



Action Research on Sustainable Food Choices

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Introduction

This research aims to better understand and address the barriers consumers face when trying to use their ethical principles in making food purchasing decisions. Consumers are increasingly interested in using their principles when choosing what food to purchase, wanting to know where and under what conditions their food is produced. Consumer interest in these issues and their willingness to shop accordingly will support agricultural production and food distribution systems that are sustainable. However, many people report that despite their support for more ethical agricultural practices, they do not actually translate this support into making more sustainable purchasing choices due to a range of factors such as cost, lack of information and accessibility of items (Beesley, 2008; Padel & Foster, 2005). The ultimate goal of this project is to design and implement education strategies that will help consumers to translate their principles into their actual purchasing decisions.

Background & Rationale

Research in the Annapolis Valley and elsewhere indicates that there is a large gap between individuals' positive attitudes toward using ethical principles to make sustainable food purchasing decisions, and the extent to which they actually make these choices (Beesley, 2008; Padel & Foster, 2005). Two-thirds of consumers surveyed in Kings County say that they value ethical practices in deciding on the type of food they purchase (Beesley, 2008).

A study of UK consumers found that only 20% of those who were supportive of ethical purchasing actually translated their attitudes into specific purchasing decisions in a 12 month period (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Yet to increase food security in the Annapolis Valley and elsewhere, consumers must translate positive attitudes into making actual purchases, and community stakeholders must develop the capacity to support the shift.

A range of barriers have been identified which explain this gap between attitudes and behaviour. The three most prominent are lack of easily accessible, useful information on which to base decisions, limited accessibility of sustainable products, and cost (Beesley, 2008). The proposed project aims to advance knowledge of education and accessibility strategies to help translate support for sustainable practices into practical purchasing decisions. Work in community-based-social marketing is a key conceptual framework from which to approach this challenge (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999).

Addressing the Atlantic Node's theme of Community Mobilization around Issues of Common Concern:

- This project addresses ways to build the capacity of social economy organizations to empower individuals in making sustainable food choices and contributing to community food security.
- The research investigates which formats of information (tools) are most effective in overcoming obstacles and building individual capacity to make sustainable food choices.
- By building individual capacity, these tools will also influence the engagement of individuals in community food security issues and encourage community mobilization around food security issues (e.g. advocating for better packaging labels, advocating for stores to carry local/organic food, etc.)

Research Questions

- What are the distinctive barriers to consumers making sustainable and secure food purchasing decisions in relation to their demographic characteristics and household makeup?
- What strategies, educational tools and systemic changes would be most helpful in reducing these barriers and increasing the percentage of consumers who translate their positive attitudes into actual decisions?
- How are community organizations and stakeholders best engaged in the educational process so as to promote sustainable and secure food choices and improve their capacity in this area?
- What are promising systemic changes that can occur at a community level which can promote sustainable and secure food choices?

Community/University Collaboration

This project is a collaborative initiative between JUDES (Just Us! Development and Education Society) and Acadia University.

JUDES

Just Us! Development and Education Society was established in 2006 as a not-for-profit organization committed to raising public awareness about the social and environmental issues relating to international development and the benefits of Fair Trade. JUDES acts as the community lead on this project, and serves as the administrative partner.

Community Advisory Group

The research team and JUDES have organized an open community advisory committee of interested government (NS Dept. of the Environment), producer (Agrapoint, local farmers), consumer, community (Acadia Farm, Wolfville Farmers' Market), low-income and non-profit (Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada, Ecology Action Centre) stakeholders in sustainable food purchasing to advise, support and help disseminate the results of the project. This committee is a community engagement process that helps to inform and improve the research as well as building knowledge and capacity of the stakeholders, and providing them with educational tools, to address food sustainability and security issues.

Dissemination

The results of this project will be relevant to:

- Consumers that are interested in making ethical food purchasing decisions, but struggle to translate this interest into action.
- Community organizations (e.g. non-profit groups, consumer advocate groups, food security groups) that work towards community food security or have a role in educating the public about these issues.
- Producers and companies who wish to communicate the values and conditions under which their food products are produced.
- Retailers who recognize the interest and awareness of consumers in making ethical purchasing decisions, but are unsure of how to respond to this increased interest.
- Government departments involved in food policy, agricultural policy, and industry development.

Methodology

The research includes four elements to be completed over a two year period.

1. To use focus groups* to identify and expand understanding of the barriers that a range of Annapolis Valley consumers face in making more sustainable and secure food choices.
2. To complete a literature review of the barriers to making sustainable and secure food choices, as well as reviewing potential educational tools that have been considered, developed and/or evaluated elsewhere.
3. To identify, develop, test, and evaluate specific educational tools that will promote sustainable and secure food purchasing choices.
4. To investigate accessibility and system-based barriers to secure food purchasing, and explore ways to make sustainable food products more accessible.

*The researchers will facilitate a series of seven focus groups with consumers in the Annapolis Valley from varying demographic groups: parents with young children, parents with older children, seniors, low income consumers, young consumers with no children, professionals, and students. These groups will include 6-8 participants each and will be audiotaped, transcribed, and coded, and analyzed using grounded theory. Participants will complete a brief written survey on their demographics, purchasing attitudes and actual practices at the outset of the focus groups.

Planned Deliverables

Findings are not yet achieved as the project is just getting underway.

Project Deliverables/Milestones	Dates
Community Advisory Committee Terms of Reference	Sept. 2008
Ethical Review completed	Dec. 2008
Literature Review & Case Study analysis completed, disseminated	Dec. 2008
Research Report (including focus group results) completed	April 2009
Report circulated/ disseminated widely	
Information Tools completed	June 2009
Tool Testing complete	Sept. 2009
Results on tool testing complete – report disseminated widely	Dec. 2009
Provincial Forum on ethical purchasing results & impacts on ethical purchasing	March 2010
Small Focus Group structure changes complete	April 2010
Students have been identified as one of seven demographic groups that will be targeted for focus groups. The participants will contribute to the research as outlined in the Methodology section.	

Research Assistant

The student research assistant will contribute to the development, design, implementation, analysis and write up of the research project. The research assistant will gain experience in community engagement and development, project development and management, and in community-based education, complementing the academic learning of the student with community experience.

References

Beesley, E. (2008) The impact of consumer values on food purchasing decisions. Honours thesis submitted to the School of Recreation Management and Kinesiology, Acadia University.

Carrigan, M. & Attalla, A. (2001). The myth of the ethical consumer – do ethics matter in purchase behaviour? *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(7), 560

McKenzie-Mohr, D., & Smith, W. (1999). *Fostering sustainable behaviour: An introduction to community-based social marketing*. Gabriella Island: New Society Publishers.

Padel, S. & Foster, C. (2005). Exploring the gap between attitudes and behaviour: Understanding why consumers buy or do not buy organic food. *British Food Journal*, 107(8), 606.

