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Global Food Security

Presentation

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Considering the current trends in global food production and distribution, what are the key implications for consumers in terms of food security, pricing, and access to healthy and nutritious foods? What roles can policy and innovation play in mitigating emerging challenges to consumers?

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I want to draw attention to the impact of current trends on consumers.

Firstly, while current issues such as climate and geo-political events and high inflation, and the major disruption of the pandemic have impacted food production and distribution, we must remember that the system has not been serving consumers with healthy, sustainable and affordable food for some time:

- According the World Bank, 42% of the global population cannot afford a healthy diet (2021)¹.
- WHO says we are in a malnutrition 'double crisis' of undernutrition and overnutrition both of which severely damage health².

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/icp/brief/foodpricesfornutrition>

² <https://www.who.int/health-topics/malnutrition>

- Then there is waste - UNEP figures show one fifth of all food available to consumers is being wasted³.
- Food systems are responsible for between a quarter and a third of global greenhouse gas emissions⁴.

So that is the current situation, but what of the future?

- By 2050, there will be 2 billion more mouths to feed, at the same time as the need to cut greenhouse gas emissions, maintain soil and forests and water and regenerate lost natural resources and biodiversity has become urgent – this is the scale of the challenge.
- Many discussions will talk about consumers ‘playing their part’ and making different choices, and we know that they are willing to do so, but it is currently difficult to act at an individual level in a system that is so broken.
- Consumers are caught in a vicious circle. The cheapest and most readily available food is most likely to be the end product of a system that is depleting natural resources, polluting through production, often providing highly processed, low-nutrition food and is dominated by large producers who are able to undercut sustainable producers on price.
- And yet, it is not guaranteed that this system they are caught in will withstand supply chain shocks and shortages that occur through either natural, political or economic events.
- This food system is contributing to *ongoing* climate change that in turn will make producing adequate amounts of diverse, nutritious and affordable food in the future very difficult – through for example contributing to deforestation, unpredictable weather, desertification and flooding.
- So, consumers find themselves in a position where they are supporting an unsustainable food system *and* suffering the short and long-term impacts of that same system.

³ <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/food-waste-index-report-2024>

⁴ <https://ourworldindata.org/greenhouse-gas-emissions-food>

- The theory that consumers can exercise their purchasing power to demand more of producers and retailers, reward those who deliver sustainable, healthy, affordable food is hard to put into practice.

Given this, what roles can policy and innovation play in mitigating emerging challenges to consumers? Here are some very top-level thoughts:

- Safe, climate-friendly, healthy food must be made cost-effective for consumers and work for their real lives, for eg terms of how it can be stored, prepared etc. Involving consumers as well as producers in the design of better food systems is vital.
- Information – many (not all) consumers live in a world of information overload. Add to this that companies are not shy of over-promoting their sustainability credentials, and ‘green washing’ products with very little verifiable information to back it up. International standards could have a key role to play in backing up environmental food claims, and consumer protection authorities must scale up their monitoring function to identify false and misleading claims. The role of technology in the enforcement of consumer protection could be one way to do this, the [EnfTech report](#) released this year sets out how consumer protection authorities are using technology to scale up and speed up market monitoring.
- Agricultural subsidies – funded in part by citizens’ taxation of course – must be realigned to make sure they are contributing to future-proof, sustainable food systems. The Global Land Outlook report from the UNCCD found that each year, roughly \$700bn is paid in agricultural subsidies, and only around 15% contributes positively to natural capital or biodiversity.⁵ This is just one example of where subsidies can be much better applied.
- Innovation – there is a lot of new developments such as cell-based meat, or other alternative proteins⁶. These attract horror or excitement, depending on your point of view. But are the costs of developing lab-based meat justified if similar environmental positives could be achieved by people limiting their ‘real’ meat

⁵ <https://www.unccd.int/resources/global-land-outlook/glo2>

⁶ [Cultivated meat: the future of food or just another fad? | Euroconsumers](#)

intake? Innovation without a wider perspective, or without consumer engagement could be a wasted process.

- More effort should be made to understand and track the pricing of food to ensure it is fair and rewarding good practice. For example, as food prices surged around the time of high inflation, the retailers, producers and speculators all accused each other of 'greedflation'. It is important that competition authorities have the right tools to investigate pricing and ascertain whether it is due to an abuse of dominant position.⁷

Liz Coll is a consumer policy analyst and founder of [Connected Consumers](#), where she has established projects on digital rights, generative AI, virtual markets, the future of consumer internet regulation and the use of technology in consumer law enforcement.

She has advised national governments, financial institutions, consumer organisations, global think tanks and international standards bodies on the impact of powerful, social technology on consumers and markets. Liz established the first global digital programme at Consumers International, after leading digital consumer policy work at Citizens Advice and at Consumer Futures, the UK's statutory consumer body. She is a regular speaker, panellist and author on core consumer issues including e-commerce, the platform economy, consumer data, IoT and AI.

She began her career at the London School for Economics' Centre for Analysis Risk and Regulation and from there joined sustainability non-profit consultancy Forum for the Future. She has a BA in Politics and Government from the University of Sussex and an MSc in Political Sociology from the LSE.

⁷ [The hunger games: are food prices being played? | Euroconsumers](#)