

Report from NJF seminar 366:

Food Consumption Behaviour

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Local and Ecological Food Consumption – Case Studies in Finland and Sweden

Annamari Hannula, M.H.C., Savonlinna Department of Education, University of Joensuu, Finland, e-mail: Annamari.Hannula@joensuu.fi

Olof Thomsson, Agr dr, Swedish Biodynamical Research Institute, Järna, Sweden e-mail: oloft@gotland.com

Anna-Liisa Rauma, Prof, Savonlinna Department of Education, University of Joensuu, Finland, e-mail: Anna-Liisa.Rauma@joensuu.fi

Introduction

The consumer survey presented here is a part of the EU-funded INTERREG III B project BERAS (Baltic Ecological Recycling Agriculture and Society). The project partly uses action research methodologies to, not only learn more about food habits and its consequences, but also to activate people and get more attention to these questions. The project is based on case studies, complemented with scenarios and consequence analyses, of ongoing practical, local ecological initiatives that promote local food supply cooperation between consumers and ecological producers in rural villages in the eight EU countries around the Baltic Sea.

Aims and objectives

As the studies presented here are part of a large project there are many underlying aims, which all point at learning about and promoting more sustainable food supply systems. An important aim is to engage people in general in the case study areas, especially the consumers involved in the survey, in order to get more focus and knowledge on food related questions in the society. It is also important to develop a scientific knowledge base for reduction of the negative environmental impacts in the Baltic Sea drainage area that are a result of production, processing, distribution and consumption of food. In BERAS, also economy and sociology are studied.

The first objective of the consumer surveys is to put together a realistic food basket (consumption profile) with locally and ecologically (organically) produced foodstuffs, based on the actual consumption of households devoted for environment and health. This food basket will be compared with Swedish and Finnish average food baskets, concerning environment impacts, use of resources and economy in the whole food system. The objective, for the large project, is to show what difference it makes if I as a consumer: 1) buy organically produced food, 2) buy locally produced food, 3) eat less meat, and 4) buy products of the season.

The second objective is to investigate the practices of everyday life in order to reveal food-related habits and attitudes involved in food choice, especially from the standpoint of ecology.

Research Questions

What kind of eating habits do these Finnish and Swedish families have?

What kinds of foodstuffs are purchased?

Where are the foodstuffs purchased?

How much locally produced food and/or organic food do they buy?

Subjects and Methods

The research subjects in these studies are families living in Juva County, Finland and in Järna Count, Sweden. In Finland, the first part of the study started in April 2004 with nine participating

families. In Sweden, a similar survey has been performed during 2000-2002, but the method was revised and the survey restarted again in February 2004 with 14 households participating.

Both in Finland and in Sweden, one member of the family recorded weight, price, origin and environmental branding of all food entering the household for human consumption during 14 days. One period during winter/spring (when local products are scarce) and one period in late summer/early autumn (when local products are easy available) are recorded to get representative results for the yearly consumption. After the recording period, one family member was interviewed about the food choices and food consumption. The quantities of different kinds of food are compensated for inputs and outputs to the household stores, in order to get representative values for the consumption during the two-week period.

Results and conclusions

Preliminary results show that in the Juva district amount of energy according to the purchase diary is 7.6 MJ/person/day and in Järna district the amount is 9.4 MJ/person/day. According to the National FINDIET 2002 Study, dietary energy intake was 9.2 MJ/day among men and 6.6 MJ/day among women. Thus, we can conclude that our results are in a range that is reasonable. However, the results are not easily comparable to statistical data due to differences in survey methods.

The results presented also give an account for quantities and costs for different product groups consumed by the households. In the paper we conclude that the participating households in Sweden have a different consumption profile compared to average consumers. The profile is in better agreement with the diets suggested in the S.M.A.R.T. material, published by Centre for Applied Nutrition (CTN, Samhällsmedicin) and The Swedish Consumer Agency, which promote a combination of environmentally friendlier and healthier food. I.e. the households in the survey seem to buy a larger share of vegetables (less meat), less “empty” calories, more ecological food, “right” vegetables (e.g. more legumes) and less transported food, compared to the national average food. What impact this will have on the environment, private and public economy and sociological aspects will be further investigated within the BERAS project.