

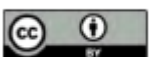


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INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY IN
ATHLETES' DIETARY CHOICES

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 Portugal.

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 Portugal and is structured as follows:

With this National Report we aimed to present the results of our interviews, divided by country. In this specific document, we aimed to show the dietary intake of the Portuguese athletes, as well as their knowledge about sustainability and their willingness to change their habits into a more sustainable diet. Also, the perception of sport nutritionists and coaches about their role in implementing changes in their athletes’ diet and, according to their opinion, the main barriers that athletes are faced regarding sustainability are also stated in this report.

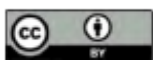
To note that, except for dietary intake, interviews were taken using a 5 point Likert Scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” options.



2. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sustainable diets have been put on the spotlight, as one of the solutions towards winning the fight against climate change. According to FAO, a sustainable diet is a diet with low environmental impact, which contributes to food and nutrition security and to a healthy lifestyle, for present and future generations. These diets are respectful of biodiversity and protect ecosystems, they are culturally acceptable, accessible, affordable, nutritionally adequate, safe, and healthy.

Portugal is characterized by a high meat and fish consumption (as opposed to fruit, vegetables, bread and cereals consumption), as well as a significant amount of food waste (Baptista et al., 2012), being the Mediterranean country with the highest per capita food Footprint (Galli et al., 2020). In 2020, Portugal had 587 812 registered athletes, with football being the most popular sport (190.865), followed by volleyball (53.316), handball (45.394) and basketball (26.608) (PORDATA, 2021).





3. ATHLETES' DIETARY INTAKE

3.1. Dietary Intake

Portuguese athletes reported a higher meat consumption, especially for chicken and other poultry, where more than 2/3 reported a consumption of at least 2-4x a week (20% consume it at least once a day). Regarding red meat, about 1/3 reported a consumption of once a week, while the other third 2-4x a week. The fish consumption is not as high as meat, as ~50% consume white fish about once a week and oily fish 1-3x a month. Most athletes did not consume processed meat such as ham, bacon and sausages, as well as fried fish.

The consumption of dairy products are discrepant among athletes, as 20% reported to consume low fat yogurt at least once a day, while 20% eat this food 1-3x a month or never. Around 1/3 do not consume cheese, while the other third consume this food at least once a week. Egg's consumption is also discrepant, as 10% eat it daily, 30% once a week and 30% 1 to 3 times a month. The most common fat used by Portuguese athletes is olive oil, where 30% consume it daily and only 10% do not consume it at all.

Fruit and vegetable consumption are below the recommendations, as the mean intake was 2.5 (ranging from 1 to 6 portions/day) and 2 (ranging from 0 to 7) portions a day, respectively. Also, 80% never consumed plant-based alternatives such as soy, tofu, etc, and around 50% do not consume pulses such as lentils and beans.



3.2. Awareness on Sustainable Diets

More than half of the athletes seemed to recognize what a healthy diet is (60%), as well as its impact on their health (80%). Nonetheless, 10% reported a lack of knowledge about the impact of their diet on their health. Regarding the knowledge about sustainable diets, 20% of the athletes were not able to understand what a sustainable diet is, as well as its impact on the environment. Also, ~1/3 of the athletes did not consider the environmental impact when buying food not the pollution that the food may generate. Around 60% agreed that sustainable diets are a global issue.

Around half of athletes adopted a neutral position regarding their interest in how their food is produced (organically, seasonal, with minimal CO₂, environmental- and animal-friendly, without child labor), 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 60% 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, as well as a 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 more than half of the athletes. Nevertheless, more than half of this sample 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, almost half of the athletes reported that sustainable food is not easily accessible in their community, and the lack of year-round options due to season products consists of a barrier in sustainable foods.



3.4. Willingness to Change

Most athletes agreed that the environment has changed negatively when compared to when they were younger, where more than 2/3 were very concerned about the consequences of what they eat in terms of sustainability.

Despite most the athletes agreed that they should act towards sustainability, around one third feels that 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 ~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 possible barriers to implement a more sustainable diet. Nevertheless, ~1/3 did not consider these reasons as possible barriers and ~20% did not have any opinion (neutral).

Surprisingly, more than 2/3 of the athletes are willing to reduce the amount of food they waste, while ~60% would like to limit their meat consumption. Also, more than 2/3 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 80% 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, but only 40% understand the impact that the diet can have on health. When it comes to sustainable diets, 60% understand what a sustainable diet consists of, as well as the impact that the diet can have on the environment. Surprisingly, 80% do not think that sustainable diet is a global issue. All coaches consider the environmental impact when buying food and around 2/3 are aware of the pollution that the food they consume generates. Around 80% believe that sport coaches should play a major role in climate change mitigation strategies.

The major concerns when buying food are 1) Being 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 80% are aware of the food waste application available and from that, 60% 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 ~50% think that there is a lack of energy components that athletes need in their diet. Most of them adopt a neutral position regarding the accessibility of sustainable food in their community, while ~20% disagree with that affirmation.

All coaches agreed with the affirmation "The environment has changed negatively compared to when I was a child", while 80% are really concerned about the consequences of what their athletes eat in terms of sustainability. 60% believe that they should take action towards sustainability.



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. 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.

All coaches believe that extrinsic barriers limit their athletes from making their diet more sustainable and 60% believe that intrinsic barriers such as habits, time and knowledge may also undermine in that process.

More than 2/3 believe that policymakers must take action towards sustainability.

Coaches believe that their professional expectations/view are at least partially aligned with sport dietitians and athletes when it comes to healthy diet and 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 (~80% Strongly agree, ~20% Agree). They also seem to know, although **with** less certainty, what a sustainable diet consists of and its impact on the environment (~80% Agree, 20% ~ 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 2/3 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 labor and being traded in a fair way is also a concern for the majority of this group. More than 1/3 adopted a neutral position 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 organically when buying food. Around 2/3 are aware of the food wasted applications that are available currently, and from that, 2/3 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 2/3 are very concerned about the consequences of what athletes eat in terms of sustainability.



More than 2/3 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% are not convinced enough to change their athletes' habits, and 20% 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. There is still present the misconception that a sustainable diet is not comprised of all energy components that athletes need in their diet, especially among coaches.

Therefore, there is a need to create some strategies that are easy to understand and to implement in this specific 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 and be the driver when implementing these strategies.

6. References

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