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11TH AESOP SUSTAINABLE FOOD PLANNING CONFERENCE

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Organization Team

Michiel Dehaene	Ghent University, Belgium
Elke Vanempten	ILVO-Flanders Research Institute for agriculture, fisheries and food & VUB-Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research, Belgium
Alessandra Manganelli	HafenCity Universität Hamburg, Germany
Hans Vandermaelen	ILVO-Flanders Research Institute for agriculture, fisheries and food, Ghent University, Belgium & co-curator expo 'Gentse Gronden' at STAM, Ghent
Emma Bierens	Ghent University, Belgium
Glenn Willems	ILVO-Flanders Research Institute for agriculture, fisheries and food

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Narratives of Change: more than individual intentions in the path to a sustainable and socially just food future

Patrícia Abrantes
Centre of Geographical Studies, University of Lisbon and Laboratory Terra, Portugal
patricia.abrantes@edu.ulisboa.pt

Carolin Zorell
Örebro University, Sweden
carolin.zorell@oru.se

Luís Moreno
Centre of Geographical Studies, University of Lisbon and Laboratory Terra, Portugal
luis.moreno@edu.ulisboa.pt

This paper presents a cross-case qualitative analysis of the relationship between food security, sustainability, and social justice within the framework of the European Green Deal's Farm to Fork strategy. Drawing on fifty narratives in urban and peri-urban areas of five European countries (Austria, Greece, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey), developed in the project ACCTING (AdvanCing behavioural Change Through an INclusive Green deal), the study explores links between barriers and opportunities faced by individuals to access healthy and environmentally sustainable food and different forms of economic and social marginalisation framed by a socio-ecologic behavioural change perspective.

A narrative methodology allows us to delve into the food system realities of individuals and their families from low-income backgrounds, single mothers/parents, working parents with intersectional identities (e.g., LGBTQ, ethnic or religious minorities, migrant communities), disabled, and elderly people. The cross-case findings reveal an interconnectedness of scales (i.e. multilevel relations) between individuals and communities with local, national, and global policies and movements in developing small food transitions into larger changes, suggesting that food must be understood by policies and authorities from a multiscale perspective (both across time and space).

In fact, across combinations of demographic, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds, many people seem to be aware of global sustainable food movements and have intentions to change their food practices. Yet, a set of structural, social, and political conditions exacerbate social and economic injustices, which impede them from making the leap from intentions to food access and change. However, the analysis also unveils factors that the interpersonal scale seems essential for change, transforming individuals into its agents. Social support networks like neighbours, friends, and family, emerge as key enablers of changing mindsets and behaviour, by fostering trust and transmitting diverse kinds of knowledge. They seem to provide access to the needed resources (food sharing and knowledge transfer) for changes, which policies and policymakers sometimes fail to provide. The challenge is to tie individuals, communities, and self-organised actions to feasible local, regional, and national policies.

By unravelling the diverse stories of struggle and transformation, our study illustrates how environmentally sustainable and healthy eating is not just a personal choice, but a collective journey, which calls for a multiscale perspective of participation, agency, and governance as analytical tool.

Keywords: Sustainable food systems, Food Justice, Vulnerable populations, Socio-ecologic framework, Behavioural change

Introduction

The concept of a sustainable food system (SFS) has gained significant importance over the last fifteen years, particularly among academia and policymakers (e.g. UNEP, 2016; HLPE, 2017; EAT-Lancet Report, 2019; FAO Strategic Framework, 2022; United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030) (Brouwer, et al, 2020). According to Bene et al. (2019),

this increasing focus reflects the shortcomings of traditional food systems, which have negatively impacted various dimensions of food security and sustainability. They have shown unable to provide food available to all, to provide quality food, to give equitable access also in terms of culturally-appropriate food, and to preserve the environment (Bene et al. 2019).

Nonetheless, a look in the literature shows that some groups are more adversely affected than others. Individuals and communities in disadvantage that is, in vulnerable or marginalized positions — such as those experiencing poverty, racial, gender and ethnic discrimination, the elderly, and people living in deprived areas (e.g. food deserts)— encounter various obstacles that affect their right to accessing, consuming, producing, processing, and distributing nutritious food. Consequently, changes to SFS are more challenging for these individuals and communities than for others (Horst et al., 2024). This results in the creation of more socially unjust structures, where the most vulnerable are left behind (Bene et al., 2019).

Developing sustainable food systems capable of ensuring food security and nutrition for all is inherently complex. An SFS must be productive, deliver healthy and nutritious diets, be environmentally sustainable to address climate change, and be inclusive and just to support the most vulnerable populations (Viana et al., 2020). Therefore, people-centric frameworks like the sustainable food system wheel (FAO, 2018) or the socio-ecological model addressing behavioural change are increasingly incorporated in food approaches by placing individuals and their resources at the centre of interactions with society and nature; they sustain that human behaviour is complex, multidimensional and influenced not only by individuals inherent characteristics but also by the contexts in which they live from local to global levels. Thus, several layers influence the individual —from intrapersonal characteristics, such as attitudes and values, to interpersonal (micro to meso level), organisational/community (meso level) and policy levels (macro level). This multilevel perspective is explicit in space, including the local (e.g. neighbourhood), national or global level, and over time (i.e. adaptation to change). The socio-ecological perspective suggests that the performance of the food system is evaluated based on the ability of all actors within the system to influence each other, and to initiate change (Schölmerich & Kawachi, 2016; FAO, 2018).

With this framework in mind, our study explores experiences of individuals with varying intersections of vulnerability to better understand the key enablers and hinders that at different scales influence access to healthy, affordable, and sustainable food. The hypothesis is that the linkages between individuals, and their relations with natural and societal contexts, can trigger opportunities for altering behaviours and potentially initiate change in the community and society.

The study is implemented in the context of European Union's Horizon 2020 project ACCTING (AdvanCing behavioural Change Through an INclusive Green deal) and the research questions are: 1) What factors enable or hinder individuals to access and consume environmentally sustainable food? 2) Are these the same/different for various (vulnerable) groups and countries and at different levels?

Our empirical investigation to answer the questions is exploratory, building on 50 narrative interviews conducted with people living in urban and peri-urban areas in 5 countries (10 interviews per country): Austria (Vienna), Greece (Thessaloniki), Portugal (Lisbon and Cascais), Sweden (Orebro, Stockholm, Gothenburg) and Turkey (Gökçeada, Çanakkale, Izmir, Istanbul).

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative approach that uses narrative interviews, which were carried out in three phases:

(1) Desk research to identify target vulnerable groups and tentative enablers and hinders

The first step consisted in identifying the priority target groups through multidimensional vulnerability approaches: Identification of the priority target groups of ACCTING is based on the theoretical framework of social, economic, and environmental vulnerability, which is inherently multidimensional (Poortinga & Darnton 2016). In this project they are: Gender, Gender Identity, Age, Disability, National minority, Ethnicity, Religion/belief, Sexual orientation, Social class, Geography.

The second step was to identify tentative factors serving as hinders and enablers of behavioural change. Tentative factors were identified through a comprehensive literature review and summarised along three major categories (also adapted from the FAO's sustainable food system wheel and the socio-ecological model): resources, social dynamics and relations, and structural conditions. Personal resource conditions include both material (e.g., money, tools, software applications) and immaterial (e.g., time, data, experiences, know-how, access to political and social actors) resources. Social dynamics include different kinds and aspects of social relations (e.g., having people to rely on/trust, caring/emotional support, being part of a community or social network, and having certain beliefs and values) (e.g., Centola 2018). Structural conditions relate to the broader material and immaterial conditions 'owned' by a society (e.g., infrastructures, the physical and natural environment, policies, social and economic conditions, socio-cultural norms) (FAO, 2018).

(2) The narrative interview

The narrative interviewing is a qualitative method to articulate and share people's stories in their own words. Narrative analysis can be used to understand how experiences of past events and circumstances can improve collective planning and policy for the future (; Zorell et al., 2023). The technique is used to collect and share a person's story which entails both a research methodology and a mechanism for storytelling, i.e., both a way of telling a story and a way of knowing.Stories have both intuitive and emotional elements, which are important complements to statistics and more impersonal and generic accounts of inequalities. Narratives as a technique can thus make visible how multiple sources of inequalities intersect, as well as the situational and contextual nature of inequalities from a single person's perspective (Zorell et al, 2023)

The narrative started with a general background question: I would like to ask you how you usually obtain your food? Can you describe your daily food routine? Could you please share your experiences and concerns in this respect? This was followed by more concrete probing questions. An example for such a question is: Are there different opinions/views in the family about eating habits and environment-friendly and healthier eating?

(3) Analysis of the narratives

Following each interview, researchers completed a report on the informant and the narrative in a spreadsheet template provided for this purpose. Each narrative interview report contained three sections: background information (including vulnerability profile of the informant), narrative summary and analysis (including keywords and telling quotes to flag important themes and statements that captured the narrative), and identification of enabling and hindering factors (where the interviewer was asked to flag enabling and hindering factors across the three thematic dimensions: resources, social dynamics, and structural conditions). Some descriptive and test hypothesis were developed to analyse possible relationships between data.

Case study results

Country context and sample characterisation

The project collected narratives from 5 countries: Austria, Greece, Portugal, Sweeden, and Turkey. These five countries vary geographically, socio-demographically, and economically. Turkey stands out among the other countries as being the most populous (84.7 million in 2021), the most ethnically diverse and for hosting the largest number of refugees, namely Syrians. All others have similar demographic dimensions (around 10 million inhabitants in 2021). In Sweden and Austria, more than 20% of the resident population was born abroad or has an immigrant background, while in Greece and Portugal, foreign citizens account for 8.4% and 5.2% of the total population, respectively (Eurostat, 2022). In 2022, Sweden and Portugal had the lowest rate of population that was unable to afford a meal containing meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent every second day, with 2.4% and 3%, followed by Austria (5%) and Greece (10%), the latter ranging above the EU average of 8.3% (Eurostat, 2022). According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, for Turkey, the rate was of 41.5%.

Regarding the narrative interviews, the sample comprises 50 narratives (n=50), including 33 women (66%) and 17 men (34%). Most of the informants (46%) are between 25-44 years old, whereas 32% are between 45-64 years of age. Greece presents the highest proportion of younger people (aged 25 or less years old), and women, while in Portugal 70% of the interviewees are aged between 45 and 64 (Table 1).

	Portugal	Sweden	Austria	Turkey	Greece	TOTAL
GENDER						
Woman	6 (60%)	7 (70%)	6 (60%)	6 (60%)	8 (80%)	33 (66%)
Man	4 (40%)	3 (30%)	4 (40%)	4 (40%)	2 (20%)	17 (34%)
AGE						
Unknown				1 (10%)		1 (02%)
< 25	0 (00%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	0 (00%)	3 (30%)	5 (10%)
25 – 44	2 (20%)	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	5 (50%)	23 (46%)
45 – 64	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	2 (20%)	16 (32%)
≥ 65	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	0 (00%)	5 (10%)

Table 1 – Informants by sex, age and country of residence

The profiles of the interviewees include various kinds of backgrounds standing for social vulnerability and marginalisation. These factors were identified by the field researcher based on research desk, including participants covering all vulnerability factors previously identified. Although there are some differences in the most represented vulnerability profiles in the sample of each country, which can be a limitation of these qualitative approach, we can see in Table 2, social class and socio-economic background, followed by gender, geographical context – urban/rural – and ethnicity, as the most relevant characteristics defining the vulnerability positions of the individuals recruited for this study.

	Portugal	Sweden	Austria	Turkey	Greece	TOTAL
Vulnerability profiles						
Already marginalised /disadvantaged	5	4	4	7	0	20
Socially included but at risk	5	6	6	3	10	30
Vulnerability factors						
Gender	4	5	0	6	8	23

Gender Identity	0	2	1	0	0	3
Age	3	4	4	1		12
Disability	3	1	1	0	0	5
Membership of a national minority	2	1	0	4	0	7
Ethnicity	1	4	4	7	0	16
Religion/belief	1	1	1	0	0	3
Sexual orientation	0	1	0	0	5	6
Social class / socio-economic background	10	6	8	9	3	36
Geographical (e.g., urban/rural)	4	4	0	9	1	18
Other	3	2	5	1	4	15

Table 2 - Vulnerability factors of the informants.

In Portugal, Austria, and Turkey, social class/socio-economic background is the most represented vulnerability factor, while in Turkey the geographic context is also prominent ('rural and peri-urban areas'), followed by ethnicity and gender. In Sweden, social class/socio-economic background has the highest representation, closely followed by gender, age, ethnicity, and geography. Finally, in Greece, gender and sexual orientation are the most represented vulnerability factors in the sample recruited. Although not represented in the table, several interviewees from Portugal and Turkey were not only consumers; they were also gardeners and farmers.

Enablers and hinders of change

The enablers and hinders of change are analysed from the perspective of three thematic dimensions: resources, social dynamics, and structural conditions. We identified six resources which are normally intrapersonal (e.g. money, time, education, knowledge perceived self-efficacity, access to equipment) plus the access to political and social actors, which is related to the community layer. On the second dimension we identified four social dynamics related to the interpersonal layer (part of a community social relations, and feelings of social appreciation), and beliefs and values (the former being partially overlapping with the intrapersonal layer). Finally, the third dimension is the structural conditions (environment, infrastructure, policies and politics and events). This dimension stands in the junction of community and physical and social environment layer.

Overall, concerning resources we can observe that there is some general balance between enablers and hinders. However, knowledge, perceived self-efficacy, time and access to social and political actors stand out among the former, while money and access to equipment show more weight among the latter.. Structural conditions are considered to act more as barriers than enabling factors, while social dynamics are referred to by more participants as enabling rather than hindering(Figure 1).

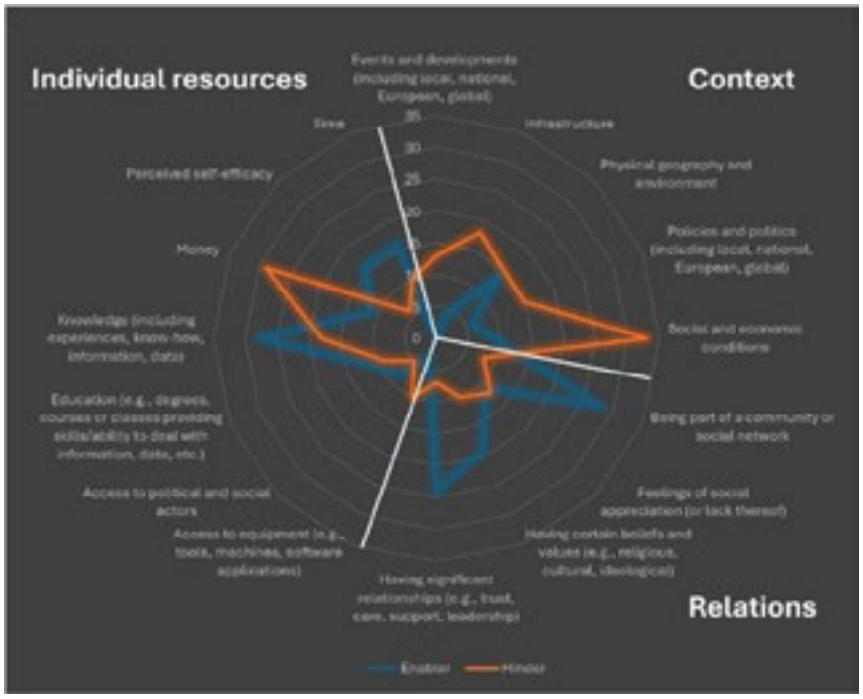


Figure 1 - Enablers and hinders of change, by category and subcategory

In general, the most common enabler of change regarding resources is knowledge (28 mentions), but lack of knowledge can also be considered as an obstacle (18 mentions), while money is raised as a prominent hindering factor (in 29 narratives). Concerning social dynamics, the most common enablers are being part of a community or social network (28 mentions) and having significant relationships (24 mentions), followed by having certain beliefs and values. Relations and the role within the community, as well as the indication of behaviours conducive to shifting towards sustainable eating habits due to beliefs and values (e.g. health conditions and beliefs) indicate that even in contexts of vulnerability and marginalisation, there is some awareness of what constitutes a healthy and sustainable diet The following quotes are illustrative of the effects of social dynamics to induce behavioural change:

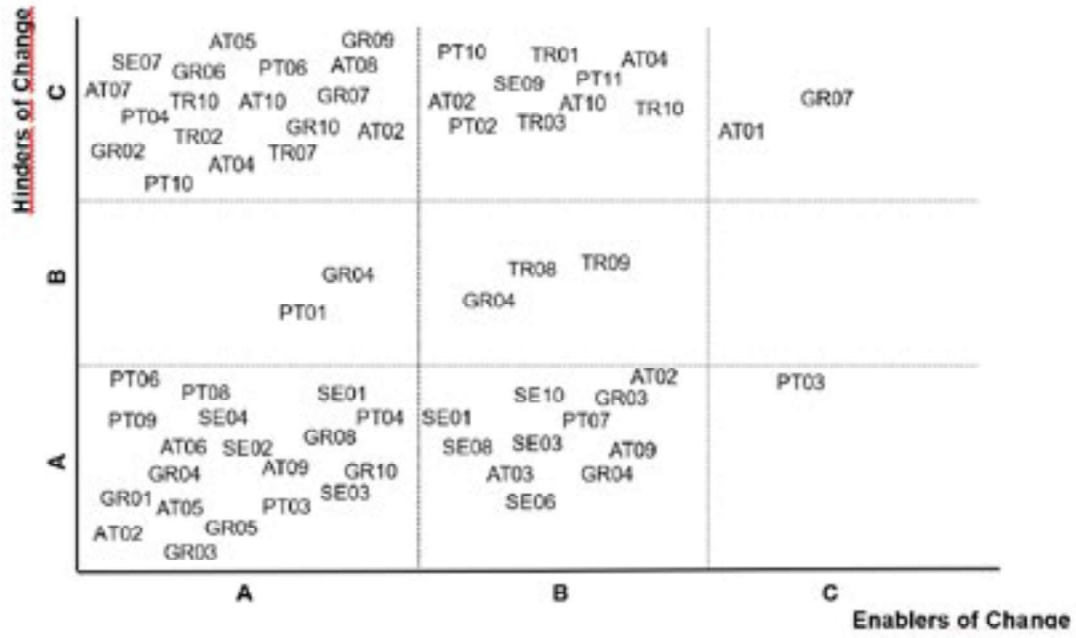
> *Our only income comes from selling flowers. When we could not sell flowers, we had no money and no food. It was very difficult. We managed to survive thanks to the support of neighbours, friends and family. We also received some food support from the municipality. (Turkey Romani Woman, aged 38)*

> *If you are in a good relationship with the field owners and prepare your food (...) in summer, you will be okay in winter, since we rest in winter. [And] For example, when you know the owner of the local grocery store in your neighbourhood in person, you buy and later pay with the money you will earn. (Turkey, Romani man, aged 42)*

> *I am very grateful to the Town Hall, which gave me this little house, and (…) this garden too, to help my life, and they are also helping me there at ARESC [Association for Educational and Social Responses to the Community] with a little basket from the Food Bank (…) And so, thanks to the garden, I relate more to the people who are here (…); we pretend that we are from the same family (…). (Portugal, Immigrant woman)*

The feelings of social appreciation have, in turn, almost a balance of mentions as an obstacle (12 cases) and as an enabler (11 cases). Structural and contextual conditions are almost exclusively referred to as hinders. Social and economic conditions are a major hindering factor (33 mentions), followed by infrastructure (18 mentions and only 4 times mentioned as an enabler). Physical and natural environment work both as a hinder and an enabling factor (15 and 14 mentions, respectively). Policies and politics were considered as a hindering factor by 15 informants, not very different from events and developments 13, this one with no mention as an enabler.

Results by country highlight that most individuals revealed a combination of facilitating and inhibiting factors of change of individual character (micro-level factors), especially in Greece and Portugal, and then follows the combination of individual enabling conditions with hindering structural conditions of change, with cases from Austria and Greece standing out here.



A – Individual Resources (micro-level factors);
B – Social Dynamics (meso-level factors);
C – Structural Conditions (macro-level factors)

Sources of the Narratives
AT – Austria; GR – Greece; PT – Portugal;
SE – Sweden; TR – Turkey

Figure 2 – Significant relationships between enablers and hinders of change

Finally it was possible to test the relation between hinders, enablers and the vulnerability profiles through the Chi-Square Test P-Values to check if there were statistically significant associations. The p-value less than 0.05 was only found for the relations between Enabler Structural and Vulnerability profile: Disability ($p = 0.014$) and Enabler social dynamics and Vulnerability profile: Social class ($p = 0.031$). This suggests that enablers and hinderers are transversal and intersect all the profiles.

The socio-ecological model emphasises that food decisions are developed based on a combination of intra- and interindividual factors. Figure 3 enables to visualize how obstacles and enablers at different scales relate with the socio-ecological model.

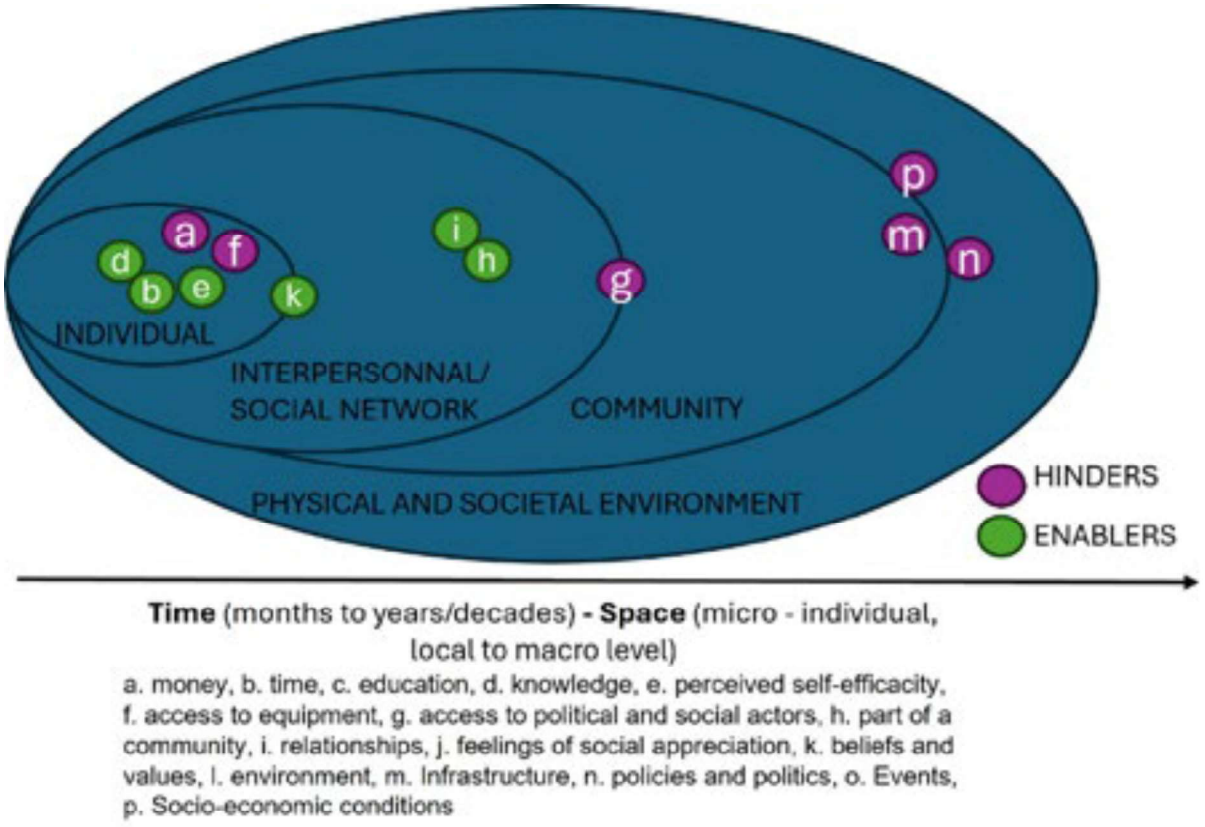


Figure 3 – Barriers and enablers categorized within the socio-ecological model. Source: the authors, adapted from FAO (2018); Schölmerich and Kawachi (2016), Peng, et al (2018), Kincaid, et al. (2007).

We find that most enablers are closely related to interpersonal levels (overall and by country – cf Figure 2). This indicates that despite personal barriers such as financial constraints, behavioural change can be facilitated through knowledge and immersion into a social environment which helps and encourages eating healthy and environmentally food.

Thus, the interpersonal level, or local scale, tends to act more as enabler than as obstacle. However, at the meso- to macro scales, structural conditions play a significant role as obstacles to change. There is a substantial gap between what individual strive for and what the macro scales enable them to put in practice: shops and other access points to food that is both healthy and environmentally friendly is missing, coming paired with lack of access to transportation that could bring individuals to the shops while also being affordable to them. The meso- and macro scales are the scales of policy implementation, and the ones facing challenges in counting that no one is left behind.

Final remarks

In our study, we found that most enablers of change are closely linked to personal and interpersonal relations. While some change originates from individual knowledge, it is primarily the interaction within social networks that drives change, even in the face of financial constraints. These social interactions facilitate access to resources such as food sharing and knowledge transfer—areas where policies and policymakers, operating at more macro levels, often fall short. Consequently, structural factors at the meso to macro scale (regional and national) can constrain the ability of the most vulnerable populations to effect change.

Our findings suggest that while social capital—encompassing relationships around the local food system, community engagement, and collective action—and human capital—individual preferences and knowledge influencing food system choices—are vital for accessing healthy and nutritious food, these alone are insufficient to drive widespread change. Effective community education and a broader dissemination of knowledge in disadvantage communities through sound policies would be determinant of behavioural change.

Furthermore, aligning policies at local, regional, and national levels to support sustainable food systems and address structural barriers is crucial. Sustainable eating is not solely an individual effort; it requires cohesive integration across local, national, and global levels. Policies, actions, and governance schemes at these various scales must be coherent and mutually reinforcing (Leeuwis, 2021). For instance, public health policies should account for territorial aspects of food systems, and agriculture should be integrated into land use planning and management. These are examples where public participation and governance are possible and necessary.

In summary, fostering social and human capital is critical, but it must be supported by comprehensive policy frameworks. These frameworks should aim to eliminate structural barriers and promote sustainable food systems, ensuring that efforts at the individual and community levels are bolstered by robust and supportive governance. By integrating social capital, human capital, and well-aligned policies, we can create a more equitable and sustainable food system for all.

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