Towards a Shared Understanding of Food Literacy Across the European Union

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Foreword

Our dream is simple but ambitious: a future where every European has the knowledge, skills and confidence to make food choices for themselves, their communities and the planet. As Programme Managers within EIT Food's Public Insights and Engagement Team, our work enables and empowers people to make better food choices. Over the years, through initiatives like FoodUnfolded, FoodEducators and the Consumer Observatory, we have spoken with people across Europe — from teachers and policymakers to parents, researchers, entrepreneurs and citizens. These conversations have given us deep insights into what works, and what doesn't, when it comes to building knowledge and shifting behaviours around food. Again and again, we returned to one concept: ***Food Literacy***.

When we first encountered the term, it gave us a way to describe something we had long known was essential but had struggled to articulate. It allowed us to define and frame the knowledge, skills and behaviours that underpin how we interact with food. But while well established in countries such as Australia, Canada and the UK, there was no concrete definition or framework that fit the European context. Without a common language, efforts across countries, programmes and policies risked remaining fragmented.

That is why we commissioned this report from the University of Gothenburg. Our goal is to build a shared understanding of Food Literacy that resonates within Europe. One that connects cultures, systems and policies, and can guide the design of future programmes, funding priorities and governance structures. We see this as the first step in embedding Food Literacy into the fabric of the European food system. Food Literacy can inform European Commission priorities, inspire national initiatives and support the choices made in schools, homes and communities.

We hope this report brings clarity but also sparks collaboration. Food Literacy cannot be delivered by one organisation, government or sector alone. It requires educators, innovators, policymakers and citizens to come together around a common vision and language. By doing this, we can empower Europeans to become more food literate and help drive the transformation towards a healthier, more sustainable and fairer food system.

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Towards a Shared Understanding of Food Literacy Across the EU

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Introduction

Today's food systems are currently economically, environmentally, and socially unsustainable and in need of transformation. Food systems include all processes needed to feed a population e.g. growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, distributing, marketing, and consumption of food. They are heavily reliant on government subsidies, are a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, are at the heart of global public health challenges, and are contributing to exploitative work environments globally. To deal with these big challenges, multi-level and cross-sectoral action is needed. Furthermore, people need to be empowered with food literacy - knowledge and skills in relation to food - more than ever now, to become sustainable citizens.

There is a growing disconnect between people and their food system. This disconnect is being driven by many factors including the increasing distance between farm or sea to fork, the positioning of food as a commodity, and the urbanization of society. The result is a deskilling and distancing of society in relation to food with individuals and communities lacking fundamental food skills and knowledge as well as missing an understanding of how and where food is produced, processed and sold, and under what conditions. This has led to both disconnected consumers and an overall lack of informed participation of citizens in food systems. While transitioning to more sustainable diets is a major part of the solution, and something we need to continue to educate citizens about, it is not the only change that is needed; major shifts across food systems are also required. These shifts require citizens having food literacy not only for their own consumption and food habits, but also to help drive change across food systems in their work and advocacy efforts. Citizens and communities across the EU need to take action across multiple levels of food systems and adopt more sustainable food habits. Therefore, there is an urgent need for food literate citizens who understand and act on how food systems function, and under what conditions.

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Why Food Literacy?

Food Literacy and Public Health

Food systems are a major contributor to global public health concerns. In fact, unhealthy food habits are responsible for one in five deaths globally – that's more deaths than tobacco, high blood pressure, or any other health risk[1]. Although 74% of Europeans indicated they think everyone should eat food that is better for the environment[2], only 12% of the EU population in 2019 consumed the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables which are a key component of sustainable and healthy diets[3]. Additionally, the EU average for meat consumption is approximately 1.58 kg/person/week[4] which is considerably higher than the EAT Lancet recommendation of no more than 300g of meat per week for a sustainable diet[5].

Food literacy can significantly improve individual and public health by empowering people to make informed dietary choices that promote well-being and food systems sustainability. Food literate citizens understand how diet influences long-term health, including the risks of non-communicable diseases such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. They are also better equipped to navigate complex food environments, distinguish between highly processed and nutrient dense foods, and recognize the importance of sustainable food habits for health.

Additionally, food literate citizens can foster community-wide health improvements by sharing their knowledge about healthy and sustainable foods with families, peers, and wider networks. This in turn can increase demand for sustainable, minimally processed foods, and encourage food retailers and policy makers to prioritize building food environments that make sustainable and healthy food choices easy and accessible for all.

Food Literacy and the Environment

Food systems are central to the desertification of soil, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and contribute approximately one third (about 34-37%) of all greenhouse gas emissions globally[6]. Food consumption is a major driver of these environmental impacts, making food one of the largest contributors to household carbon footprint[7]. As a result, EU residents are asking "more from nature than the region's ecosystems can regenerate"[8]. Shifts in dietary patterns towards more sustainable ways of eating therefore, have the potential to significantly reduce the environmental footprint of the EU.

Food literacy is a crucial tool in mitigating these environmental impacts and can help food systems become arenas for ecological preservation rather than degradation. Food literate citizens understand the ecological consequences of intensive food production methods, from land use and water consumption to greenhouse gas emission and biodiversity loss. With this understanding, food literate citizens can support sustainable food systems transformations in many ways, for example: by choosing local, seasonal, and sustainable foods; reducing food waste; and advocating for policies that support and promote regenerative agricultural practices and responsible supply chains.

Food literacy empowers citizens to recognize environmental trade-offs associated with their food-related choices and adopt behaviors that contribute to environmental preservation rather than degradation. By promoting a connection to the land and understanding of where food comes from, food literacy can spur collective action that contributes to building a more resilient and sustainable food system in the EU and beyond.

Food Systems

Food systems include all components (e.g., environment, people, institutions) and activities related to producing, processing, distribution, preparing, and consuming food. Food systems also include environmental and socio-economic outputs of these activities[9]. Food systems are complex, multi-level (i.e., municipal, provincial/state/national, regional) systems that are shaped by environmental, political, technological, economic, and social factors including cultural norms and lifestyles[10].

Food Literacy and Society

Food systems were not built equally for all. Current industrialized food systems have been built by perpetuating racial inequalities and colonial ideologies resulting in marginalized communities continuing to be subject to harmful social and environmental externalities[11]. Globally, smallholder farmers, especially women, are the most hungry and feel the largest impacts of climate change. Increasing natural disasters (e.g., flooding, drought) and more extreme weather can significantly decrease crop yields and, consequently, the livelihoods of these groups. In all countries including those in the EU, the poorest and most vulnerable often face compounded disadvantages related to food including reduced access to healthy and sustainable diets[12].

Food literacy can help create fairer and more equitable food systems by empowering individuals and communities to make choices that support food production and distribution practices that are safe and fair for all. A food-literate society understands the systemic injustices embedded in current food systems, from unfair labor practices to barriers many people face to accessing sustainable and healthy foods.

By taking food systems actions - such as supporting local and sustainable agriculture, advocating for policies that protect workers' rights, and challenging inequitable food policies - food literate citizens can help dismantle these systemic injustices. Overall, food literacy can help drive systemic change and ensure food systems transformations are done in a way that is not only sustainable, but also socially just.

Moving from Consumer to Citizen

Although the word "consumer" is commonly used when discussing people's role within food systems, changing the language from "consumer" to "citizen" has powerful implications both for how people are viewed and how they view themselves within the system. Consumer is an inherently passive term that implies acceptance of a system in its current form. Citizen, on the other hand, is an inherently active term that implies certain rights and responsibilities within a system. Therefore, considering communities and citizens as active agents within food systems is a powerful way to mobilize the potential of people to see the role they can and do play within food systems[13].

Food Literacy and the Economy

There are many hidden costs of today's unsustainable food systems. The global economic value of human suffering and environmental harm caused by current food systems is estimated at well above 10 trillion USD per year. This figure is more than food systems contribute to GDP globally meaning that food systems currently destroy more value than they create[14]. Additionally, the negative health outcomes resulting from unsustainable food systems and unhealthy food habits are placing a heavy financial burden on health care systems. Around 70% of these global hidden costs of food systems come from health impacts of non-communicable diseases caused by unhealthy and unsustainable food habits.

Food literacy can help reduce the hidden costs of food systems and contribute to making food systems financially valuable rather than costly by empowering citizens to make informed choices that support and promote sustainability and health. Food literate citizens understand the true cost of food - including the environmental impacts, potential health care expenses, and lost productivity. Therefore, food literate citizens can drive demand for more sustainable production and consumption patterns. These transitions can lead to lower health care costs and support local economies through sustainable sourcing of food. Ultimately, transitioning to more sustainable food systems, facilitated by food literate citizens, has the potential to generate economic benefits worth 5-10 trillion USD per year, making food systems a driver of value rather than a source of financial strain[14].

Summary: Why we need Food Literacy

Overall, it is clear we need to transform the way we produce and consume food in Europe and across the globe. This requires cross-sectoral and multi-level action, a global shift in dietary patterns, less food loss and waste, and radical changes in practices across food systems. Food literacy can be a tool for citizen action that can help generate this change by eating and advocating for a more environmentally sustainable, fair, healthy, and financially stable food system for all.

Defining Food Literacy

Food Literacy: Definitions

Food literacy is a multidimensional concept that includes various knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors related to food and food systems. The concept of food literacy includes two broad dimensions: health and well-being, and food systems and sustainability[15]. Therefore, food literacy can be seen both as "...the scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change and strengthen dietary resilience over time"[16] as well as a concept that considers concepts beyond diet and includes being "engaged in complex food systems"[17].

The concept of food literacy has been gaining increasing amounts of interest over the last decade. Although its origins come from the field of health and originally focused on nutrition and cooking skills, food literacy has evolved to include concepts related to sustainability, action, decision making, justice, culture, and society[18]. This evolution has been in response to the recognition of the unsustainable nature of current food systems and dietary patterns. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the concept, food literacy could be seen as part of every action and activity related to food[19].

Food literacy can be defined as:

"The ability of an individual to understand food in a way that they develop a positive relationship with it, including food skills and practices across the lifespan in order to navigate, engage, and participate within a complex food system. It's the ability to make decisions to support the achievement of personal health and a sustainable food system considering environmental, social, economic, cultural and political components"[17].

This definition highlights that food literacy goes beyond the individual and the transmission of knowledge and encourages critical thinking, positive relationships with food, and promotes food as a social practice. In this definition there is also mention of "participat[ing] in complex food systems", which may often be overlooked in more traditional approaches to conceptualizing food literacy. Therefore, food literacy is an active concept that empowers individuals and communities to act in addressing food systems issues and injustices as well as individual and community level health concerns.

Dimensions of Food Literacy

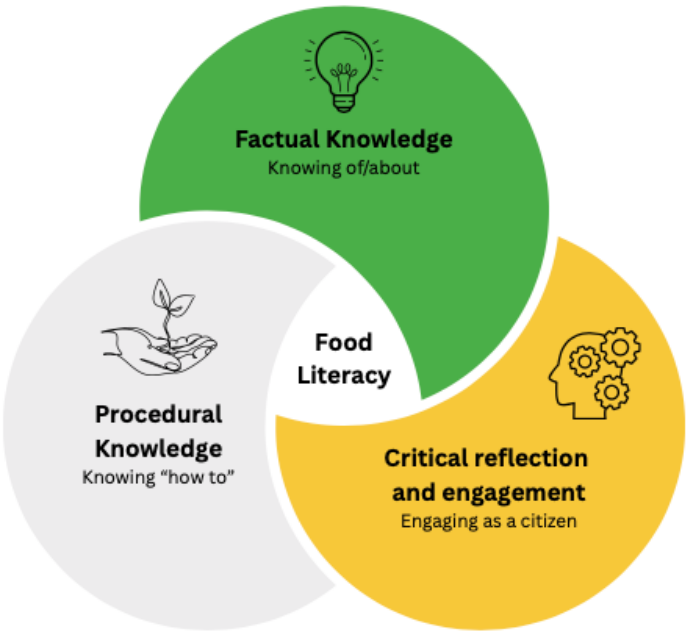
Food literacy is not an all or nothing state of being. Rather it can be seen as a continuum whereby an individual moves from a passive consumer of food to an active participant in food systems. As they move along the continuum, they not only gain new knowledge and skills about food but also are able to use that knowledge in their own life. There may also be an evolution of values along the continuum as they become more aware of the broader impacts (e.g., environmental, social) of food systems and begin to see themselves as actors in local and global communities rather than viewing food solely through an individual lens.

Food literacy is composed of different dimensions that account for various knowledges, skills, and values. Although there are several different conceptualizations of food literacy, food literacy can broadly be seen as being composed of three areas: factual knowledge, procedural knowledge, and critical reflection and engagement[20,21].

Factual knowledge (knowing pf/about) is concerned with knowledge related to food and food systems as well as ability to assess if food-related information is evidence-based and credible. For example, being able to identify foods with fiber or knowing that food systems are contributing to climate change. Although important, factual knowledge on its own does not necessarily mean an individual is acting on this acquired food-related knowledge.

Procedural knowledge (knowing "how to") is our hands-on food skills. This includes skills related to growing, preparing, and eating food. For example, knowing how to chop vegetables or plant a seed. Procedural food literacy is essential skills-related knowledge for being about to cook and meal plan, but it also includes skills that promote participation in broader food systems.

Critical reflection and engagement moves beyond individual health and focuses on critically evaluating food systems and forming connections between health, food, society, and the environment. There is an emphasis on considering the wider impact of individual and community food choices, as well as the structure and function of our food systems. Examples of enacting critical food literacy include advocating for policies that support sustainable food production, volunteering with a food-related organization, or educating friend and family about their role within current food systems.



The three dimensions of Food Literacy

When it comes to designing and delivering programming that focuses on building food literacy, it is important to consider all three areas of food literacy. Food literacy initiatives need to embrace the multidimensional nature of food literacy considering not only nutrition or health related outcomes but also the broader sustainability, socio-cultural, or equity issues related to food systems[22]. If only one area is targeted, for example cooking skills, it does not allow participants to learn about and use their potential as food citizens. With a holistic approach to food literacy, participants can learn important knowledge and life skills as a consumer but also can learn about the transformative power that individual citizens and collective food literacy can have on our food systems and wider society.

Enacting Food Literacy

Individual and Collective Food Literacy

Food literacy can be enacted at both an individual level and a collective level. Individual actions are often based on an individual's personal beliefs and focus on a person's own life in relation to food.

Benefits of Individual Action:

- Reducing one's ecological footprint
- Improving the health and sustainability of your diet
- Signaling to companies that you're interested in sustainable food choices
- Inspiring others to engage in positive food-related behaviors
- Making you feel good about your food-related decisions

Examples of Individual Action:

- Voting for healthy and sustainable food-related policies
- Signing petitions
- "Voting with your dollar" (purchasing products that reflect your interest in sustainable food systems)
- Composting
- Being willing to support food-related taxes, for example a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages
- Eating a sustainable diet with reduced consumption of animal based proteins
- Donating time or money to a food-related charity/project.

Enacting individual food literacy clearly has many benefits but collective food-related action is also needed to push for the radical food systems transformations that are needed. However, enacting individual food literacy can be a precursor to wider change and incentivise collective food-related action in community and institutional-based settings.

Collective food-related actions are taken by a group of people based on shared decisions or can occur in an institutional setting (top down or bottom up). Collective political and social actions have the potential to drive positive food systems change more effectively than individual actions alone.

Examples of Collective Action:

- Working to educate the broader public about food and food systems
- Starting or working with a coalition or local food policy council to engage with elected officials
- Participating in or organizing a protest
- Organizing workplace or institutional level educational-based initiatives to support food systems thinking (literacy) among food systems actors
- Campaining with colleagues within your workplace or school to make sustainable food-related changes (such as having meat-free meal days)

Food Literacy Across the Lifespan

Although most discussions about food literacy focus on young people and incorporating learning about food into education systems, food literacy education can occur in various settings across the lifespan. Food literacy is developed across the lifespan, as such food literacy programming can and should include a variety of age groups. However, there is an underrepresentation of food literacy initiatives involving adults, which is problematic as they themselves may never have learned about food in schools. This represents a major gap in current programming but also an opportunity for future food literacy initiatives. These initiatives can take place in community kitchens and gardens, or within other public institutions such as libraries. Food is rarely a central component of school curricula across the EU (or globally)[22], and as such, there is an urgent need for this to change. Given this lack of education, engaging adults is essential, especially since they represent a group who can contribute significantly to sustainable food systems transformations through their personal and professional lives.

Education for Food Literacy

Education for food literacy can take place in many different settings, however, one of the places it most often appears is within schools. This is because schools are one of the easiest and most practical places to incorporate food literacy education as they are already a place of education, and they reach the majority of young people. When considering school-based food literacy programming, initiatives should try to embrace a multi-year, cross-curricular approach. This means that topics related to food are included in multiple school subjects and across a variety of levels of development from primary to the end of secondary school. If food literacy initiatives are limited to one subject or grade, it is unlikely that it will result in food literate adolescents at the time of their graduation. Rather, food education should be incorporated into teaching/learning and positive food- related behaviors should be modelled and supported within the wider school environment by utilizing a whole school approach. Additionally, as previously mentioned, education for food literacy should incorporate multiple dimensions from nutrition and health to environment and sustainability, and multiple food literacy knowledges including factual, procedural, and critical. By incorporating education for food literacy in a holistic way, students can not only be empowered to take positive food related action in their personal lives through their consumption habits but also be situated in school environments that support and facilitate broader action.

Whole School Approaches

Whole school approaches recognize that learning occurs both in and outside the classroom setting. Whole school approaches require cooperation between a variety of actors in and around schools including students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and community members. Ideally, whole school approaches create a web of consistent experiences across a student's schooling experience so that sustainable and healthy behaviors become second nature to students. Without a systemic approach to food education, students may learn that showing concern for the environment and health while doing nothing about it is normal adult behavior[23].

Food Literacy for All

Barriers to Enacting Food Literacy

There are several personal and external factors that can create barriers or help enable people's ability to apply their food literacy. Some examples of personal factors include self-efficacy, confidence, experience, and resilience. An individual's personal relationship with food and other psycho-social factors impacting food behaviors and consumption are also examples of personal components. In addition to these personal components, external components also exist. These external factors can range from socio-economic and socio-cultural factors to food systems policies at local and global levels. These external factors have an impact on what foods are produced, food prices, and local food environments amongst other things. An example of an external factor influencing an individual's ability to apply food literacy is a person knowing what is healthy or sustainable to eat but not being able to afford these foods. They may also live in an area where the nearest grocery stores do not sell sustainable foods. Therefore, although they have factual knowledge about food, there are economic capacity and food environment are barriers to them applying their food literacy. In brief, it is important to recognize that food literacy does not exist in a vacuum and is influenced by several factors that are often beyond the control of an individual.

Equity and Food Literacy

As noted in the previous section, not everyone has equal opportunity to apply their food literacy. Therefore, it is important to consider privilege when designing and delivering food literacy programs and think about individual or communities' food related capabilities. It would not be appropriate to propose a food skills initiative to learn how to cook healthy foods, when the problem to start is that people simply cannot afford these foods to begin with. It would also be inappropriate to suggest that individuals grow their own food in an area where there is no access to outdoor growing space. This demonstrates that food literacy programming should be carefully thought out and be context specific, taking the location, demographics, and several other factors into consideration.

Diverse backgrounds and experiences also influence how individuals develop food literacy. Political factors, geography, socio-economic factors, cultural heritage and other conditions play a role in individual and community relationships with food. It is important to recognize this diversity when engaging in food literacy activities. For example, in 2022 5.1 million people immigrated to the EU from non-EU countries[24] and as of 2024 there were approximately 13.2 million refugees living in the EU[25]. There are also many ethnic minority groups in the EU who have been historically disenfranchised and, consequently, have experienced a significant loss of food culture and skills. The lived experiences of these individuals impact their understanding about and relationship to food. Therefore, food literacy programs need to be open to diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences when being designed and implemented. This diversity can enrich food literacy education and invites us to try new foods, learn about new cultures, and accept different backgrounds and ways of life.

Food Literacy for All

Examples of Food Literacy Initiatives Across the EU

Project Wasteless (Hungary)

https://maradeknelkul.hu/en/about-wasteless/

Project Wasteless is a national food waste prevention program in Hungary. This project operates extensive educational programming targeting children about reducing food waste. They also run an educational campaign raising awareness of food waste as well as practical ideas about how people can reduce their own food waste.

The Vegetarian Society of Denmark (Denmark)

https://vegetarisk.dk/english/

The Vegetarian Society of Denmark works with a variety of groups to advocate for transitions to more sustainable and plant-based diets. In addition to working in the policy space, the Vegetarian Society of Denmark also has educational workshops in schools and hosts webinars, festivals, and other events to engage individuals and communities in their work. Through their efforts, this organization helps individuals and communities gain an understanding of food systems and helps them navigate and engage with the complexities of food production and consumption ultimately leading to decision making that supports personal well- being and a sustainable, equitable food system.

Food for Life (UK)

https://www.foodforlife.org.uk

The Food for Life program utilizes a whole settings approach to food ensuring that good food is a right, not a privilege. They work with schools, caterers, and communities to push for lasting and sustainable change in food systems and to help people foster a positive relationship with food throughout life.

Slow Food (Global)

https://www.slowfood.com

Slow food is a global movement that works together to ensure good, clean, and fair food for all. Slow food works to educate and empower citizens of all ages to engage in food related action. They assist schools in starting school gardens, organise training for food professionals and educators, and develop educational material designed to increase knowledge about food and change citizen's food related behaviours. Slow food also has specific activities related to political advocacy and engages citizens across Europe and beyond to push for fair and environmentally friendly food and farming practices.

The Swedish Food Agency (Sweden)

https://www.livsmedelsverket.se/en

The Swedish Food Agency (Livsmedelsverket) has information and recommendations about dietary behaviors that go beyond nutrition and instead take a holistic approach that encourages critical engagement with food systems. For example, they emphasize the importance of considering the planet when making food choices and have resources that discuss the environmental impact of various foods. They also have educational material that both provides information about the impact of food waste and tries to motivate people to minimize their own food waste. Overall, the Swedish Food Agency provides information and resources to inform citizens and empower them to make decisions that consider health and environmental outcomes.

The Hidden Heroes of Food Literacy

Although the above represents some great examples of how the food literacy is being implemented across the EU, it is important to remember that many initiatives involving food literacy are locally situated and, consequently, may have no visible online presence. Motivated school teachers, parents, and community members across the continent are working to connect people with food systems, pushing for regional/national/EU-level policy changes that support sustainable food systems, and advocating for food environments that support healthy and sustainable diets. The term "food literacy" may not always be used, but the goals of food literacy are being pushed for by EU citizens at all levels of the system.

Conclusion

This report has emphasized the need for food literate citizens in the face of complex global food systems challenges including climate change, public health concerns, and social inequities. Food literacy is a multidimensional concept that encompasses knowledges, skills, and values that empower citizens to make informed decisions about food and critically engage in broader food systems for human and planetary health.

Food literacy is more than nutrition, cooking skills, or “voting with your dollars” and can include critical reflection and action in relation to personal and community health, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Citizens empowered with a holistic food literacy can engage and act on issues related to sustainable agriculture, ethical consumption, and nutrition both on an individual and community level. They are equipped to navigate and challenge highly industrialized food systems and advocate for equity and sustainability at all levels. Overall, food literacy is essential for creating the more resilient, just, and sustainable food systems that are urgently needed.

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