



Policy Brief 2:4

Excerpt from the Swedish report [Konsumtionens gränser](#). (The Limits of Consumption)

Who has the power over food consumption?

When sustainable eating is discussed, the focus is often on consumers and individual responsibility. Better information about the environmental and health impacts of food is frequently proposed as the solution. But is a lack of information really the main barrier? What, or who, actually shapes households' opportunities to eat more sustainably? By looking at this issue through the perspective of households, we have examined how the surrounding society influences their conditions, and which actors or factors may hinder or support a transition towards more sustainable food consumption.

This study focuses on Swedish households that tried to change their eating habits in order to become more sustainable. Our aim was to understand what enables and what hinders people in everyday life when they try to make better choices for both their health and the environment. To explore this, fourteen households in thirteen Swedish municipalities took part in an intervention where they, over a period of four to eight weeks, chose and attempted to reach specific goals related to sustainable eating. They could select one or several of the following five goals: eating for reduced climate impact; eating to support a diverse agricultural landscape; eating less energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods such as soft drinks and sweets; eating less red meat and processed meat; and eating more fruit, vegetables, and legumes. The households' experiences were documented through diaries, surveys, and interviews.



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The barriers that households repeatedly encountered during the study can be described using the metaphor of a glass ceiling. The research shows that this glass ceiling, which consists of a wide range of structural factors, restricts the room for action for many households when they try to make a transition. Households encounter obstacles related to, for example, limited availability of healthy and vegetarian options in shops, restaurants, and workplaces. Other barriers include a lack of time to reflect, learn, and search for alternatives, as well as a



Joining forces
can strengthen
the capacity
to change!

lack of supportive everyday structures. Food prices also play a decisive role. Even though the participating households had medium to high incomes, they experienced sustainable and healthy food as unreasonably expensive compared to less healthy alternatives.

For other households, the very same factors can function as enablers. This may be the case when there is a good local supply of sustainable food products, or when workplaces, social networks, and media provide support for change. Some households also have the capacity to transform their food practices by producing part of their own food, provided that they have access to land for cultivation. Making the transition together with others, both within the household and at the workplace, appears for several households in the study to strengthen their capacity to change.

These findings show that the factors that hinder or enable household transitions vary depending on both social and material conditions, such as norms and social support, access to cultivation land, or the range of products available in grocery stores. This suggests that strategies and support measures need to be tailored to such conditions.

The results do not imply that households have no power or freedom to act. They took part in the challenge of eating sustainably with strong engagement and also succeeded, at least during the intervention, in making real changes. Some households made extensive changes, while others did so to a lesser degree, according to their own accounts. To deal with challenges related to cooking skills, cultural contexts, and the limitations created by the glass ceiling, households used a range of strategies to overcome barriers. These strategies included spending a lot of time searching for new recipes, products, and restaurants; experimenting with different protein alternatives to meat; mixing meat with vegetables and beans to create similar dishes with lower climate impact; eating at home more often or bringing packed lunches instead of eating out; shopping once a week; and planning meals in advance to make time suffice. The intervention thus demonstrated that a transition to sustainable eating can be possible for highly engaged households, but that it requires substantial effort, time, and resources.

So, who should be responsible for the transition? Previous research has shown that consumer empowerment is limited and that a focus on individual lifestyle change is insufficient. This is confirmed by our study, where the intervention demanded considerable effort and resources from households. Several households expressed that sustainable transition should not depend on consumer choice alone, but should instead be supported by the state and other actors within the food system, for example by removing unhealthy or unsustainable options entirely. Placing the main responsibility on households risks turning consumers into scapegoats and shifts attention away from the structural changes needed to enable sustainable consumption on a larger scale.

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A transition to sustainable eating can be influenced by a wide range of actors, each with a certain degree of power and agency to drive change. The key actors identified in the study include grocery retailers, restaurants, and policy-makers at different levels.

It is important to note that many of the participants in the study had extensive knowledge about sustainable and healthy eating, as well as strong financial resources. However, not all households have such favourable conditions. This means that actors within the food system carry a significant responsibility to shape sustainable systems that include all types of households, if sustainable consumption is to become mainstream.



Further reading

Svenfelt, Å. and Parekh, V. manuscript. [Enabling sustainable food consumption beyond behavior learning from a household transition intervention](#). Included in the thesis: Parekh, V. (2025). Mainstreaming Sustainable Consumption. Practices, Perspectives, and the Case of Food. Doctoral thesis in Sustainability Studies, KTH Royal Institute of Technology

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For further information, see:
www.sustainableconsumption.se/en

Reference to this text

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