



Consumers: Considered and consulted more, but not yet influential

Do today's consumers have more influence than ever before? Their preference for local and environmentally friendly products is increasingly gaining ground in Switzerland. The same applies to organisations that represent consumer interests and certain movements promoting sustainable consumption. But in practice, various hurdles prevent consumers from having a greater political influence. An NRP 69 research group investigated this paradox. It proposes various measures that could improve consumer involvement in regulating the food system.

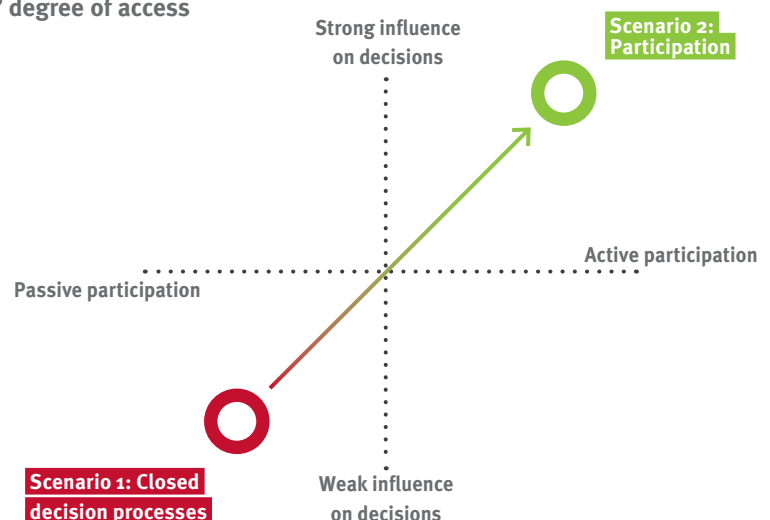
Various media and scientific trends support the view that consumer involvement now plays an important role in the transition to more sustainable food systems. Consumers should be able to make their voice heard by decision makers, either via their purchasing decisions, direct involvement in the democratic process or by getting involved in movements such as those campaigning for food sovereignty. This would enable them to constitute a new centre of power and influence the regulation of the food system. But does this viewpoint tie in with what's actually happening in Switzerland? To answer this question, a group of researchers at the University of Lausanne and Agridea investigated the political processes involved in making the Swiss food system more sustainable. They analysed the context within which consumers participate in the decision-making

processes relating to sustainable nutrition, and examined the impact of their involvement.

The researchers identified three ways in which consumers are involved, more or less actively, in decision-making processes. The most passive type of participation is image-based; in other words, when decision-makers draw on opinion surveys, market studies or sales statistics to identify consumer preferences. The second way is by representation through interest groups, for example in the form of lobbying. And finally, consumers can attempt to directly influence decision-making by means of their own personal actions, for example through their purchasing decisions (boycotting or buycotting), via activist movements or via participative bodies. This third way calls for the most active form of commitment.

Evolution of citizens-consumers' degree of access

Citizen-consumers' involvement can evolve according to two competing scenarios. In one case, the influence of dominant actors continues to prevail and the decision processes remain closed. Consumers' involvement is passive and has a weak influence. In the second case, the decisional systems evolve towards pluralism. Consumers become influential actors in food governance.



The research group then investigated the extent to which these types of involvement influenced the decisions taken by government and companies in the food industry. To do this, they carried out a comprehensive analysis of four decision-making processes relating to sustainability and the development of food labelling. The case studies they chose related to subjects that have been addressed in Switzerland over the last 25 years: Swissness, organic farming, climate labels and a regional brand (“Genève Région – Terre Avenir”). With the help of a document analysis, interviews with key stakeholder representatives and meetings with the project advisory group, the researchers identified and compared the stimuli, phases and milestones of each decision-making process.

Influence declines as discussions progress

The results revealed a paradox. On the one hand, there were various indications that consumers are involved in the decision-making processes. Their consumption patterns and readiness to pay (first way) constituted a strong stimulus in all the case studies examined, and motivated and legitimised the actions of political and commercial stakeholders. The interest groups (second way) also played an active role, particularly in parliamentary discussions about Swissness. And the movements promoting sustainable food (third way) provided a strong stim-

ulus for organic farming and the “Genève Région – Terre Avenir” brand.

On the other hand, the case studies showed that the consumers’ influence on the substance of the decisions remained limited. Their involvement was mainly passive or transferred to people who represent consumer interests. In general, the importance attached to their preferences and claims decreased as discussions progressed. Political and commercial stakeholders were more likely to resort to surveys and statistics to justify their actions, without actively involving consumers. Consumer organisations had trouble making their voices heard on a political level, even if they were frequently consulted. Reasons for this included more powerful interest groups, an imbalance of resources, and difficulties in making a significant impact on politics “behind-the-scenes”. As with the influence of citizens’ initiatives, the influence of consumer associations also declined as soon as discussions turned to technical aspects or commercial issues.

These conclusions put the general view of consumer involvement into perspective with regard to regulating the food system. The researchers can see various measures that could be used to increase the influence of consumers and consumer organisations (see box).

Further information:
www.nrp69.ch

Recommendations

More opportunities for consumer involvement

The project underlines the fact that consumers today have a limited influence over decisions regarding sustainable nutrition. To remedy this situation, the researchers recommend various possible solutions:

- Extend the right of appeal of consumer protection organisations, based on the existing model for environmental organisations;
- Give consumers the right to file class actions;
- Involve consumer protection organisations in fulfilling public duties (such as food inspection);
- Improve and standardise environmental information for foodstuffs;
- Develop cooperation bodies in which consumers are increasingly involved.

These measures could increase consumers’ influence across the entire decision-making process. This could ultimately contribute towards drawing up regulations that are tailor-made to the various stakeholders in the food chain and could help to find solutions for the three big challenges – public health, the environment and farming.