CAFETERIA CONCEPT

Sustainability Week Switzerland
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Do you have any comments, criticism or additions?
We are happy to hear about them!
INTRODUCTION

Nutrition is a crucial part of sustainability! This role is of a diverse nature: from greenhouse gas emissions, which drive climate change, through fair trade, to the issue of ethical values. There are countless facets that are directly or indirectly relevant to sustainability. Every day in our diet we deal with this topic. And often we eat outside our home - including in the canteens and cafeterias of our higher educational institutions (HEI). These HEI bear a great responsibility in shaping and forming a society. They develop forward-looking concepts and new knowledge. Consequently, it is of central importance that the members of the HEI deal with the topic of sustainability and also set an example - among other things in nutrition. Due to the wide variety of topics in the field of sustainable nutrition and the complex interplay of demand and supply, the potential for action and improvement is enormous. In order to promote sustainability in canteens and cafeterias, cooperation with the food providers is essential.

The Sustainability Week Zurich can look back on a very positive cooperation with the catering industry since 2015. In 2017, three catering establishments with 12 cafeterias and canteens at five HEI were involved.

TOPICS

In this chapter we present a selection of relevant topics related to sustainable nutrition. These issues might be addressed and discussed with the food providers of your HEI.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Globally, agriculture accounts for 20 to 30 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions (see figure one), making it a major driver of climate change (IPCC, 2014). It’s worth noticing that different foods can have quite different greenhouse gas emissions. Figure two shows various products and aspects according to their CO2eq emissions. It states that animal products have a much higher CO2eq balance than plant based products. Further it can be seen that seasonal products are to be preferred compared to production in greenhouses. The role of regionalism as well is also highlighted, with air transport having a particularly negative impact on the CO2 balance.

![Figure 1: Global greenhouse gas emissions](https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions-data)

![Figure 2: comparison of the carbon footprint of different food products; Source: eaternity](https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions-data)
**RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION**

Responsible consumption takes into account the living conditions of producers as well as ethical aspects. It can be assumed that human rights and living conditions in so-called developed countries are protected by domestic law. However, this is often not the case in so-called developing countries. When consuming products originating from these countries, fair trade should therefore be ensured in order to promote compliance with human rights and dignified living conditions. Responsible consumption also includes consideration of ethical aspects in relation to animal husbandry such as securing animal welfare and frequent checks of their living conditions. The multifaceted benefits of local and regional products should also be highly valued. Supporting regional products, not only reduces CO2 emissions, but also strengthens the domestic market and protects local culture, tradition and landscape.

**RESOURCE CONSUMPTION**

Due to limited resources on earth, the lowest possible resource consumption should be sought. Meat production, for example, requires a lot of water, which can be a scarce and vital resource in some places (Helvetas, 2016). Furthermore, as few plastic packaging as possible should be used because this can be recycled only partially, is produced from limited resources and takes quite some time to biodegrade.

In our opinion, sensitization to Foodwaste is already very high but yet not to be neglected. It is well known that about a third of our food is lost between field and plate (Foodwaste.ch, 2016), which could feed 3.5 billion people (Waser, 2014).

**APPROACH**

In our opinion, the promotion of sustainability at cafeterias and canteens should take place both on the demand side as well as on the supply side. On the one hand, students are informed and sensitized through campaigns in order to encourage a more sustainable demand. At the same time, the offer is to be promoted more in the direction of sustainability. Based on the experience of the Sustainability Week Zurich, it is very important that action is taken of one’s own volition and conviction and thus sustainability is not perceived as an obligation.

**HOW DO WE PROCEED?**

**Understanding the structure**

First of all it is very important to understand the structures at your HEI, cafeterias and canteens. Answering the following questions can help you with this:

- How are the responsibilities distributed within the cafeterias and canteens?

  For example: Who is responsible for the menu? Who for snacks? Is this regulated centrally or is it the responsibility of each individual cafeteria/canteen itself?

- What can be adjusted and/or changed? Who should we turn to for questions and collaborations?

- What is the connection between the food providers and the HEI? Are there guidelines, regulations on the part of the HEI? Is there any financial support from the HEI?
Is there a commission for cafeterias and canteens at your HEI and what influence do these have on the food providers? Who is a member of this commission? How can you become part of it?

In order to get this information, research is essential. In Zurich we have found that these structures are very different depending on the food provider and the HEI. This results in different starting points for cooperation. Internet research was often not sufficient to understand these structures and even after working together for quite some time it is difficult to keep a good overview. In Zurich, we received a lot of important information from the people responsible for sustainability at the HEI themselves.

**Strategy**

Based on your newly gained information, it is important that you work out a strategy. Where is action needed the most? Which areas have a big potential for improvement? What are your actual possibilities and where can your team help out and have an impact? A strategy can help you in finding a focus of your work and in developing effective actions for your cafeterias and canteens.

**Communication with food providers**

After you have dealt with getting to know the structure, you should also know who your person of contact is. It might be advantageous if you get in contact with the food providers via your HEI. Once a connection is established, it is very important to communicate professionally and politely. We want them to change, but in order to do so we need to work with and not against them. Consider that the food providers are mostly companies that depend on keeping their customers and therefore prioritize meeting their demand. Think about where your interests meet those of the food providers. What can you offer them? What are your options? Why should the food providers work with you? How can you convince them?

**Feedback**

Giving feedback to the food providers can be very promising. Consider not only suggestions for improvement and criticism but also praise for things that are already good. Most food providers allow feedbacks via their website or directly in their cafeterias and canteens via some form to fill in. From our experience these feedbacks are welcomed and taken very seriously. Encourage other students to give feedback as well.

**HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENING IN THE CAFETERIAS AND CANTEENS?**

In order to move the demand towards sustainability it is essential to understand how it is generated in the first place and how and why people consume as they do. This knowledge helps to adapt the supply of the food providers more easily. Background information from the food providers are very helpful, such as specific information and statistics on the number of menus or type of menu sold. These can often be obtained directly from the food providers. Unfortunately, in-depth information is not often available (for example the origin of certain products or whether they are labeled as fair-trade). It is important that you observe the canteens yourselves and form your own opinion about the offer and analyze the choice of customers.

**Surveys**

Surveys help to analyze, evaluate and understand the demand of customers. This knowledge serves as a basis for new projects and legitimating your actions. The Sustainability Week Zurich conducted a survey although it was not representative, some hypotheses could be derived from it. For example, that the taste of a menu is the decisive factor for choosing it, followed by price. In addition, this survey has already served for legitimating further proposals.

Below are some suggestions and examples of how sustainability can be promoted at your cafeterias and canteens. We classified it in actions to shift the supply side towards more sustainability and actions to shift the demand side. Some experiences from the Sustainability W 51§ week in Zurich are given in each case.
ACTIONS-DEMAND SIDE

INFORMATION/AWARENESS-RAISING CAMPAIGNS

An information campaign on sustainability and nutrition can encourage customers to act more sustainable when eating in the canteen or cafeteria as well as at home. Various approaches can be used of this:

- Motivational posters for sustainable consumption (templates available)
- Informational posters with info graphics
- Informational flyers on every table (templates available)
- Constructions that raise awareness (e.g. tower of paper cups)

The experience from Zurich shows that an information transfer and sensitization is effective and successful with attractive eye-catching advertisements. Further we think it is better to limit the amount of information in order to not overwhelm students and to provoke a negative and dismissive attitude.

MENU PROPOSALS

To directly involve customers in the planning of menus you could give them the opportunity of proposing own menus which then are cooked during the sustainability week. They can submit their own sustainable vegetarian or vegan meals directly by filling out a form in the canteen/cafeteria or via an online form. This action got very good feedbacks in Zurich.

Figure 3: Collection of menu proposals in a canteen in Zurich, own photo

ACTIONS-SUPPLY SIDE

SUPPLY CHANGES

Supply can be adapted in favor of sustainability which can have a major impact. During the Sustainability Week in Zurich in 2018 the following changes were made:

- In total more than 50% vegetarian food
- No meat from ruminant animals
- Daily vegan dessert
- Purely vegetarian salad buffet with various vegan options

Although the canteens were willing to push demands like “Meatless Monday” or “A Week of Vegetarian Menus Only” these were not perceived well among the customers. Many students were furious that something was taken away from them. Consequently, they didn’t take the Sustainability Week serious anymore and stopped attending our events. Remember that a bad message will spread very rapid and hurt your image. Be careful what demands you push through and think about whether they will be accepted by whom they affect.

BETTER COSTS

Vegetarian and meat menus are often priced differently. Unfortunately the current price differences between the menus are often not reflected by their actual differences in production and definitely not according their environmental friendliness (often meat menus are cheaper than the vegetarian options). The idea behind the “true cost” action is to get a higher price for meat menus and lower the price for vegetarian menus. This would create an incentive to choose the more environmentally friendly vegetarian or vegan menu.

However, this idea is connected to various problems and should be scrutinized and discussed critically. The price changes might have a negative impact if these are reversed after a week.
If vegetarian or vegan menus are cheaper during one week than usually, they could then be perceived as overpriced as one pays more than it is actually worth. For meat menus it might result in an opposite effect. If prices were lowered after a Sustainability Week, the menus would be perceived as particularly cheap ("bargains"). Based on the assessment of these effects from the food providers as well as as results of surveys, this idea of changing the prices could be considered as a longer-term action.

Unfortunately, this proposal was not well perceived in Zurich and thus could not be discussed any further. The food providers are generally convinced that the costs of vegetarian menus are not lower than the ones of meat menus. In addition they argue that they do not want to discriminate costumers who eat meat.

**MENU-LABELS**

Rating and labels on the environmental friendliness and/or CO₂ balance of menus is another way to promote sustainable consumption at canteens and cafeterias. This could be illustrated with a point system or with bar charts comparing the different menus. A master thesis at ETH Zurich found that communicating sustainable menus through labels led to an increased consumption by 7% (ETH Seed Sustainability, 2015). It is important that these ratings are based on scientific assessments and preferably consider different dimensions of sustainability. Credibility is crucial when it comes to convincing customers to change their behavior. Calculating the CO₂ balance of a menu can be done relatively easy using accessible calculation tools like [eaternity](#) offers. However, it is much more difficult to analyze the usage of various resources or certain social components. There is no standard classification of such factors and too little information to work with.

Our experience in Zurich shows that a holistic, scientifically correct analysis of the menus is not really feasible and thus only CO₂ calculations were carried out. For a successful comparison of menus, it is very important that all menus in a canteen or cafeteria are labeled and that these labels are communicated to the customers as good as possible and at “the point of the decision of a menu” for example on the website or at the entrance of a cafeteria or canteen. A label which no one knows or is seen after standing 15 minutes in a queue is of no use. These labels must be very clear, easy to understand and must not require any previous knowledge. This means that solely displaying the number of CO₂ emissions of a menu does not work. It cannot be expected that customers know what these numbers mean. In addition, CO₂ calculations require a lot of resources such as time and/or money. Ultimately, the question arises whether the same effect could have been achieved using posters only and skipping a detailed calculation.

**SUSTAINABILITY MENUS**

One (or more) “sustainability menus” may be offered daily during the sustainability week. These should be vegetarian and/or vegan and meet as many of the following requirements as possible: seasonal, regional, fair trade, organic, foodwaste-reducing.

In Zurich, one or two sustainability menus were offered daily during the Sustainability Week in 2017. New in 2018, two sustainability menus will be offered daily, one vegetarian and one vegan.

**STAMPING SYSTEM**

Every time by buying a vegetarian or vegan menu customers receive a stamp on their collection card. When the card is full, customers will receive, for example, a free vegetarian menu, a pastry or a desert of their choice. We believe that this would encourage customers to consume more meatless dishes.

This could also be used as an incentive for the use of reusable cups.

**INCENTIVES FOR REUSABLE CUPS**

When consuming a hot beverage in a reusable cup a small unpacked candy is added to it. In Zurich, this incentive could only be implemented for the cup you brought with you, but not for the ceramic cup of the cafeteria/canteen itself. There are various reasons for this:

- Too few cups and the fear that the cups are not enough for such a project
- Generally no cups and dishwasher available
- Fear of the cups being stolen (which unfortunately actually happened)
FURTHER REQUESTS TO THE FOOD PROVIDERS FOR REDUCING PACKAGING

Packaging materials often cannot be reduced due to hygiene regulations. However, this is not the case everywhere. In addition to the stamp card and the incentive for reusable cups, the following suggestions can be discussed with the catering companies in order to reduce packaging materials and close cycles:

- Reusable containers with depot
- More return points for coffee cups
- Apple juice is already being served openly in water glasses in a canteen in Zurich - perhaps this would also be conceivable for other beverages, instead of PET bottles or disposable cups.

According to our experience in Zurich, these proposals are more difficult to implement; an often cited reason is a lack of financial resources.

FURTHER INQUIRIES TO THE FOOD PROVIDERS FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE VEGETARIAN AND VEGAN OFFER

We see the greatest potential for promoting sustainability in the promotion of vegetarian and vegan offers. This can be approached and discussed with the food providers through the following suggestions:

- Demand one vegan option per day
- Demand for a more diverse and attractive vegetarian/ vegan offer
- Food providers themselves promote vegetarian menus by conveying the (ecological and ethical) advantages of a meatless menu to the customer and offering more attractive menus.
- Expansion of the range of vegan snacks such as various chocolates, ice creams and a selection of pastries

SOURCES


IMPRINT

For further information and inspiration, please contact the cafeteria team of the Sustainability Week Zurich

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