



Food and Agriculture
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PRIMA
PARTNERSHIP FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA

CONSUMERS AND MEDITERRANEAN DIET: TOWARDS FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Thursday, 26 January 2023 | 9:30-11:00 (CET)

BACKGROUND

Everyone is a consumer; consumers are the ultimate reason why food is produced, and as such **empowering consumers has a tremendous potential for impact on food systems' sustainability**.¹ Consumers' behaviour can strengthen the transformation of food systems through awareness and informed choices which, in turn, would drive targeted incentives. Promoting their active engagement in the food systems agenda can offer unique insights on food consumption trends and market demands, as well as a better understanding of the practical constraints to food access, affordability, safety and quality that might hinder healthy diets in the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean diet, rich in plant-based and local foods, has been associated with significant improvements in health benefits related to non-communicable diseases and nutritional status.² It has also been recognized as a sustainable diet because of its lower environmental impact on the use of soil, water and energy³ and the positive potential for climate mitigation.⁴ In addition, its social and cultural relevance led UNESCO to acknowledge it is as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

However, **evidence^{5,6} shows a decline in adherence to the Mediterranean diet in countries across the region**. For example, prevalence of obesity among adults has been on the rise in the last decade, with the highest rates found in countries like Jordan (35.5%), Egypt (32%), Lebanon (32%), Türkiye (32%) and Malta (28.9%). The situation is concerning also for children, given the steady increase of prevalence of overweight among children under 5 years, with peaks in countries such as Lebanon (19.7%) Egypt (17.8%) Tunisia (16.5%) Albania (14.6%) and Greece (13.9%). As a matter of comparison, the global average for adult obesity is estimated at 13.1%, while for child overweight is estimated at 5.7%.

Among the drivers, urbanization trends and lifestyle changes are reducing the time available for cooking and the regularity of meals, leading to a shift in consumers' demand for more resource-intensive food products, such as ultra-processed and pre-cooked meals, pre-packaged food products with longer durability. This has implications on food systems dynamics, in particular on the health of consumers and their environmental footprint.⁷ **Food choices, dietary habits and preferences are highly influenced by food environments⁸** in which people make their dietary choices, described as the "interface" and settings where consumers engage with the food system to make decisions about acquiring, preparing and consuming foods. Marketing strategies of food manufacturers, distributors and retailers predominantly promote eating styles that contribute to unhealthy diets (especially including fast food, sugar-sweetened beverages, and confectionery), with evidence suggesting that children are particularly exposed to food marketing for unhealthy food choices.⁹

Recognizing that consumers often face inequalities in economic terms, educational levels and bargaining power, the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection¹⁰ prioritize a list of consumers' needs conducive to sustainable consumption patterns.

MAIN OBJECTIVE OF THE WEBINAR

This webinar will focus on highlighting practices and approaches that aim at **addressing consumers' needs highly relevant to the sustainability of food systems**, such as for instance:

- to access healthy, affordable and safe food;
- to access adequate information enabling informed choices through appropriate tools (including digital tools);
- to have their views represented in decision-making processes; and
- to be educated on the environmental, social, and economic consequences of their choices, while contributing to shaping the offer of more sustainable products.

In a first place, **consumer organizations are well placed to protect consumer needs** as emerging trends and technologies transform food systems, and they have the knowledge and expertise to represent and empower consumers in influencing the food industry and markets and being involved in decision-making processes.¹¹ For these reasons, consumer organizations and other forms of association throughout the Mediterranean region need to be actively engaged in multi-stakeholder initiatives that influence the food systems agenda to better serve people and the planet.

THE SFS-MED PLATFORM

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM), the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) have joined forces in a [multi-stakeholder initiative for Sustainable Food Systems in the Mediterranean \(SFS-MED Platform\)](#), as an affiliated project of the One Planet Network Sustainable Food Systems Programme. The SFS-MED initiative aims at promoting dialogue and collaboration among Mediterranean countries and stakeholders while they implement national and local efforts for a transformation to more sustainable food systems.

THE SFS-MED WEBINAR SERIES

This series of technical webinars is organized to leverage the knowledge and expertise of a network of researchers, development practitioners and decision-makers. The webinars aim at **strengthening knowledge sharing** and **stimulating debate** around themes relevant to food systems transformation in the Mediterranean, **peer exchange** about recent research and study findings, as well as **showcasing successful and inspiring actions** to promote the operationalization of food systems approaches.

Building on the findings of a [stocktaking exercise of the UN Food Systems Summit \(UNFSS\) Dialogues held in the Mediterranean](#), the webinars will revolve around a set of shared priorities and trends that are common to most countries in the region, considered as entry points or main thematic areas regarding what to transform in the Mediterranean food systems. Many of these were reflected as well in the national pathways for food systems transformation that countries developed within the UNFSS process during 2021.

Additionally, **multi-sectoral engagement has the potential to amplify and channel consumers' voices to decision-makers**, and to offer a deeper understanding of consumers' rights and needs that are conducive to healthier diets and more inclusive and sustainable food systems in the Mediterranean. Over the past decade, the One Planet Network implemented the [10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production \(10YFP\)](#) by catalyzing multi-stakeholder cooperation amongst all sectors and actors, facilitating collaboration between governments, civil society and the private sector on sustainable consumption and production in order to achieve SDG 12 (Ensuring sustainable patterns of consumption and production).

Sustainable public food procurement has the potential to contribute to more sustainable patterns in both food consumption and food production, when policy and regulatory frameworks are formulated with the aim to deliver multiple social, economic and environmental benefits. On the one side, it may improve access to local, affordable, diverse, safe, nutritious or culturally acceptable food for consumers of publicly procured food (served in schools, public universities, hospitals, prisons and social programmes). On the other side, it has the potential to stimulate the supply side through market access, demand-driven improvements to productivity, quality and sustainability standards for small food producers (farmers and enterprises),¹² leading to higher incomes. In 2021, school meal programmes also received considerable attention in the framework of the United Nations Food System Summit, which led to the creation of a global [school meals coalition](#).

At the same time, consumers are increasingly demanding more transparency, and higher environmental and ethical standards from the food sector. A stocktaking report¹³ of dialogues conducted in the framework of the UN Food Systems Summit found that Mediterranean countries emphasized the need to empower consumers to make healthy and sustainable dietary choices, through better information and awareness-raising on the social and environmental footprint of their food choices, including the adoption of consumer-friendly labelling and packaging, as well as product traceability. **Education for sustainable consumption¹⁴ plays a central role in promoting the change to a more sustainable lifestyle**, to motivate individuals to take responsibility for the impact of their daily choices and to change underlying social norms. Awareness resulting from education on sustainable lifestyles is vital to make these drastic lifestyle shifts acceptable through alternative solutions. Behaviour changes require effective collaboration between national and local authorities, educational institutions, consumers' organizations and mass media.

A conducive environment for sustainable consumption would enable protecting the right to safe and healthy food at affordable prices, equipping individuals with vital information to make informed food choices, while increasing transparency and consumers' trust in a food system that enables sustainable production patterns.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Based on this background, the SFS-MED Platform is organising the fourth technical webinar in a series about the levers for food systems transformation, with the aim to present concrete experiences and successful cases from the consumer perspective, including on transparent information and consumer education and innovative pathways for sustainable public procurement.

Consumers should be at the center of all elements of the food system, from food research to food production and procurement, as well as food industry, environments and marketing. Bringing together representatives from consumers organizations, experts from research centres, international organizations and educational networks, the webinar will provide a forum for exchange on the role of consumers in a more sustainable food system agenda in the Mediterranean.

This session will aim to address a key question: **what is the active role that consumers can play in shaping more sustainable food systems and what are the implications for rethinking Mediterranean diets?**

OBJECTIVES

KNOWLEDGE

Create a knowledge base about opportunities, innovative solutions and gaps or limitations for food systems transformation, specific to the Mediterranean context.

EVIDENCE SHARING

Facilitate replication and upscaling of concrete solutions for food systems transformation through the dissemination of evidence about successful approaches and lessons learned from across the Mediterranean.

AWARENESS

Promote and raise awareness on food systems thinking by facilitating multi-disciplinary and multi-sectorial exchanges.



¹FAO. 2021. *Consumer organizations and the right to adequate food – Making the connections*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb3685en>

²Lacirignola C., Capone R., El Bilali H., Debs P., Cardone G.L., Driouech N., Dernini S., Burlingame B., Gitz V., Meybeck A. Priority 5: Mediterranean food consumption patterns: diet, environment, society, economy and health. In: Petruzzella D., Sancassiani S. (eds.). 2017. *Options Méditerranéennes*, A No. 120 – Feeding Knowledge. Bari, Italy, CIHEAM. <https://bit.ly/3UPHcnk>

³Hachem, F., Capone, R., Yannakoulia, M., Dernini, S., Hwalla, N. & Kalaitzidis, C. 2016. The Mediterranean diet: a sustainable consumption pattern. In: FAO and CIHEAM. *Mediterra 2016. Zero Waste in the Mediterranean. Natural Resources, Food and Knowledge*, pp.243-261. Paris, Presses de Sciences Po. <https://bit.ly/3XwBtEX>

⁴Castaldi, S., Dembska, K., Antonelli, M. et al. 2022. The positive climate impact of the Mediterranean diet and current divergence of Mediterranean countries towards less climate sustainable food consumption patterns. In: *Scientific Reports* 12, 8847. Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-12916-9>

⁵FAO. 2021. *Europe and Central Asia – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021: Statistics and trends*. Budapest, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7493en>

⁶FAO. 2021. *Near East and North Africa – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021: Statistics and trends*. Cairo, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7495en>

⁷Scoullou, M., Malotidi, V., Farnese, M., Biccoci, R., Salman, N., Atrash, I., Elhri, S., Ftouhi, M., Reda, M., Ahmadein, G. 2021. *Mediterranean Food – Our legacy, Our Future: A resource handbook to promote intercultural dialogue and sustainability through the Mediterranean Food & Diet*. Athens, MIO-ECSDE. <https://bit.ly/3zqaYr4>

⁸FAO. 2016. *Influencing food environments for healthy diets*. Rome. www.fao.org/3/a-i6484e.pdf.

⁹World Health Organization. 2022. *Food marketing exposure and power and their associations with food-related attitudes, beliefs and behaviours: a narrative review*. Geneva. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

¹⁰United Nations. 2016. *United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection*. New York and Geneva, UN. <https://rb.gy/prvysx>

¹¹Consumers International. 2019. *How Consumer Organisations Can Contribute to More Sustainable Food Systems*. London, CI. <https://rb.gy/qcxhh0>

¹²FAO, Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT and Editora da UFRGS. 2021. *Public food procurement for sustainable food systems and healthy diets – Volume 1*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7960en>

¹³FAO, CIHEAM and UfM. 2021. *Food systems transformation – processes and pathways in the Mediterranean: a stocktaking exercise*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7978en>

¹⁴Union for the Mediterranean. 2019. *Education for Sustainable Consumption, Behaviour and Lifestyles – A collection of case studies*. Barcelona. <https://rb.gy/byuncg>

AGENDA

Interpretation will be provided in English and French

9:30-9:40	Welcome remarks	Giuseppe Provenzano <i>Project Manager, Higher Education and Research Division, Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)</i>
9:40-9:50	Keynote remarks <i>Setting the scene: Multi-stakeholder efforts to engage consumers in rethinking Mediterranean diet</i>	Hamid El Bilali <i>Senior Researcher, CIHEAM</i>
9:50-10:55	Panel discussion <hr/> <p>Voice to the consumers for collective action</p> <hr/> <p>Sustainable public food procurement bridging consumption and production</p> <hr/> <p>Research and Innovation to support consumer choices for Mediterranean sustainable diets through digital tools</p> <hr/> <p>Information and education for sustainable consumer choices</p>	Moderator: Giuseppe Provenzano <i>Project Manager, Higher Education and Research Division, Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)</i> <hr/> Ferdi Fero <i>Albanian Consumers Association (ACA)</i> <hr/> Darine Dogui <i>Director of Studies, Research, Analysis and Comparative Trials, Tunisian National Institute for Consumer Affairs</i> <hr/> Florence Tartanac <i>Senior Officer, Food and Nutrition Division, FAO</i> <hr/> Marco De La Feld <i>Head of R&D Unit ENCO srl, [PRIMA project SWITCHtoHEALTHY]</i> <hr/> Aravella Zachariou <i>Head, Unit for Education for the Environment and Sustainable Development (EESD), Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth of Cyprus</i>
10:55-11:00	Closing remarks	Laura De Matteis <i>Food Systems Expert, Food systems and Food Safety Division, FAO</i>

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Publications

- CIHEAM/FAO. 2015. *Mediterranean food consumption patterns: diet, environment, society, economy and health*. A White Paper Priority 5 of Feeding Knowledge Programme, Expo Milan 2015. Bari and Rome, Italy, CIHEAM-IAMB, FAO. fao.org/3/i4358e/i4358e.pdf
- Consumers International. 2019. *How Consumer Organisations Can Contribute to More Sustainable Food Systems*. London, CI. <https://rb.gy/qcxhh0>
- Consumers International. 2021. *Consumers call for action at the United Nations Food Systems Summit*. London, CI. <https://rb.gy/wdyqxy>
- Consumers International. 2022. *Consumers in Crisis: An Action Agenda for Future Food Systems*. London, CI. <https://rb.gy/nmukti>
- FAO. 2021. *Consumer organizations and the right to adequate food – Making the connections*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb3685en>
- FAO. 2021. *Consumer organizations in action – A collection of practices driving the right to adequate food*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7566en>
- FAO. 2022. *Thinking about the future of food safety – A foresight report*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb8667en>
- FAO, Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT and Editora da UFRGS. 2021. *Public food procurement for sustainable food systems and healthy diets – Volume 1*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7960en>
- FAO and CIHEAM. 2016. *Mediterra 2016. Zero Waste in the Mediterranean. Natural Resources, Food and Knowledge*. Paris, Presses de Sciences Po. <https://bit.ly/3XwBtEX>
- FAO, CIHEAM and UfM. 2021. *Food systems transformation – processes and pathways in the Mediterranean: a stocktaking exercise*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb7978en>
- Scoullou, M., Malotidi, V., Farnese, M., Bicocchi, R., Salman, N., Atrash, I., Elhir, S., Ftouhi, M., Reda, M., Ahmadein, G. 2021. *Mediterranean Food – Our legacy, Our Future: A resource handbook to promote intercultural dialogue and sustainability through the Mediterranean Food & Diet*. Athens, MIO-ECSDE. <https://bit.ly/3zqaYr4>
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- United Nations. 2016. *United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection*. New York and Geneva, UN. <https://rb.gy/prvysx>

Articles

- Castaldi, S., Dembska, K., Antonelli, M. et al. 2022. The positive climate impact of the Mediterranean diet and current divergence of Mediterranean countries towards less climate sustainable food consumption patterns. In: *Scientific Reports* 12, 8847. Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-12916-9>
- Lacirignola C., Capone R., El Bilali H., Debs P., Cardone G.L., Driouech N., Dernini S., Burlingame B., Gitz V., Meybeck A. Priority 5: Mediterranean food consumption patterns: diet, environment, society, economy and health. In: Petruzzella D., Sancassiani S. (eds.). 2017. *Options Méditerranéennes*, A No. 120 - *Feeding Knowledge*. Bari, Italy, CIHEAM. <https://bit.ly/3UPHcnk>
- Medina, F.X., Solé-Sedeno, J.M., Bach-Faig, A., Aguilar-Martínez A. 2021. Obesity, Mediterranean Diet, and Public Health: A Vision of Obesity in the Mediterranean Context from a Sociocultural Perspective. In: *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 18(7):3715. Basel, Switzerland. MDPI. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073715>

Websites and online resources

- “C’est qui le patron?!” La marque du consommateur. 2022. Paris, La Société des Consommateurs. <https://bit.ly/30lBU0t>
- “Chefchauen – The Mediterranean Diet project.” 2017. Chefchauen, Morocco. Department of Environment and Cooperation, City of Chefchauen. <https://rb.gy/hhhuao>

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