therefore, these methods reached out to people in their different circumstances.



# Whose voices were heard?



# Understandings of unhealthy food appear to unite opinion more than those of healthy food.

An overwhelming majority of photographs describing unhealthy food point to the nutritional disadvantages of certain foods. No photograph presented unhealthy food as food which is not tasty or does not make the consumer happy.

However, when it comes to healthy food, a significant number of photographs make reference to 'happy food' (20%). This is food which might not necessarily offer any nutritional advantages, but their intake makes consumers happy. It is worth noting that a majority (67%) of photographs which present healthy food as happy food (or beyond nutritional value) were taken by people with migrant backgrounds.

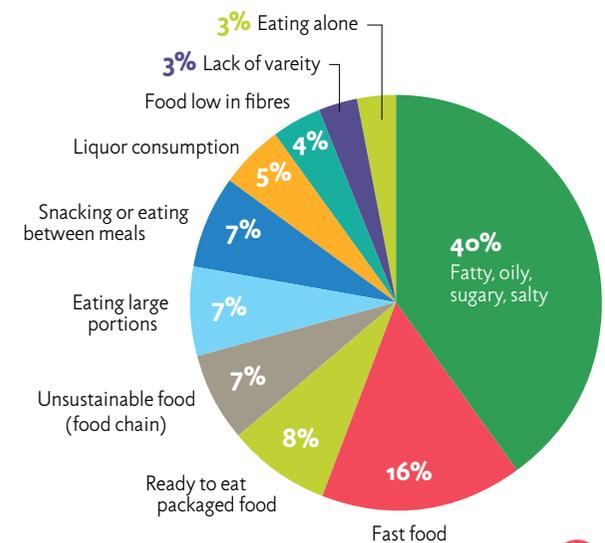


YES, JUST BECAUSE IT IS FAST DOESN'T MEAN IT IS RUSHED, BUT IT COULD ALSO BE FATTY

# Citizens' understandings of unhealthy food

(based on everyday practice)

Fatty/Salty/Oily and Sugary food rank high on citizens' understandings of unhealthy food.

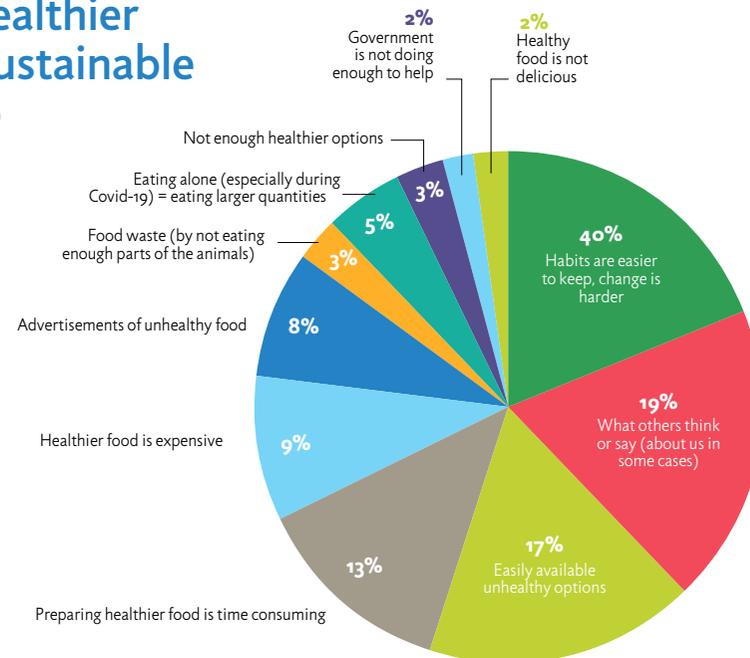


# DESIRED FOOD FUTURES

'At home we say this sometimes about eating something labeled as healthy: "this must be very healthy because the taste is pretty mediocre".' (BM)

1. Consume less meat 13%
2. Eating/cooking together to derive happiness from food 12%
3. More home/self-prepared meals 10%
4. More healthy options which are delicious too 9%
5. Eat/shop local products 7%
6. Grow your own food more 6%
7. Food portion control 6%
8. Consume more fairtrade products 6%
9. More healthy kid menus at restaurants 4%
10. Eat more vegetables 4%
11. 'Cleaning-up' fastfood by making it more healthy 3%
12. Order freshfood online more to overcome inconvenience 2%
13. Less food packaging with plastics 1%
14. More commercials of healthy food 1%
15. Less sugary foods 1%
16. Eat leftovers to reduce food waste 1%
17. Healthier versions of the unhealthy foods we are 'addicted' to 1%
18. More awareness on what is healthy/unhealthy 1%
19. More quick to prepare recipes 1%
20. Less deep fried food 1%
21. Eating outdoors more for happiness 1%
22. Eating more food with medicinal value 1%

# Factors which could inhibit a desired healthier and more sustainable food future



## The problem is what others say or think (about us)

One participant said, 'At parties here in the Netherlands, we sit in circles with a lot of unhealthy food on the tables. When you don't eat people often ask, "are you on diet?" in a mocking way. When you get this kind of reaction then you are more pressured to eat what is on the table even when you consider it unhealthy. I feel like that kind of pressure does not allow you to make healthier food choices.' (JF)

One of the main obstacles to healthy and sustainable food transformation in Almere and its environs is what others say and think to and about those who attempt to change the way they eat.

Another said, 'I want to be able to eat a hamburger without someone making me feel guilty as in being the only one who doesn't care about the planet. Eating a hamburger doesn't mean I care less about the planet than a vegetarian. If you have a collective of people shaming people for eating certain things then that could negatively affect food system transformation' (FL).

# 'Fake news' exists even in food discourse

We can look at the influence of 'fake news' in talk about food. A related concept to fake news, 'hearsay' is largely used within the domain of legal issues. Out of legal domain hearsay is understood as information received from other people that one cannot adequately substantiate. In the context of post-2016 United States presidential elections hearsay will fall within the context of 'fake news'. The lead-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections was characterized by deep tensions between the then-candidate Donald Trump and news media organizations which gave rise to a nation-wide discourse on fake news. 'Fake news' has taken on new symbolic meanings to signal a post-truth era where conventional facts are deeply challenged. In the context of food in this project, this takes on new meanings of how unsubstantiated facts about food are propagated by word of mouth - fake food news. Here are some quotes and photographs from participants on fake food news and how that could affect eating practices:



The clock on the photo. A common excuse is often time. People often complain that healthy food takes too long to cook but that's really not the case. I am retired and haven't worked in a long time which means I have all the time in the world and I am always home. But, I still catch myself complaining sometimes that I don't have time to cook healthier meals. There are many healthy recipes that can be quickly prepared. It is just what people say that stays in my head. (Respondent LT).

This is a photo of food from a takeaway shop. They often don't let you know how much calories are in these meals so you don't even know what you are eating. Everyone says it is fast food and it saves time you will need in cooking yourself. However, its often something you could cook yourself in the same amount of time it is made and delivered but people often think when it is fast food then it must be quicker to get to the dinner table than cooking yourself - because everyone says so. (Respondent HK)



Based on the findings of this research, such 'fake food news' is often negative and either inhibits healthier food practices or promotes unhealthy eating. For instance, out of the 19% of photographs which reported 'what others say' as the leading reason for finding it difficult to change to healthier food practices, 89% of the photographs revealed negative influences or inhibiting factors towards transformation from unhealthy to healthy eating practices.

# Being surrounded by supportive people could enhance healthy food transformations

There is hope in using what is said or done by others to promote healthier eating practices if people have the right social networks around them. For instance, there were some responses from some participants which revealed the potential that lies in using what is said or done by others to promote healthier eating. Participant VT said:



I read a scientific paper and they confirmed that red meat is not good not only for your body but also for the environment. (Participant VT, Almere).



Another, participant FL highlighted how being surrounded by positive talk (discourse) such as that from supportive friends and family can have a positive influence on changing the way people eat. He said:

I also think that it was easy for me to stop eating chocolates because a lot of people around me were complaining about the calories in chocolate not being good for you. I know a lot of them who actually stopped eating chocolates too. So, that helped me in leaving chocolates out of my diet. (Participant FL, Almere)

On the other hand, a lack of this support could be problematic. For example at the Dutch Food Week exhibition in 2020 we overheard a young couple in an argument. The man was interested in reading the messages we put up about what healthy food is. However, his girlfriend was not interested and she dragged him away saying:

You don't want to hear what they are talking about. Just some more boring talk about healthy food. I am sick of all that. I eat whatever I want. (Unidentified member of the public)

# Listen to your bodies

Our bodies convey much stronger messages to us about our eating habits than any other source of information. For instance, one participant said:

You don't really need anyone to educate you on the good or bad of what you are eating. For example, if you eat only fast-food for one week your body will let you know it's bad for you through the weight you will gain. If you eat salads a lot you will feel your body is light and fresh. When you eat too much you feel heavy too. So, just listen to the message from your body and you can be able to tell if what you are eating is good for you or not. (Participant HX)

Based on the quote from HX, it can be emphasized that people's bodies are key sources of information which require as much attention as the other sources of information about food knowledge. The body as a messenger is also closely linked to other discourse. For example, changes in body weight or shape will be picked up by others and can lead to either body shaming or body praising. Body praising can encourage people to stay on the path of healthier food practices. On the other hand, body shaming can either lead to people falling back to unhealthy eating practices or waking up and making changes in the way they eat (transformation towards healthier eating).

However, we need to be careful here because body weight as well as other factors such as beauty and attractiveness are cultural conventions which could be context-dependent.

For example, while being overweight is a symbol of health and wealth within some non-Western cultures, in Western ones it signifies a low level of self-discipline, laziness, and lack of control which is often projected in poor diets and lifestyles. This is besides the fact that being overweight can also be a result of several genetic syndromes caused by mutation or chromosomal abnormalities, such as Prader-Willi and Bardet-Biedl syndromes - not always unhealthy diets or lifestyles. The most prominent theoretical approach to the socio-cultural creation of body weight dissatisfaction or satisfaction and associated food pathology is the tripartite of influence of the following factors: 1) family, peers, mass media; 2) internalization of societal appearance standards; and 3) social comparison processes regarding body appearance (where people want to have a similar bodyweight as others they know). These three factors can determine what sort of discourse people get from their bodies because they set the norm against which people can compare themselves.



**BODY PRAISING CAN ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO STAY ON THE PATH OF HEALTHIER FOOD PRACTICES**





**'When you are a single mum with four 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 (but to eat cheap fast food). You 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, citizen of Almere)

**'This is about time for me. I am so busy at my work that I don't really get the time to cook or eat healthier food. I know it is a silly excuse but it is what it is. When I come back from work and I am tired I really don't have much time to cook. I just want to flick a pizza in the evening and get the eating out of the way. When I come back from work I need to go to bed early and also wake up early'.**

(ES, citizen of Almere)

## The effect of Covid-19 on food pattern transformations is more complex than often assumed

Different demographic groups and in different situations experience the effect of Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns on their food patterns in different ways. To younger people (teenagers), the lockdowns have led to healthier habits as they drink less. To people who live alone, the lockdowns have led to unhealthier habits because they feel unhappier eating without company, and eating alone also means less portion control and eating more frequently. To people who live with other people in the same household, Covid-19 has been positive because due to lockdowns, they see their housemates/family members more. Thus, they eat together more and eating together equals happiness which equals healthy eating.



*'This is me hiking and camping here. It shows I really like eating outdoors with company. Because of corona I don't have the opportunity to hang out with friends and eat more but it is something I will definitely continue to do after the pandemic. I think after the pandemic and in future people should eat out more and together because that means deriving more happiness from food'. (WT)*



**'What you are seeing is my dinner. This is me eating alone. Although the meal is delicious and healthy for your body in nutrition, my mental well-being is not good. I think eating alone like this in this pandemic is bad for my mental health. The sadness of being and eating alone in this pandemic has made me eat more. So, I think the future from where we are now is one of cherishing being together because we weren't created to be alone. I hope this realization serves as a lesson in other aspects of life especially food - the need to eat together for mental health'. (CH)**

*'I normally drink about five bottles of beer per day. During corona I am stuck at home so I drink less as there are no parties to go to or get together with friends which often serve as occasions to drink more. It is easier to drink 10 beers when out than at home. So, in a way the Covid-19 has helped in reducing my beer consumption. I rarely drink more than two beers at home, but I often lose count when I go out'. (FL)*

*'This is about how we should eat in future. We used to eat separately because people were always busy doing something or going somewhere. But, thanks to the corona situation we are spending more time together at home and therefore, we are eating more together. I think even after corona we should continue to appreciate the value of eating together with friends and family'. (SB).*



## Sixty-six percent of citizens contest the way the term 'organic' is being used in food

These citizens either don't really understand the meaning of the term, think others do not understand the meaning of the term, feel that the term is being misused by people on social media, or that the term is exploited by others for commercial interests.



**'I think it is a buzz word that not everyone understands. The word means so many different things and that way it also gets misunderstood and misused a lot. It is important but we need to understand what it means. Labelling of food like that can be very misleading because some people are using it just for marketing to get their products sold. I think organic food in itself is important, not only because of the ingredients in the food, but also for the wider ecosystem'. (ES)**

**'A lot of questionable products are labelled as organic. I think the concept in itself is good. I don't think people really understand what organic is. The definition is quite vague and for that reason it can be misinterpreted in several ways. People make it look like eating organic is the only way to eat healthy. Organic doesn't necessarily mean healthy. You can have unhealthy organic food. People act like as soon as it is labelled organic then it is good to eat'. (FG)**

**'Well! Well! Well!. What is organic really? Most of us normal people do not really understand what organic is'. (SA)**

**'I think a lot of people who buy organic food don't even know what it means. I don't even know what it really means ha ha ha ha. You can just charge a lot of money for anything with an organic label and people will be willing to still pay for it because it is becoming fashionable to consume organic'. (FL)**

## Some citizens with migrant backgrounds do not feel the 'hype' around the concept of organic food

This is mainly because organic food is considered as the norm and not the exception in some of the lower-middle-income countries the citizens come from. This is despite the fact that farming practices are shifting from the conventional methods which are largely organic to dependence on chemicals in many low-middle-income countries. Also, there is increasing dependence on imported food which

is often not organic in lower income countries. However, organic food is still not yet a 'buzz word' as it is higher-income countries. The widely held assumption is still that in lower-income countries, foods is still largely grown or processed without synthetic fertilizers, genetic modification or pesticides. Hence, the consideration of 'organic' as the norm in these regions.

**'If we look at cultures I will say for example that in Peru the brand organic will not have any effect on people. People will look at it as just an excuse to charge people more. People will look at two eggs and see they look the same and you won't convince them to pay more for one because it is organic and the other isn't. However, in the Netherlands people will be more willing to pay that extra euro for the organic because the word 'organic' has much more of an impact here'. (KP of Peruvian origin)**



**'I come from Vietnam and there is more organic food in Vietnam than inorganic food. That has made me appreciate the quality of organic food more - mainly in the way the food is produced. For example, in Vietnam when I buy vegetables from the streets I don't doubt how the vegetables are produced. I know the vegetables come from the local farms and sometimes I even know the farmers. Here and especially in the supermarkets, I don't even trust the products when they say organic. When I buy food with the label "organic" on it I still feel unsure'. (HX of Vietnamese origin)**

# Yes, this confirms what you already thought. A majority of the food advertised on the mass media and public platforms is unhealthy

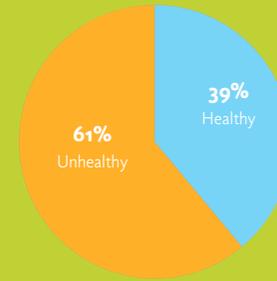


Fenna Geijp

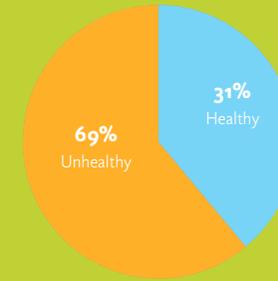
According to research conducted by Fenna Geijp (Aeres research assistant under the supervision of Harrison Esam Awuh), there is no significant difference in the balance between healthy and unhealthy food commercials between government-funded TV channels and commercial TV channels. In the newspapers (OnsAlmere and Almere Deze Week), there was only one period (March – April 2020) in which there were more

healthy advertisements. This period probably coincided with the new 'eat your local' initiatives which became popular at the onset of Covid-19. However, in the periods leading up to the holiday and festive seasons (Sintaklas and Christmas), the advertisements of unhealthy food products increased. In the shopping mall of Almere Stad, 58% of the advertisements on restaurants and shops showed unhealthy food products.

NPO 1



NPO 2

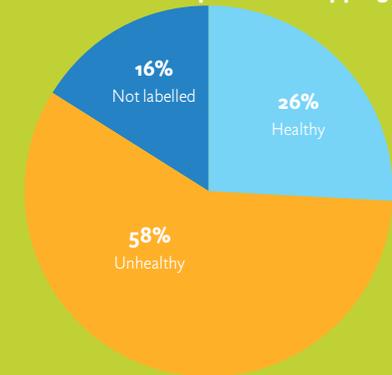


RTL 4



Restaurants and shops in the shopping mall

SBS 6



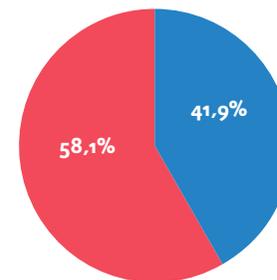
## The mass media (amongst others such as family and friends) plays a significant role as citizens' source of information about food



Jolien Flipse at a public presentation of the online forum for deliberation

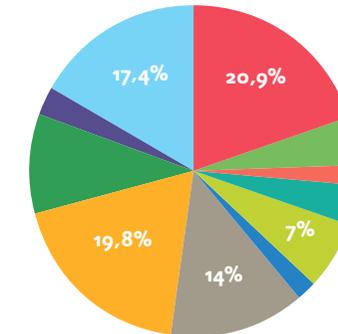
To support the previous findings of Fenna Geijp, a survey by Jolien Flipse (Aeres research assistant under the supervision of Harrison Esam Awuh) shows how important the media and public platform are in citizens' food environment. Jolien Flipse found out that a considerable 14% of people get their information about food through advertisements on the mass media (TV and newspapers).

Met welk geslacht identificeert u zichzelf?



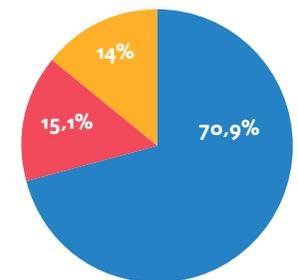
- Man
- Vrouw
- Anders
- Zeg ik liever niet

Via welke bron krijgt u het meeste informatie over voeding? (kies er 1)



- Boek
- Media (kranten, tijdschriften, tv)
- Sociale media
- Voedingsblogger of -vlogger
- Een app
- Website
- Vrienden of familie
- Gesprek met een gezondheidsprofess ...

Bent u geboren in Nederland?



- Ja (mijn ouders en ik zijn geboren in Nederland)
- Ja (ik ben in Nederland geboren, maar één of beide van mijn ouders is van buiten Nederland)
- Nee

# Online Forum for public deliberation by Jolien Flipse and Emily Whyman

Jolien Flipse in cooperation with another research assistant Emily Whyman (Food Active, United Kingdom) also established an online platform to enable public deliberation. Citizens can go on the platform and exchange ideas about food and through this process, learn from each other. The platform is also being used by our colleagues from Flevo Campus to investigate what citizens think about Sopropro as the food of the future. The reason for creating an online deliberation platform was in response to limitations of face-to-face deliberation during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Jolien Flipse



Volgens onderzoek van Jolien Flipse (onderzoekstagiaire bij Aeres) onder respondenten van het forum en de enquête De Toekomst van Eten komt naar voren dat gezond eten voor velen betekent: het eten van groente en fruit, gevarieerd eten en eten volgens de Schijf van Vijf van het Voedingscentrum. Ook mentale voldoening krijgen van voeding is gezond eten. Het gebrek aan tijd, gemak, de prijs van gezonde voeding, ongezonde verleidingen van lekkere dingen weerhouden respondenten van gezond eten (in de toekomst). Wat kan helpen naar

gezonder eten in de toekomst is beschikbaarheid van gezonde voeding (in kleinere dorpen of op scholen), biologisch eten, goedkopere gezonde voeding, recepten met instructies en inzicht en tips in gezondheid. De toekomst van eten ligt volgens de respondenten bij een moestuin of lokaal eten (bijvoorbeeld met behulp van verticale landbouw) en samen eten. Respondenten verkrijgen kennis over voeding vooral via familie of vrienden (20%). In het overdragen van informatie over voeding zijn met name ouders een belangrijke bron.

## De toekomst van eten



Emily Whyman



## Photovoice (with a total of about 320 photos) served as a mirror because it provided participants the platform to re-examine their current eating habits and possibly make changes

*I'm starting with the man in the mirror I'm asking him to change his ways  
And no message could have been any clearer  
If you want to make the world a better place  
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change  
Na-na-na, na-na-na  
Na-na, na-na*

(Michael Jackson, 1987)

'I found that using photos made me rethink existing prejudices about the food. It made me ask more questions about my food (e.g on whether the stock cubes are healthy or not?). So, my impression was good and even surprising to myself. I learned from taking photos to pay attention to detail and to question what I eat more'. (KP)

'I found it very interesting in the way that this visual material provokes and elicits a lot of memories, stories, and decisions behind each photo. For me, the combination of visualization, interpretation and presentation about my photo choices make my answers much more vivid, detailed, and informative to me as well. I learned about myself concerning food'. (HX)

*'Because the food I was talking about was visible on the photos before me, I could remember the decisions I took before I prepared, bought and ate a particular food at a point in time. I believe it nudged me positively to elaborate on the healthy/unhealthiness of the respective food'. (SA)*

'Holistically, the method got me to be even more confronted with how much I hate plastics!! Oh oh I did find it a little hard to make photos of any food in which plastics were not visible'. (RB)

Harrison Esam Awuh and Claudia Segreto (Aeres Almere Lectoraat) were present at the Dutch Food Week (DFW) on 14th of October 2020 with an interactive photography exhibition. They carried out an exercise with students of Aeres Almere in which the students presented their views about the present and the future of food through photographs. Members of the public were cordially invited to join in conversations with the students. The objective of the public deliberation exercise was to use the photographs to generate discussions that will enable people to compare what they know with what others know.



Public deliberation at the DFW revealed four kinds of citizens: 1. Those who passed-by without paying much attention to what was going on; 2. Those who engaged in discussions to express their disapproval of healthy and sustainable food (HSF) ideology and promote their own contradictory views; 3. Those who came, saw, did not engage in any discussion, and left; 4. Those who engaged in discussions to share complementary ideas about HSF.

The last group (4) made up the majority of citizens who engaged in discussions. Most people expressed positive views on the need for healthier and sustainable food transformations. 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 transformations 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 transformations. I mean the government cannot make it compulsory for anyone to eat anything. It has to start from the individuals'. (Leroy, Almere)



# Recommendations and avenues for further research



In this project we have used diverse methods as a means of attaining more inclusion. Inclusion here has not only been demographic, but it has also been about reaching out to people in different circumstances in time and space. The relative success of these methods highlights the need to correct and expand the methods to reach out to more people in the Flevoland Province (going beyond Almere if possible).

One major challenge with the online platform has been to motivate more people to get on and participate consistently. A recommendation in this regard has been to improve the software to ensure that participants do not need to sign in to participate (reducing the threshold). Another recommendation from the participants has been to use the local newspapers to promote the platform and also set up a tangible reward system for consistent participants (e.g. gift vouchers).



The effect of self-styled healthy eaters on other people's motivation to eat healthier or not is still very much an understudied field. In this research, we have seen how shaming of supposed unhealthy eaters by supposed healthy eaters could lead to people developing more resistance towards healthy and sustainable eating patterns. There is the need to investigate this relationship more. The outcome of such an investigation could lead to the designing of more socially or morally acceptable approaches to nudge people towards healthier food choices.

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