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INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY IN
ATHLETES' DIETARY CHOICES

SUSTDIET NATIONAL REPORT





SUMMARY

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1. SUMMARY

This National Report is 1 out of 6 reports created under the EU-funded project “Integrating Sustainability in Athletes Dietary Choices”, which is a KA2 ERASMUS+ Sport project, that aims to promote sustainable food consumption and to facilitate the shift to healthy, sustainable diets, in particular by supporting the integration of sustainability in sport nutrition in Germany, Greece, Malta, Portugal, Spain and Turkey.

The National Reports aim to present the results of a number of interviews taken to elucidate the situation surrounding athletes’ dietary choices in each national context, as a step towards achieving the objectives presented above. The interviews involved a number of different target groups, namely athletes, coaches, and sport nutritionists/dietitians, who were inquired on eating habits, knowledge on healthy and sustainable diets, as well as on their willingness to change towards more sustainable options, and perceived barriers. All results are presented disaggregated by country, and by professional status (athletes, coaches, sport nutritionists/dietitians). This report refers to Germany and is structured as follows:

First, the report demonstrates the current dietary intake of the German athletes interviewed. It presents their real and perceived knowledge about sustainability and illustrates their willingness to change nutritional habits in favor of more sustainable ones. Moving on, it exhibits how sport nutritionists and coaches perceive their own role in implementing changes in their athletes’ diets, including the main barriers athletes face regarding diet sustainability.

To note that, interviews were taken using a 5 point Likert Scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” options. Detailed percentages for most answers are given in parenthesis, where SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

2. INTRODUCTION

In Germany, nutrition is predominantly based on the consumption of dairy, cereals, vegetables, fruit and meat. Even though there is a trend towards vegan and vegetarian diets, too much meat continues to be consumed compared to recommended levels. Gender-specific differences can be identified here: Women eat less meat and more fruit than men (Gose et al., 2018 and BMEL, 2022a). Furthermore, a large amount of food waste is produced, in 2020 it was approximately 11 million tons (BMEL, 2022b). A large part of it (59%) is generated in private households (BMEL, 2022b).

Around 27 million athletes are organized in associations of the DOSB (German Olympic Sports Confederation) (DOSB, 2022, p.1), most of them playing football (7,2 million), second most gymnastics (4,6 million) and third most tennis (1,4 million) (DOSB, 2022, p.12).

Regarding sustainable diets for athletes there is only little German research available. Therefore the following survey results aim to contribute to this field of research and the discussion.

3. ATHLETES' DIETARY INTAKE

3.1. Dietary Intake

A quarter of the German athletes in this focus group has a vegetarian diet. Less than 10% consume meat on a daily basis. Around a third eat meat weekly and the rest could be described as flexitarians with a very low meat intake. The consumption levels of fish and seafood are very low: around 17% consume fish weekly, the rest of the interviewees less or never.

Regarding dairy products, cheese and cottage cheese are the most commonly used products. All the athletes eat cheese at least once in a while, around 8% weekly and nearly 70% various times a week. The consumption of cottage cheese is more divergent: around a third never eat it, while around 42% consume it daily. Yoghurt is also a quite frequently used product as only around 17% never eat any kind of yoghurt, 41% eat low fat yoghurt at least twice a week, whereas the high fat alternative is only consumed by 17% more than twice a week. One could assume that eggs might be considered a good protein source as they get consumed several times a week by around 70% and only 8% never consume them. The most frequently used fats are olive oil and butter. Only 8% never eat olive oil, 42% several times per week and around 50% at least once a day. Butter gets consumed various times per week by 42%, at least daily by a third of the participants and 17% never eat it.

The average fruit consumption of the German athletes in this survey is with 3,3 portions per day (ranging from 1-9) higher than recommended. Vegetables on the other hand tend to get consumed less than recommended with an average of 2 portions per day (ranging from 1-5). Regarding plant-based proteins one can identify that most of the participants include them in their diet on a regular basis. A quarter of the interviewees consume legumes and plant-based meat alternatives every now and then, nearly 70% consume legumes at least weekly, whereas around 60% eat tofu and other substitute products at least once a week. Half of the participants consume supplements like protein powder.

3.2. Awareness on Sustainable Diets

The majority of the athletes indicated knowing what a healthy diet is (92%), as well as its impact on their health (92%). The knowledge about sustainable diets, on the other hand, was less extensive. One third of the athletes was not sure or didn't know what a sustainable diet is and 25 % couldn't grasp its impact on the environment. Also, around 1/3 of the athletes did not consider actively the environmental impact nor the pollution of the food they are buying. However, 58% agreed that sustainable diets are a global issue, whereas another 33% didn't have an opinion on it.

Most athletes reported a great importance of food production conditions (organically, seasonal, with minimal CO₂, environmental- and animal-friendly, without child labor, fair trade certification, free-range product) and transport (little transport distance, local/regional). Thereby the exploitation of animals was not such an important factor like the exploitation of humans for around 1/3 of the participants and the environmental impact was not considered by 25% of the participants.

Concerning the food waste applications, around two thirds of the participants were aware about its existence, but only less than half of the people knowing these applications use or used them at least once in their life.

3.3. Barriers to Access

Most athletes (92%) assumed that there is a lack of knowledge regarding food impact, but only a third of them saw a problem in the lack of product quality in sustainable food. The possibility of lacking some energy components (i.e., macronutrients) that they need as an athlete when undergoing a sustainable diet is a concern for half of the athletes. Nevertheless, around 60% of this sample reported that they are willing to change their diet into a more sustainable one, while the others adopted a neutral position.

When it comes to the accessibility of sustainable food in their community, the sample was divided. Half of the athletes reported that sustainable food is not easily accessible in their community and the other half answered the opposite. However, the lack of year-round options due to seasonal products was considered a barrier in the consumption of sustainable foods by two thirds of the athletes.

3.4. Willingness to Change

Most athletes (92%) agreed that the environment has changed negatively when compared to when they were younger, whereas half of the participants was very concerned about the consequences of what they eat in terms of sustainability.

Around 60% of the athletes agreed that they should act towards sustainability, the others remained neutral on this position. The same amount of participants who agreed on the former statement, were also feeling that going into a more sustainable diet is compatible with their condition as athletes.

Considering the main barriers that may undermine their willing to undergo a sustainable diet, 50% of athletes reported that some intrinsic barriers such as their knowledge, inadequate self-efficacy and individual's habits may limit them from undergoing a sustainable diet. Reasons such as culture, coaches, economic reason, or meals imposed by the team (extrinsic barriers) were reported by 50% of the athletes as challenges in implementing a more sustainable diet.

All of the athletes are willing to reduce the amount of food they waste, while 50% would like to limit their meat consumption. Also, 2/3 are willing to change their eating habits and undergo a sustainable diet even if other athletes do not. However, concerning to make sacrifices to improve their diet in terms of sustainability (such as paying more, spending more time preparing the food), 33% of the participants weren't willing to do so and another 17 % adopted a neutral opinion.

4. THE ROLE OF COACHES AND SPORT NUTRITIONISTS/ DIETITIANS

4.1 Coaches

All coaches reported to know what a healthy diet consists of, whereas only 60% seem to understand the components of a sustainable diet. 60% are convinced that sustainable diets are a global issue, 20% remained neutral on this statement. 60% of the coaches don't actively consider the environmental impact when buying food. Their awareness on the pollution that the food they consume generates was divided evenly from very little to very high. Around 40% believe that sport coaches should not play a major role in climate change mitigation strategies and another 40% remained neutral in this regard.

The major concerns when buying food are 1) Production without exploitation or child labor; 2) The production company respects the labor rights and wages of the employees and produces in an animal-friendly way; 4) organic production and 5) little transport distance.

When it comes to barriers to change athletes diets, the lack of knowledge regarding food impact and the inaccessibility of sustainable foods were pointed out as the major obstacles. The coaches were strongly divided on the questions if there are lacks of product quality in sustainable food and lacks of year-round options due to seasonal products. 80% were convinced that a sustainable diet could cause a lack of energy components that athletes need.

Two thirds of the coaches believe that intrinsic barriers such as habits, time and knowledge may limit their athletes from making their diet more sustainable, extrinsic factors, on the other hand, were not considered a great barrier.

The majority of the coaches (80%) agreed on the negative development of the environment compared to when they were children. However, most of them (80%) are not concerned about the consequences of what their athletes eat in terms of sustainability. 60% believe that they should take action towards sustainability, whereas the rest remained neutral in this regard.

40% of the participants are not willing to change their athletes' habits to contribute to sustainability. The other 60% were convinced of the opposite even if other athletes won't change their diet. The willingness to push athletes to produce less food waste was higher than the willingness to influence on reducing their meat consumption or increasing plant-based alternatives. Only 20% of the coaches were aware of the food waste application available and already used or still use them in their day-to-day life. All of the coaches were convinced that policymakers must take action towards sustainability.

Lastly, most of the coaches believe that their professional expectations/views are much more aligned with athletes than with sport dietitians regarding a healthy diet. When it comes to sustainability, they remained mostly neutral, with slight tendencies to agreement with athletes and disagreement with nutritionists.

4.2 Sport Nutritionists/Dietitians

As expected, all dietitians had a very good understanding of a healthy diet and its impact on health. They also seem to know, although with less certainty, what a sustainable diet consists of and its impact on the environment (50% agree, 50% strongly agree). All of them agreed that sustainable diets are a global issue.

They were also highly aware of the pollution that food may generate and consider the environmental impact when buying food. The majority of the participants believe that sport dietitians should play a major role in climate change mitigation strategies and that climate change is an important practice issue for sport nutritionists.

When buying food, all of the dietitians considered the majority of the production conditions important (animal friendly production, without exploitation nor child labor, fair-trade, environmental sustainability, seasonal/regional production). Only the fair-trade logo/certification was not an important buying factor for most of the participants. Everybody is aware of the food waste applications that are available currently, and 75% has already used or still uses them in their day-to-day life.

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All sport dietitians support the change of their athletes' diet into a more sustainable one. All of them reported as the main barriers the lack of knowledge regarding food impact and the lack of accessibility in their community. None of the participants saw a problem in the lack of quality of sustainable food, whereas half of them considered the barrier to consume sustainable foods because of a lack of year-round options due to season products a problem. The lack of some energy components for an athlete when undergoing a sustainable diet was a highly controversial statement as half of the participants disagreed strongly and the other half agreed strongly.

All of them agreed that the environment has changed negatively when compared to when they were younger, and around half of the dietitians are very concerned about the consequences of what athletes eat in terms of sustainability. All of them believe that they should act towards sustainability, mostly also willing to self-sacrifice for food consumption to contribute to sustainability. This also resulted in the will of everybody to reduce their athletes food waste, limit their meat consumption and to change their eating habits to contribute to sustainability even when other athletes won't do that. However, 50% believe a more sustainable diet is not viable in their athletes' conditions. Also, most of them believe that extrinsic (e.g. culture, high competition, coaches) and all of them believe that intrinsic barriers (e.g. habits, time, knowledge, inadequate self-efficacy) may limit their athletes from making more sustainable choices. All of them were convinced that the greatest responsibility to take action in this field lies with the policy makers. Finally, Sport Dietitians were very divided on the alignment of their professional expectations/views with coaches and athletes when it comes to healthy diet and sustainability.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this survey show the need to implement several strategies on sustainable diets for athletes not only addressing athletes but also sport dietitians and coaches. Overall, it seems that there is a lack of knowledge about sustainability especially among the athletes and coaches, being pointed out as the major barrier to undergo a more sustainable diet. Some neutral positions (nor agree or disagree) may be a consequence of the lack of knowledge on several topics as the questionnaire didn't offer the option to answer "I don't know". Also, the accessibility of sustainable foods in some communities was considered a big obstacle.

Especially the coaches didn't show strong will to contribute to more sustainable diets for athletes or to take action towards a more socio-ecological society. Athletes and nutritionists, on the other hand, saw greater importance in these topics as well as their role in it. Nutritionists are highly willing to work on changing the dietary habits of their athletes such as meat consumption and reducing food waste to undergo a more sustainable diet, whereas a smaller percentage of the coaches and athletes but still a majority of them were willing to do so. The misconception that a sustainable diet is not comprised of all energy components that athletes need in their diet is still widespread, especially among coaches. Furthermore, the interest in acting towards socio-ecological sustainability tends to correlate with the existing knowledge of the interviewees.

These results call for a variety of measures to improve the environmental impact of food production and consumption in general, and athletes' diets in particular. One possibility could be to generate education material on these topics, adjusted to the different target groups. Athletes could function as change agents that act as role models and facilitate their knowledge. Furthermore, to enhance deep structural change, there is a need for strategies to hold policy makers accountable and encourage them to take action. Through policy e.g., the accessibility of sustainable foods could be increased in various ways, so that the acquired knowledge can also be implemented in daily life.

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