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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 explain 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/dieticians, 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, sports nutritionists/dieticians). This report refers to Malta and is structured as follows:

Firstly, the report will determine the current dietary intake of the Maltese athletes interviewed. It presents their real and perceived knowledge about sustainability and illustrates their willingness to change nutritional habits in favour of more sustainable ones. Next, it exhibits how sports nutritionist and coaches perceive their own role in implementing changes in their athletes’ diets, including the main barriers athletes face regarding diet sustainability. It must be noted 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

This report consists of one of the six National reports created under the project "Integrating sustainability in athletes' dietary choices". This National Report aims to outline the results of our interviews, divided by country. In this specific document, we aimed to show the dietary intake of Maltese athletes, as well as their knowledge about sustainability and their willingness to change their habits into a more sustainable diet. Additionally, the beliefs of sports nutritionists and coaches about their role in implementing changes in their athletes' diet and the main barriers that athletes are faced regarding sustainability are also stated in this report.

Although Mediterranean, the food habits of the Maltese are closer to a British Anglo-Saxon one (Tessier & Gerber, 2005). The Maltese diet can be described by a high consumption of cereals, mainly pasta and traditional Maltese bread, dairy products, eggs and sugar (especially from soft-drinks). Meat consumption is dominated by red meat with a high proportion of processed meats including corned beef and luncheon meat; fish consumption is low compared to meat (Mizzi, 1995).

A national survey carried out in 2003 has found that fresh milk is the type of milk most commonly consumed (46.06%); Maltese bread (white) is the most common kind of cereal consumed, with a mean of 2.2 slices per person per day; the type of fat used most often for food preparation at home is not olive oil (38.87%) but rather other vegetable oil (52.55%); 47% answered that they add salt to meals during cooking 'almost always' and 23.73% 'almost always' add salt to meals at the table (Department of Health Information, 2003). In a study comparing two generations (mothers and daughters), it was found that cheese consumption increased significantly in recent years (+49%), with cheddar being the most common cheese consumed (Tessier & Gerber, 2005).

An unbalanced diet, together with a sedentary lifestyle, is believed to be the cause of the increasing incidence of non-communicable disease in the Maltese population. The leading causes of mortality in Malta are ischemic heart disease and cerebrovascular disease, which together comprised 37% of mortality causes in 2002 (World Health Organization, 2006). Risk factors for cardiovascular diseases are high: 22.1% of Maltese are hypertensive (Ministry for Social Policy, 2008), 8.88% have high cholesterol levels and 7.10% are diabetic (Department of Health Information, 2003). Recently it has been found that Malta has the highest rates of childhood obesity (10-16 year olds) in the world (25.4% pre-obese and 7.9% obese) (Janssen et al., 2005), that the Maltese have the highest average BMI (26.6) in Europe, and that among Europeans, Maltese were the least inclined to go for a ten minute walk (European Commission, 2008). Interestingly, the same study found that Maltese were also the likeliest to believe that they eat “very good” for their health (44%); with a further 43% believing that they eat “good”.

3. ATHLETES' DIETARY INTAKE

3.1. Dietary Intake

This project revealed that most Maltese athletes do not follow any specific diets. Furthermore, the rest of the athletes who adopt some diets vary widely. Similarly, it is found that higher-level athletes, compared to lower-level, have higher knowledge of diet, albeit slightly.

Two females under 24 years old were interviewed and 1 male above 25 years old and younger than 34 years. They are all single and 2/3 are professional athletes. The 2 females reported a yearly income less than Euros 10, 000 and the male between Euros 20, 000 and Euros 40, 000. The male had a Bachelor's degree, whereas the 2 females are qualified with a high school certificate or equivalent.

All the athletes reported a moderate to high-level meat consumption from weekly to monthly, depending on the quality of the meat and hence the price.

The consumption of fish was reported at a lower frequency to all of them answering as consuming the fish items monthly or less.

Carbohydrates, on the other hand and dairies, were reported more frequently with 2/3 consuming them weekly and 1/3 3 times monthly.

Sweets consumption was reported the least with all of them consuming them only monthly or less. The intake of fruit and vegetables varies from weekly to 3x weekly for all 3 interviewees. However, dry lentils, peas and beans as well as soya, tofu and veggie burgers were consumed monthly by all 3 interviewees.

3.2. Awareness on Sustainable Diets

Knowledge and awareness of sustainable diets

More than a fifth of the athletes seemed to recognize what a healthy diet is (20%), as well as its impact on their health (20%). Nonetheless, 20% reported a neutrality regarding lack of knowledge about the impact of their diet on their health. Regarding the knowledge about sustainable diets, 10% of the athletes were not able to understand what a sustainable diet is, and 20% were neutral about its impact on the environment. Also, 10% of the athletes did not consider the environmental impact when buying food not the pollution that the food may generate. However, only 10% agreed that sustainable diets are a global issue.

Around 1/3 of athletes reported a neutral position regarding their interest in how their food is produced (organically, seasonal, with minimal CO₂, environmental- and animal-friendly, without child labour), transported (little transport distance, local/regional) and prepared (fair trade logo/certification, free-range product).

In what concerns to the food wasted applications, half of the participants were aware about its existence, and 100% of those who know these applications use or used at least once these applications in their life.



3.3. Barriers to Access

Most athletes assumed that there is a lack of knowledge regarding food impact, but all disagreed that there is a lack of product quality in sustainable food. Nevertheless, more than 30% reported that they are willing to change their diet into a more sustainable one, while the others adopted a neutral position. However, when it comes to accessibility, 10% of the athletes reported that sustainable food is not easily accessible in their community and the rest were neutral, and regarding the lack of year-round options due to season products consists of a barrier in sustainable foods, the views were divided from neutral to agreement and to disagreement.



3.4. Willingness to Change

Most athletes agreed that the environment has changed negatively when compared to when they were younger, where more than 20% were very concerned about the consequences of what they eat in terms of sustainability and that they should act towards sustainability, around 20% feel neutrally about going into a more sustainable diet is not compatible with their condition as athletes.

Considering the main barriers that may undermine their willing to undergo a sustainable diet, around 10% 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 10% of the athletes as possible barriers to implement a more sustainable diet. Nevertheless, 10% did not consider these reasons as possible barriers and 10% did not have any opinion (neutral).

Surprisingly, more than 20% of the athletes are willing to reduce the amount of food they waste, while 10% would like to limit their meat consumption. Also, more than 10% are willing to change their eating habits and undergo a sustainable diet even if other athletes do not. However, in what concerns to make some sacrifices to improve their diet in terms of sustainability (such as paying more, spending more time preparing the food), almost 10% adopted a neutral opinion.

4. THE ROLE OF COACHES AND SPORT NUTRITIONISTS/ DIETETICIANS

4.1 Coaches

All coaches reported to know what a healthy diet consists of and understand the impact that the diet can have on health. When it comes to sustainable diets, 40% understand what a sustainable diet consists of, as well as the impact that the diet can have on the environment. Surprisingly, 20% feel neutrally that sustainable diet is a global issue. 40% of the coaches consider the environmental impact when buying food and around 80% are aware of the pollution that the food they consume generates. Around 60% believe that sport coaches should play a major role in climate change mitigation strategies. The major concerns when buying food are 1) Produced without exploitation nor child labor; 2) produced without disturbing the balance of nature; 3) local/regional product and 4) is traded in a fair way. However, if the company respects the labor rights and wages of the employees, if it is produced organically and in an animal friendly way are also important for coaches. Around 40% are aware of the food waste application available and from that, 40% already used or still use them in their day-to-day life.

When it comes to barriers to change athletes' diet, the lack of knowledge regarding food impact was pointed out as the major barrier. Coaches also believe that there is a lack of product quality in sustainable food, as well as ~60% think that there is a lack of energy components that athletes need in their diet. Most of them adopt a neutral position regarding their willingness to support the change of my athletes' diet to a more sustainable one

Almost all coaches (60%) agreed with the affirmation "The environment has changed negatively compared to when I was a child", while 60% are really concerned about the consequences of what their athletes eat in terms of sustainability. 40% believe that they should take action towards sustainability while 40% feel neutrally about this.

Around 40% are not convinced enough about changing athletes' habits in terms of sustainability. Only 20% support the change of an athletes' diet into a more sustainable one, while the others adopted a neutral position or simply agreed. Nevertheless, around 80% are willing to change athletes' eating habits in order to contribute to sustainability, such as reducing meat consumption and increasing plant-based alternatives.

20% of the coaches believe that extrinsic barriers limit their athletes from making their diet more sustainable while 40% agree and the other 40% are neutral about it and 60% believe that intrinsic barriers such as habits, time and knowledge may also be undermined in that process. 40% believe that policymakers must take action towards sustainability.

4.2 Sport Nutritionists/ Dietitians

As expected, all dietitians have the knowledge to understand what a healthy diet is and its impact on health (~100% Strongly agree). They also seem to know, although with less certainty, what a sustainable diet consists of and its impact on the environment (75% ~ Strongly agree). All of them agreed that sustainable diets are a global issue.

However, half of the dietitians does not consider the environment impact when buying food nor are aware of the pollution that food may generate. Nevertheless, most of them believe that sport dietitians should play a major role in climate change mitigation strategies. Plus, around 75% believe that climate change is an important practice issue for sport nutritionists, while the other third adopted a neutral position.

When buying food, most dietitians find important if it is a seasonal and local/regional product. Being produced in an animal friendly way, without exploitation nor child labour and being traded in a fair way is also a concern for the majority of this group.

More than 100% agreed regarding if it's a free-range product, traded in a fair way, produced with minimal CO₂, prepared in an environmental friendly way and if it has a fair trade logo/certification. More than half does not consider if the product is produced with a fair trade logo/certification. Around 3/4 are aware of the food wasted applications that are available currently, and from that, 1 already used or still use them in their day-to-day life.

All sport dietitians support the change of their athletes' diet into a more sustainable one. Most of them reported as the main barriers the lack of knowledge regarding food impact, the lack of year-round option due to season products and the lack of accessibility in their community. More than half disagree that there is a lack of some energy components for an athlete's diet when undergoing a sustainable diet, as well as the lack of quality in sustainable food.

All of them agreed that the environment has changed negatively when compared to when they were younger, and around 50% are very concerned about the consequences of what athletes eat in terms of sustainability. All of them believe that they should act towards sustainability and all of them showed a strong willing in driving their athletes to reduce the food waste. Half of the sport dietitians would like to limit athletes' meat consumption and more than half are willing to change athletes' eating habits to contribute to sustainability. Nevertheless, 50% strongly disagree that they are not convinced enough to change their athletes' habits, and 25% believe a more sustainable diet is not viable in their athletes' conditions. Also, most of them believe that some extrinsic barriers (culture, high competition, coaches) may limit their athletes from making more sustainable choices. Finally, most Sport Dietitians believe that their professional expectations/view are at least partially aligned with coaches and athletes when it comes to healthy diet, but not with sustainability.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the presented results, there is a need to implement several strategies comprising not only athletes but also sport dietitians and coaches. Overall, it seems that there is a lack of knowledge about sustainability among the 3 groups, being pointed out as the major barrier to undergo a more sustainable diet. In fact, some neutral positions (nor agree or disagree) may be a consequence of the lack of knowledge, as we tend to not make a decision/opinion about a certain topic if we feel that we do not have the required knowledge about it. Nevertheless, all groups believe that they should play a major role in climate change mitigation strategies. Also, most of them are willing to change some dietary habits such as meat consumption and implement plant-based strategies to undergo a more sustainable diet. The misconception that a sustainable diet is not comprised by all energy components that athletes need in their diet, especially among coaches, is still present.

Therefore, there is a need to create some strategies that are easy to understand and to implement in this target population, not only to increase their knowledge but also to improve their diet in terms of sustainability. Moreover, sport nutritionists and coaches should also be educated regarding sustainability.



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