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**Exploring the Potential for Enabling Sustainable Practices by Food Consumers**

**Webinar Summary**

**02/09/2021**

**Speakers**

Professor Mary McCarthy

Dr Claire O’Neill

Dr Oliver Moore

Daniel Kelly

Emma Walls

With opening address from Professor Thia Hennessy

**SUSFOOD2: ERA-NET**

**Funding scheme: PLATEFORMS – H2020 EU project – [2018 – 2021]**

**Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM)**

A recent webinar on ‘Exploring the Potential for Enabling Sustainable Practices by Food Consumers’, hosted by Cork University Business School and the Environmental Research Institute (ERI), UCC, discussed sustainable food practices both within the supply chain and within private households. Researchers at Cork University Business School, funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, explored how food supply and food consumption are contributing to sustainability, as part of a €1m EU project, PLATEFORMS, in collaboration with research partners in four other European countries. Professor Mary McCarthy, Dr Claire O Neill and a research team at Cork University Business School explored how various food supply channels affect our food choices and whether they are helping us to become more sustainable at home. The webinar focused on the Plateforms EU research project and featured this research and invited presentations from guest speakers from Lidl Ireland, Glenisk and Cloughjordan Farm. The key discussion points that emerged from the webinar were the role of policy when it comes to sustainable food practice, the risk of losing market share in efforts to be more sustainable and the shift in mindset needed to live more sustainably.

Professor Thia Hennessy, Dean of Cork University Business opened the webinar, setting the tone with a discussion on the Triple Bottom Line and the need for responsible leadership for a sustainable future. This sentiment was echoed by each of the guest speakers, who discussed the need for activists; on an individual level, within sector and in policy.

The first area of discussion in the webinar stemmed from Daniel Kelly, the CSR manager of LIDL’s presentation; “Responsible Sourcing and Stakeholder Engagement from a Retailers Perspective.” The role of retail in sustainable food practices was a key focus of the discussion. Kelly spoke on Lidl’s flagship Fair Trade product Way To Go chocolate, and their affiliation with B Corp products, Origin Green and SEDEX. The discussion turned to whether or not there is more work needed from retailers to prevent food and plastic waste. The discussion focused on the value of food among customers, with some arguing food is priced too cheaply, or the incentives of special offers cause food waste. In this way it was argued that retailers are complicit in trying to get consumers to buy more than they need resulting in food waste. However, retailers must still consider the Triple Bottom Line, of people, planet and profit.

The second presentation of the day was “Activism in Product Design” by Emma Walls, the Commercial Director of Glenisk. The concept of the Triple Bottom Line arose again during this discussion. Glenisk spoke to the risk of losing market share in efforts to be more sustainable and the difficulties of trying to agitate up and down the supply chain to bring about meaningful change. Glenisk are known for being market leaders in the Irish food industry, and have always strived to be activists when it comes to product design. From organic yoghurt to carbon neutral packaging they have made changes to align with a more sustainable set of goals. This is where a potential risk of losing their market arises, where changes in package design for sustainability reasons may not offer the same convenience benefits as the existing unsustainable alternative. The question was posed then, are businesses willing to lose customers in order to be more sustainable. And should they have to?

The final guest speaker was Dr Oliver Moore, speaking on behalf of Cloughjordan Farm. This presentation focused on the mindset amongst Cloughjordan Farm members as well as the need for policy changes to support a similar mindset shift within mainstream consumers. Cloughjordan members pay a monthly premium for fresh, seasonal produce grown on the farm and, through social learning, use different techniques to preserve this produce and avoid food waste. The mindset within this community is unique. The value they place on food is higher than the mainstream consumers presented in the PLATEFORMS research project. Throughout the discussion the Cloughjordan model was highlighted time and again, as the gold standard for consumption. As consumers pay a premium for the produce, they are incentivised to get the most value for their money with the food they receive. The discussion called for policy changes for the food and agriculture industry inspired by the Cloughjordan system, to promote sustainable practices and reduce food waste.

The PLATEFORMS research team, led by Professor Mary McCarthy and Dr Claire O Neill then presented their key findings. This led the morning’s discussion from policy makers, retailers and producers to consumer behaviour and sustainable food practices in the home. This research profiled consumers based on their food consumption practices, from the influence where they shop had on consumption, to how their role in the household impacted their sustainability.

The presentation highlighted how food shoppers were either ‘organised’ or ‘disorganised’ in their shopping, which in turn had consequences in terms of buying, cooking, storing and disposing of their food. Organised shoppers, who write shopping lists, meal plan, stock-check cupboards, and budget control, tend to have less food waste. However, many shoppers were disorganised and usually shopped based on their mood and were tempted by special offers or impulse purchases.

The PLATEFORM’s presentation then looked at food acquisition channels, and the impact these had on consumer’s behaviour. For online shoppers, the infrastructure of the website or app makes shopping more structured and presents less opportunity to impulse buy and have less food waste overall, particularly for those shoppers who tend to be more disorganised.

For consumers who bought their food from more alternative food supply channels such as online farmers markets or community supported agriculture (CSA), they were generally more waste averse and went to great efforts to ensure that the food they bought from those supply channels were consumed by the household. Innovative cooking practices and preservation techniques to use local and seasonal produce and avoid food waste were a top priority.

The UCC findings on those who frequent alternative food supply channels, like Cloughjordan Farm, supported Dr Oliver Moore’s characterisation of these consumers, in particular the high value they placed on produce and therefore were often more resourceful when it came to using them up to avoid food waste.

In contrast, many consumers who shop at retail multiples were frustrated with the level of plastic packing they bought, particularly in the fruit and vegetable category. Many over-purchased in this category too, particularly when trying to meet healthy eating aspirations, but often did not result in all of this perishable produce being consumed in the household and was ultimately wasted.

The discussion that stemmed from the PLATEFORMs presentation focused on who can do what. Can consumers, on their own, through their household food practices, improve their sustainable ’footprint’? Or do producers, retailers and/or policy makers need to do more? It was noted in a recent **FMCG GURUS survey** up to 50% of consumers believe that producers should do more to prevent food waste. But it is apparent from the subsequent conversation that responsibility spans the full supply chain. Parallels were drawn between health and sustainability, especially with regards to buying local and seasonal as well as reducing meat to promote better behaviour for consumers. Producers and retailers are responsible too, and while they are taking action by reducing plastic packaging, or stocking Fair Trade items, more must be done. What is clear is that while consumers and supply chain can and are taking action, there is a need for policy intervention to provide a "level playing field" for all stakeholders. The discussion in this webinar recognised that this was happening but slowly and not in critical areas. The complexity of the problem is such that no easy solution will present, but the responsibility is on all of us.