

Science for Environment Policy

Product information can promote sustainable food consumption

Providing information to consumers on the environmental and social impacts of their food purchases could help change their consumption choices, research from Norway suggests. In a psychological study, researchers noted an increase in the number of organic and fair trade products bought per week when participating consumers were informed of the products' benefits for the environment and the wellbeing of producers.

Sustainable consumption is widely considered to be an important part of [sustainable development](#), but it requires the collective effort of many individuals if it is to make a difference. [Sustainable consumption](#) may be compromised by a low 'self-efficacy belief', that is, when an individual believes that their own power to have a positive impact is insignificant. This study looked at how information campaigns can affect consumer behaviour and self-efficacy beliefs. It notes that, currently, much organic food produced in Norway is sold as 'conventional', because the supply of organic products is greater than demand. The question is therefore how to increase consumer demand for products considered sustainable, such as organic groceries, where they are clearly available.

A total of 145 citizens from Bergen participated in the study. The researchers first gave them information on how patterns of consumption can potentially affect greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution and the wellbeing of producers in developing countries. They also provided examples of how consumers' individual purchases of organic and fair trade products could help reduce these environmental and social problems, in order to boost participants' self-efficacy beliefs. Indirect benefits of sustainable purchases were also explained, i.e. participants were told that their actions could inspire others to also make sustainable choices.

The shoppers were given a weekly budget to spend on food and drink and, over a four-week period, they were presented with a range of available products to purchase from an online shop set up for the study, each with a choice of a conventional or a 'sustainable' option. Sustainable products were defined as either certified organic or certified fair trade. They were required to make just two purchases per week from a choice of two pairs of products, for example, two choices of orange juice and two choices of spaghetti, each pair consisting of an organic brand and a conventional brand. The weekly shopping budget was sufficient to cover the cost of sustainable products, which were more expensive than the conventional products, and the participants kept any unspent budget for themselves. The researchers allowed this budget surplus partly to act as an incentive to take part in the study, but also to deliberately create a conflict for the shoppers between saving money and paying extra for sustainable products.

By the end of the four weeks, each participant had increased the number of their sustainable purchases from, on average, 1.19 to 1.46 products per week. This higher level of sustainable purchasing could be seen six months later in a follow-up study among participants who chose to continue with the project, although researchers note that these participants may have been more sustainability-conscious than those who dropped out.

An important finding was that the increase in the number of sustainable purchases occurred despite no apparent change in self-efficacy beliefs. This suggests that awareness of the negative impacts of unsustainable choices through the information provided was sufficient to change behaviour. While the study acknowledges that participants' behaviour may have been influenced by the researchers' agenda and the fact that they were not spending their own money, it concludes that information provision can result in increased sustainable consumption, even without increases in self-efficacy beliefs. It suggests that information campaigns could complement and increase public support for economic policy interventions designed to change consumer behaviour, such as subsidies or green taxes.



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