



## **Consumers International**

### **Policy position on food and climate change**

#### **1. Background**

Food is a complex but critical issue for climate change dialogues. The impact of climate change on food security is already being felt, particularly in developing countries, and the food sector itself is in need of significant reform if climate change mitigation goals are to be met in a manner consistent with consumer access rights. In addition to adverse environmental impacts on water scarcity, biodiversity and deforestation, agriculture, food production and distribution impact on climate change by using energy and producing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In fact the food sector accounts for up to a third of household GHG emissions.<sup>1</sup> The whole life cycle of food needs to be considered in order to adequately address the enormous impact of food on the climate. Governments, industry and consumers all have a role to play in changing behaviour across the lifecycle and reducing harmful environmental impacts associated with the production and distribution of food.

Despite the need to look at all phases, the production phase of food has a much higher environmental impact than the rest of the life cycle of food, creating GHG emissions, using large amounts of energy and changing landscapes. In fact, production is responsible for more than 80% of food life cycle emissions<sup>2</sup>, and meat production alone is responsible for 18% of global GHG emissions.<sup>3</sup> Beef is particularly significant given that cows emit CH<sub>4</sub>, and N<sub>2</sub>O gases, which are respectively 21 and 310 times more harmful to the environment than CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, agriculture is a major contributor to global GHG emissions, contributing between 17 and 32% of global GHG emissions worldwide. It also poses significant challenges related to land use, representing the largest threat to tropical rainforests, especially through cattle

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<sup>1</sup> Tukker, A et al, *Environmental impact of products (EIPRO): analysis of the life cycle environmental impacts related to the total final consumption of the EU25*, European Science and Technology Observatory, 2005

<sup>2</sup> UNE P/Wuppertal Institute Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production *A key solution to climate change: Sustainable consumption and production making the link*, The SWITCH-Asia Network Facility, p.12

<sup>3</sup> UNE P/Wuppertal Institute Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production *A key solution to climate change: Sustainable consumption and production making the link*, The SWITCH-Asia Network Facility, p.12

<sup>4</sup> Danish Ministry for food, agriculture and fisheries, *Climate on the table*, 2008

farming.<sup>5</sup> Agricultural environment problems connected to cross-cutting issues such as biodiversity, climate, food security and water quality have to be dealt with as a totality because of their interconnected impacts.

In contrast, the distribution of food accounts for only around 10% of food related GHG emissions. It is therefore important for consumers to put less emphasis on choosing their food according to so-called 'food miles' and rather change their consumption behaviour in order to influence the demand for sustainable low emission products. Many consumers, given the right support, have the power to influence how food is produced through exercising their right to choose by excluding or reducing GHG heavy foods such as meat. In order to exercise this right effectively, the evidence-base must be strengthened, and confusing or misleading claims removed, to ensure consumers know which choices to make. This can be strengthened by education, an increase in sustainable choices, and should always be viewed in conjunction with government and industry actions.

Labelling food according to sustainability or environmental impact has been much discussed, but the practicalities surrounding the environmental impact of food make it counter to consumer and climate interests. One key problem is that it is often entire product categories, such as beef, that are particularly harmful, meaning that labelling in this context would not be the most helpful way to provide consumers with information to make decisions and choices. Another potential slipping point for effective labelling, is that processed foods change their source of ingredients, which impacts on the GHG emitted during sourcing that ingredient.

Such complications make labelling an impractical way of communicating with consumers on the climate impact of food, as well as posing the potential for consumer confusion. It is therefore essential that the environmental impact of food be communicated to consumers through information campaigns, education programmes and other government, industry and consumer organisation initiatives resulting from multi-stakeholder dialogue.

Urgent consideration should also be given to the impact the changing climate is having on agriculture and food production, particularly in developing countries. Water and soil pollution, land degradation, deforestation, biodiversity loss and over-fishing and desertification all have effects on food production and therefore on its availability, affordability and accessibility, particularly to poor consumers. Changes in agriculture and food production are already having an impact on food prices; after having fallen for over 50 years, they are now rising.<sup>6</sup> Trade and agriculture policies both need to be subject to substantial change in response to climate change in order to make sustainable production and distribution preferable and easy

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<sup>5</sup>Tara Garnett, *Cooking up a Storm: food, greenhouse gas emissions and our changing climate*, University of Surrey Food Climate Research Network Centre for Environmental Strategy, 2008, p. 21

<sup>6</sup> ODI website, <http://www.odi.org.uk/themes/food/index.asp>

choices for consumers and industry, and to meet the consumer right of access to basic needs. The responsibility lies with governments and industry to change their practices and policies, but also with consumers to demand sustainable produce.

## **2. Recommendations**

### ***Consumer organisations should***

- Encourage and assist consumers in changing their behaviour regarding food consumption by underlining those areas where there is vast potential for a positive impact through small changes, particularly eating less meat and moving the emphasis away from 'food miles'.
- Raise awareness among consumers about the impact food has on climate change and how to make more sustainable choices including through consumer education and practical advice from a regional perspective.
- Put pressure on governments to integrate sustainability into all food related policy.
- Put pressure on industry to change their practices in order to make agriculture, food products, and food production and distribution more sustainable.
- Undertake research into consumer options in their region for accessing food produced according to principles of sustainability.
- Promote an integrated approach to environmental and access concerns in food and agricultural policy and practice.
- Participate in the development of legislation, codes of conduct and standards to make sustainable choices easier for consumers.
- Develop networks and infrastructure for a strong consumer movement, capable of participation in food policy discourse and application.

### ***Industry should***

- Implement sustainable production and supply chain management practices to reduce material and significant GHG emissions, energy use and other environmental impacts, during all phases of the life cycle of food.
- Move towards more sustainable practices, including with regards to movement and storage of raw materials, working-process inventories, and finished goods from point-of-origin to point-of-consumption, underpinned by codes of conduct for suppliers.
- Develop more efficient, sustainable and regionally adaptable technologies in consultation with consumer organisations.
- Continuously increase the range of sustainable products, including a wider variety of vegetarian food.

### ***Governments should***

- Give the food sector a more prominent role in overall climate policies to reflect its high contribution to global GHG emissions.

- Invest in making the impact of food choices on climate change part of national curricula.
- Run targeted information campaigns to raise consumer awareness on the environmental impact of food consumption patterns.
- Give incentives to businesses to include sustainable food choices in their stock, for example through taxes.
- Set an example by adopting sustainable food procurement policies.
- Take a lead in developing and defining food security strategies, encompassing trade and agriculture, that explicitly marry the goals of nutritional well-being with climate change mitigation.
- Include the agricultural sector in their national GHG-emission-reduction plans.
- Use regulatory and fiscal measures, and both incentives and penalties, including through taxation, to ensure producers and distributors produce and distribute food in a sustainable manner.
- Use economic instruments to make sustainable food choices cheaper for consumers.
- Use regulation and standards to ensure business' green claims and marketing and advertising practices are not misleading to consumers.
- Fund research to develop existing knowledge around the current and predicted impact of climate change on access to food.
- Support and pursue consumer organisations' participation in defining and implementing strategies for sustainable agriculture, development, manufacturing and food distribution, including through capacity building.