

# Perceptions of sustainable food among consumers with a low socio-economic position in The Netherlands

## Motivations, opportunities, and abilities for more sustainable consumption and intervention directions

### Low socio-economic position (low SEP) in this study refers to consumers in The Netherlands with:

- **Low educational attainment**  
Including primary, lower secondary, and vocational education at the lowest level.
- **Low family income**  
Below the median income of Dutch adults (approximately €30,000 per year).

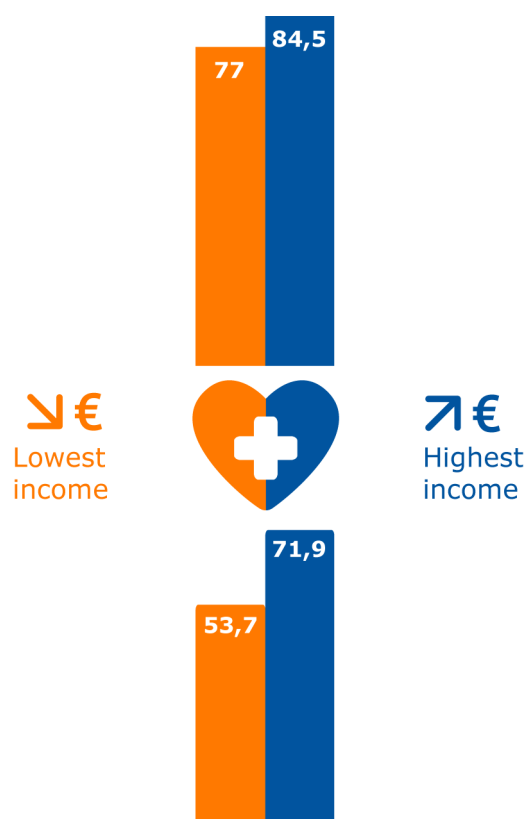
### Why should we focus on consumers with a low individual income?

- **Health inequalities**  
Increased risk of overweight and obesity, chronic diseases (diabetes, heart disease). The difference in life expectancy between people of low and high socio-economic position in The Netherlands is around 7 years. The difference in perceived good health expectancy is around 18 years. *see figure 1*
- **Limited access to healthy options**  
Challenges in accessing affordable, healthy food due to financial constraints and unhealthy food being 'cheaper'.
- **Ineffective interventions**  
Existing interventions often fail to effectively reach and engage low SEP groups.

### Why participatory research

- Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research approach that actively involves the people who are most affected by an issue in all stages of the research process. This approach aims to increase the likelihood of interventions being relevant, culturally appropriate, and effective.

### Life expectancy (expressed in years)



### Perceived good health (expressed in years)

Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2011-2014

Figure 1

### The aim of this research

To understand the perceptions, motivations, abilities, and opportunities of low SEP consumers regarding healthy and sustainable food consumption.

# Results: food associations

Food associations encompass a wide range of values, opportunities, and barriers that can significantly influence our eating behaviours. Our research uncovered the following food associations amongst low SEP consumers in the Netherlands.

List of associations		
	Price	Weight control
	Mood & social interactions	Providing energy / essential
	Taste	Freshness
	Variety	Sustainability
	Convenience	Source
	Health	

## Positive

Discounts, enjoying meals, exploring different flavours, convenient cooking, diverse options.

## Negative

High prices, meal planning stress, unhealthy food impacts, overwhelming choices, inconvenient shopping, environmental concerns.

Stress is a common experience in life, but for consumers with low SEP, it can be particularly prevalent due to multiple simultaneous challenges. This stress can significantly impact food choices and make healthy eating more difficult.


### Major stressors identified in this study for low SEP consumers.




### Multiple stressors from literature which can hinder healthy eating priorities.



**Interventions**  
Must address broader social and economic factors



Family



Economic



# Results: intervention directions

- 1. Local food**  


Buying locally produced food, Dutch cuisine, local stores, own garden.  
**Key barriers:** higher prices, limited availability, inconvenience of accessing local sources.
- 2. Avoiding food waste**  


Too good to go app, products on due date with discount, neighborhood cupboard to donate food.  
**Key barriers:** challenges with planning and storage, impulsive buying, and concerns about food safety.
- 3. Change meat consumption**  


Avoid animal suffering, avoid eating meat, eggs from local small farm, one meatless day, eat vegan.  
**Key barriers:** difficulty changing dietary habits, concerns about taste, cost and nutritional adequacy.
- 4. Avoiding processed food**  


Produce your own food, no "junk", no processed foods.  
**Key barriers:** habit and appealing taste of processed foods.
- 5. Fair trade**  


Supporting ethical production practices, buy food with fair trade logo, no child labour.  
**Key barriers:** high prices, limited awareness of the impact of fair trade on consumers.
- 6. Organic**  


Buy organic food.  
**Key barriers:** price, consumer perception that some organic products may not offer significant environmental benefits compared to conventional option.



Participants prioritised 'avoiding food waste' as the best intervention for sustainable eating

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*I think in any case, throughout the Netherlands, but also throughout the world, that people cannot do very much individually, even if we all do it together. Most... pollution simply comes from big industry.*

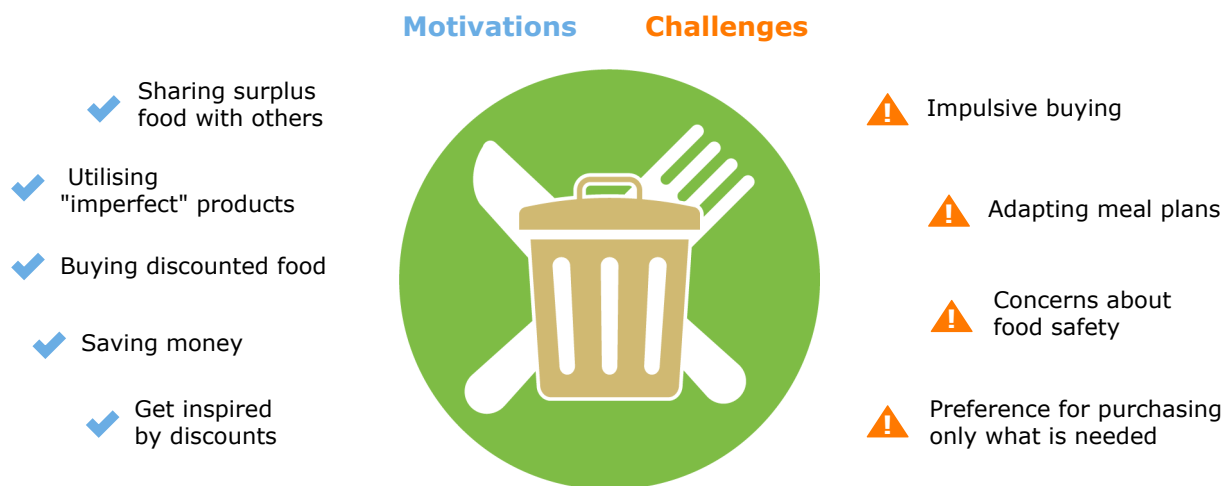
Male participant, 29 years old

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# Results: intervention directions

## Avoiding food waste






Participants discussed interventions, policies and strategies to help low SEP consumers avoid food waste.

### Participants favoured the following strategies

-  **Education & Training**  
Particularly within schools, to educate children about sustainable food choices.
-  **Persuasion**  
Using communication to encourage sustainable behaviour.
-  **Modeling**  
Showcasing positive examples of sustainable food practices.
-  **Enablement**  
Providing support to overcome barriers to sustainable eating.

### Participants had mixed opinions about the role of governments

-  **Regulation & Legislation**  
Participants acknowledged the role of government in creating a more sustainable food system.
-  **Education in Schools**  
Participants strongly supported the role of government in educating children about sustainable food choices.
-  **Local Initiatives**  
Participants valued smaller-scale, community-based initiatives, believing they can be more effective than large-scale government interventions.

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# Methods and Reflections

## Brief summary of methods

- Study focused on low SEP consumers.
- Utilised focus group discussions with 24 participants and follow up with 5 participants.
- Employed a semi-structured approach.
- Addressed key research questions: Perceptions, motivations, abilities, and opportunities for sustainable food consumption.
- Utilised the Intervention Wheel by Michie et al., 2011 (1), as a framework.

## Reflections on Participatory Action Research (PAR) in intervention design

- **Discussion atmosphere**  
Good atmosphere, open discussion, politics and the role of science are sensitive and could sometimes evoke negative reactions.
- **The topic of health and sustainable food**  
Food and health are close to daily experience and easy to talk about based on own interpretations and insights. Food production is less known, which can impact participants understanding of sustainable food choices.
- **Co-design of intervention**  
Worked well and was liked by participants, people choose what they are familiar with but can be inspired by their peers in the group. Participants tended to favour intervention strategies they were already familiar with, potentially overlooking more innovative or impactful approaches.

The co-design process requires the moderator to make quick decisions and have in-depth knowledge to effectively link participant insights to relevant policy and scientific issues.



## Conclusion

By understanding the motivations, barriers, and preferences of low SEP consumers, we can develop more effective interventions to promote sustainable and healthy eating habits within this population. This research emphasises the importance of addressing not only individual behaviours but also the broader social and economic factors that influence food choices.

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# Colophon

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For more information



## References

- 1 Michie S, Van Stralen MM, West R. The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation science*. 2011 Dec;6:1-2.

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Wageningen University & Research  
P.O. Box 47  
6700 AB Wageningen  
The Netherlands  
T +31 (0) 317 48 07 00  
www.wur.eu

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