

What shall we eat?

Timeout discussions on sustainable food

Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry & Timeout Foundation

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Table of Contents

Background.....	1
1 Timeout discussions.....	2
2 Introductions to Timeout discussions	3
3 Timeout discussions on sustainable food.....	4
3.1 The significance of food	4
3.2 Factors affecting dietary decisions	4
3.3 Challenges related to dietary change.....	5
3.4 Incentives related to dietary change	7
3.5 Other observations	8
4 Timeout discussions on sustainable food and dietary change	8
4.1 Challenges and incentives related to dietary change.....	9
4.2 Which factors have led to a change of dietary habits?	11
4.3 How can holidays promote sustainability, or is it even necessary?.....	11
4.4 How can society promote dietary change?	11
4.5 What is preventing us from making dietary changes immediately?	12
5 Timeout method	14

Background

Together with the Timeout Foundation, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry organised Timeout discussions on sustainable food in spring and autumn 2020 and in winter 2021. The purpose of the discussions was to support the preparation for the climate food programme. The Timeout method allows for constructive societal discussion. It allows people from different backgrounds to be brought together to discuss on an equal footing and to have a deeper understanding of the topic of discussion, other people and themselves. The aim was also to reach parties who have not previously participated in discussions on climate-related food issues.

The Timeout discussions were organised remotely across Finland for various groups of participants. The aim was to discuss sustainable food and issues related to dietary change. At the beginning of each discussion session, there was an introduction to the topic for the participants by presenting an illustrative image of the future sustainable food system formulated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and by reading related columns or presenting topics highlighted in the discussions in terms of dietary change incentives and challenges. Discussions were held on the importance of food, the ease and difficulty of dietary change, the role of holidays in promoting sustainability, obstacles to dietary change and the ways in which society can promote dietary change.

This report describes the Timeout discussions organised on sustainable food and the topics discussed in the sessions. In addition, the report presents the key observations of the discussions and thoughts on the Timeout method.

1 Timeout discussions

The Timeout discussions were organised remotely in various parts of Finland due to the COVID-19 situation. In spring 2020, the discussions were held in Kemijärvi, Tampere and Raasepori and they continued in the autumn in Joensuu, Kurikka, Naantali, Hämeenlinna and Uurainen. People of different ages and backgrounds were invited to participate in the discussions from the above-mentioned cities and their surroundings, ranging from upper comprehensive school students to pensioners. Participants also included people working with food, such as farmers, agricultural producers, chefs and teachers. In line with the Timeout method, the purpose of the discussions is not to represent any party but to participate in the discussion by sharing ideas and experiences related to the topic.

In December 2020, a Timeout discussion specifically aimed at young people was organised during the Timeout week, and young people from different parts of Finland were invited to participate. The topic of the discussion was sustainable food and dietary change. The purpose of the event was to discuss the factors promoting and preventing dietary change that emerged from previous discussions and to thus deepen the discussion on the topic. A Timeout discussion on the same topic was held for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry staff in January 2021.

All Timeout discussions were organised remotely, and around 10 people participated in each. The participants received personal invitations to attend the event. They were contacted either by telephone or by e-mail, and a personal invitation to the event was sent to everyone. In addition to our own networks, participants were sought using the websites of municipalities and cities, through which local hobby groups, associations, schools, educational institutions and residents were found. The Timeout discussions were two hours long. At the start of each discussion, the rules for a constructive online discussion were reviewed, and there was an introduction to the topic. After that, there was a discussion on the topic for about 1.5 hours under the guidance of an expert from the Timeout Foundation, who advanced the discussion based on a prepared framework of questions. At the end of the event, the participants' insights into the discussion were reviewed. All discussions were recorded, with participants' anonymity ensured, so that the themes emerging from the discussions could be returned to later.

2 Introductions to Timeout discussions

Each discussion started with an introduction aimed at leading the participants to the topic of the discussion. The introduction to all discussions presented the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's Food System of the Future graph, which illustrates the future dinner plate (Figure 1). It indicates that our plate should contain more fish and products of plant origin, seasonal food and reasonable amounts of meat and dairy products. In addition, the side streams of the food chain should be used efficiently, and food waste should be reduced in all stages of the food chain. In addition to the graph, the spring 2020 discussions included a short version of Jani Kaaro's column of "[Vanhan kansan lohturuokaa](#)" [Comfort food from the past], and a short version of Emmi Nuorgam's column "[Keskustelu ruokavaliosta on liian tunnepitoista](#)" [Discussion on diets is too emotional] was read at the autumn 2020 discussions. In the discussions on sustainable food and dietary change organised in December 2020 during the Timeout week and in January 2021 for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry staff, the introduction presented not only the "Food System of the Future" graph but also the challenges and incentives related to dietary change which emerged from previous discussions and which were illustrated by quotations from the discussions.



Figure 1: Food System of the Future.

3 Timeout discussions on sustainable food

The Timeout discussions on sustainable food discussed the significance of food, factors affecting dietary decisions and challenges and incentives related to dietary change. The key findings of these discussions are presented below.

3.1 The significance of food

When the participants talked about the significance of food, their emotions about food emerged strongly. **Food memories**, often from childhood, were considered very relevant and important. The **taste experiences** of food were seen as important, as this allows us to try new tastes and enjoy familiar favourite foods. A sense of **obligation** also emerged in the discussions for participants with children. These people felt that they had a duty to prepare food for children and to ensure that it contains, among other things, vegetables and organic products. One participant described the obligation as follows:

“Because I have children, I have a strong sense of obligation to offer them organic food, and vegetables.”

In addition, meal times were considered one of the most important aspects of food. It was considered an **important social event** both in daily life and in connection with celebrations. At lunch, people can chat with colleagues or with their friends at school. At home, the events of the day can be discussed over dinner with our family, and holidays also allow us to meet other family members and relatives.

3.2 Factors affecting dietary decisions

The participants felt that their dietary decisions were influenced by **education**, i.e. what and how they learned to eat in childhood. It may be related to the fact that there was always some salad and vegetables on the plate, or that home-grown meat or game was eaten in the family. A participant describes the importance of education:

“It is clearly important to me how I was raised and what was eaten at home. My childhood has an effect on me.”

Lack of time was described as having an impact on people's dietary decisions – they want food to be ready quickly and with little effort. Because of this expectation, people don't feel up to and are unable to try new things and change their eating habits in their busy daily lives, as there is no time to do so. The **feeling of security and routines** also guided their dietary decisions. There was a preference for familiar and safe tastes, and daily routines were also easily created around certain foods, such as porridge for breakfast and rye bread for an evening snack. **Emotions** also played a significant role in daily diets. People pick up foods that they crave. On top of this, it was strongly felt that certain times, such as holidays, should involve certain experiences and foods. One participant described emotions as a steering factor for dietary decisions as follows:

“Even if the rest of our daily lives has changed or our daily diet has changed, people still feel that certain moments should involve certain kinds of experiences. These are really interesting emotional attachments, and where it all comes from is really fascinating.”

In addition, **different situations in life** affected the participants' dietary decisions. Whether they had a family with children, were retired, were students or had food allergies. Their situation in life determines their economic and temporal possibilities of investing in cooking, for whom the food must be suited, and the raw ingredients available in the area. Food is also considered to be **part of their personality** and a **way to make a difference**, which strongly influences some people's dietary decisions:

“Food is important to me because I feel strongly that I am what I eat.”

3.3 Challenges related to dietary change

Among other things, the challenge of dietary changes was due to strong **feelings** associated with food. For instance, people do not want to give up or change their favourite foods. The **slow pace of change** poses challenges, as changes are not made quickly unless we are truly committed to making and maintaining the change. Making changes **requires adopting new things**, such as learning new recipes, changing our thinking and breaking habits, and it requires time. Changes may not be made unless they are inevitable, as was stated in the discussions:

“Most people will probably not change unless they have to. They maybe try it for a couple of weeks and say that some of the changes are not working. Now, we can have everything immediately, now, and quickly. Before, we had to wait for something to grow. No apples were available in the middle of the winter.”

People felt that due to a **lack of information**, they do not always know what would be the best dietary choice from a sustainability point of view. Furthermore, theoretical knowledge does not always result in practical activities. People are aware of the environmental and health impacts of food production, but they still do not act accordingly, as one participant explained:

“Even if we say that vegetarian food could be better for the environment. I understand how things are, but I still haven't changed the way I eat or prepare food. I'm aware of this and know what it's worth, but I still don't do it.”

In addition, the **clash between vegetarian food and meat dishes** was considered challenging. There was a feeling that discussion only takes place between extremists, particularly in the media, and vegetarian food and meat dishes are not regarded as equal. Instead, vegetarian food is a different option that differs from standard food. For example, it is less readily available or must be requested separately. One speaker's thoughts on the subject:

“It still takes a lot of effort to make it generally accepted that vegetarian food is just as nutritious as meat.”

It was also felt that people **are not open-minded** enough and that the **choices made by others are judged**. Getting used to **new flavours** also seemed difficult. For example, replacing dairy milk with oat milk in coffee:

“New ingredients may seem strange, and it seems difficult to break a habit. A cup of coffee with milk or oat milk are two different things.”

The participants felt that the **lack of time and exhaustion** prevented them from making dietary changes, as it seems more difficult to make changes when tired. People want easy solutions for everyday cooking, because they have little time among other activities. The **lack of concrete examples** also made it challenging to adopt healthier and more environmentally friendly eating habits. People would like to see more practical examples in guidelines of how to compile daily meals in line with health recommendations. Making changes was considered challenging when the **environment does not support making changes**. For example, we must always remember to ask which ingredients have been used in dishes, we must ask for a vegan option separately at the restaurant, or the conversation with other people about drinking oat milk or not eating meat is always the same. People felt that in these ways, the environment is detrimental to change and makes it more difficult.

3.4 Incentives related to dietary change

The participants felt that **traditional Finnish foods** could be used for making dietary changes. It is not always necessary to create new recipes and flavours. Traditional foods could be promoted and turned into vegetarian versions. This could promote eating seasonal foods and increase the use of fish and vegetables. The current **choice** in grocery stores made it easier to make dietary changes. One participant described the choice as an incentive for dietary change:

“I feel that now, change may already be much easier to make and implement in daily life. Whatever the situation in life, and even with children and other people eating at the same table.”

Nudging was perceived as a good way to promote dietary changes. The participants felt that nudging had a significant impact on the contents of the plate, for example when salads are placed at the start of line counters. The participants felt that dietary changes should be pursued **gently** and not by coercion. Offering **opportunities for experimentation** was considered a good incentive. This allows trying and getting used to different foods and flavours, as highlighted in one discussion:

“I have been positive about vegetarian protein in the army. I have been surprisingly satisfied with vegetarian food in the army. I think that the habits and other things that society partly forces on me also have a positive side, when I notice that different foods are edible too.”

It seemed easier to make a dietary change when people felt **motivated** to make changes, for instance based on their own values. Health reasons in particular motivated people to make changes to their diet:

“My diet or changes to my diet have been very strongly linked to my health.”

Personal interest and desire to try out new things were also regarded as incentives. The example and encouragement by a loved one was considered a factor promoting more sustainable and healthier eating habits. Changes made in small steps were found to be better than making major dietary changes at once. In addition to making changes in small steps, several participants called for leniency. We should not demand too much of ourselves, and the bar should not be raised too high, to ensure that the dietary changes made are long-term and that people feel positive about the changes.

3.5 Other observations

Some of the participants pointed out that their knowledge of the environmental impacts of food production and their magnitude during the life cycle of the products was lacking or they had been misinformed. For example, some did not know what kind of environmental impacts food production has on the environment and at which stage of the food chain the largest greenhouse gas emissions are generated. It was not clear in which countries some plant protein products were manufactured. These observations indicate that people need more information about food production and its environmental impacts.

4 Timeout discussions on sustainable food and dietary change

Two Timeout discussions were organised on sustainable food and dietary change. One was aimed at young people and the other at the staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The purpose of these discussions was to discuss the themes that emerged from previous discussions and to engage in a deeper discussion on dietary change. In addition to the Food System of the Future graph, themes that emerged in previous discussions were presented as an introduction to both discussions in terms of the ease and difficulty of dietary change. The themes that emerged were illustrated with quotes from the discussions. After the introduction, it was first discussed what thoughts and experiences the participants had based on the observations made on the previous discussions. After

that, the discussion turned to young people reflecting on the factors that have led them to change their own eating habits and, finally, on how to promote sustainability during holidays and whether it is even necessary. In an event aimed at the staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the discussion on how society can promote dietary change took place after sharing the thoughts and experiences generated by the introduction. After this, there was a discussion on what stopped us making dietary changes immediately. The main findings of these two discussions are presented below.

4.1 Challenges and incentives related to dietary change

The **lack of approval from the people around us**, which manifests in different ways, was considered a challenge for dietary change. For example, someone may find themselves in a situation where vegetarian food is spoken of in a belittling manner. A vegan option may have to be requested separately, which is regarded as a big step, and people feel they are attracting too much attention to themselves. As a result, the request may not be made at all. The participants also explained that they do not want to discuss their eating habits directly, and they prefer to use paraphrases to explain why they do not eat meat because of the negative associations of the vegan diet and because they have no desire to draw attention to themselves:

“I don’t eat meat, and I’m allergic to eggs.”

The **lack of vegan options** in restaurants was seen as restricting social life, as people do not want to be a burden and, because of the lack of vegan portions, it is preferable not to meet others at all. The lack of options has been found to cause conflicts in people's immediate circle, because choosing a restaurant has become challenging among the members of a group. The participants also felt that there is too strong a division and contrast between meat and vegetarian foods. There is a desire to remove this categorisation as it could promote dietary change on a societal level. It was felt that overemphasising vegetarian food could lead to negative stigma for the product or food:

“It is overly emphasised nowadays that the food is vegetarian. Everybody loves apples, but when it's branded vegan... How could we make it more mainstream so it could become the new standard.”

However, increasing the amount of vegetables in our diets was considered easy, since the **choice** of plant proteins available in shops has improved considerably over the years. More **Finnish plant protein options** in particular would be welcome, though. Some still felt that the use of plant protein products was challenging, as these products are not suitable for people with a sensitive stomach. The importance of **cooperation** in the food sector was emphasised when making dietary changes, since conflict is not constructive in the long term. **Lack of motivation** was also found to prevent a switch to a more plant-oriented diet.

A busy daily life defined people's daily diets to a great extent, which is why changing eating habits was considered challenging. As well as time consumption, the **preferences** of those around the same table require compromises on healthy and sustainable food. In particular, the **taste** of food was considered an important element. Some felt that by using **semi-finished products** and **prepared foods**, they were able to facilitate their own daily food preparation and easily increase their fish consumption, for instance, while others felt that using semi-finished products does not make food as tasty as using fresh products. **Giant packaging sizes** were thought to promote buying more than necessary and to encourage unsustainable food choices:

“I wonder if we really need king-size packs and giant packaging sizes everywhere, because that is, in a way, what leads us away from sustainable use. We are forced to buy more than we really need.”

The **slowness of change** seemed challenging. The festive menu may have remained quite unchanged for several decades. At the same time, however, it was felt that it was more important to make changes to daily dietary habits than to organise celebrations less frequently. The change in daily diet was visible when eating habits were compared, for example, to those of close relatives. There was talk of living in **two food realities**, which allows us to see how our own eating habits have changed since childhood. Toggling between these two food realities was occasionally even considered a relief, as it allows people to give up the role of a highly conscious vegetarian for a while. In terms of the slowness of change, it was also emphasised that learning new habits requires a lot of repetition in order for them to become a natural part of everyday life. It was noted that making changes is not at all easy, and we can always come up with different reasons for why it is impossible to prepare

healthy and sustainable food. It was noted in the discussion that making dietary changes requires people to **invest in change**.

The question was raised whether we might be **mistaken** about how healthy and sustainable Finns' diets are. Some participants felt that their eating habits and the diets of their immediate circle had become healthier, with an increase in vegetable consumption and a decrease in meat consumption. At the same time, however, a study mentioned indicated that meat consumption had increased and fish consumption had decreased over the last decade. Impressions were also perceived as preventing dietary changes in daily life. It was felt that becoming more aware of our own food choices would promote dietary change, since the first idea may be that choices are made based on rational reasons, but when the matter is considered in more depth, we become aware of the different factors on which the choices are based.

4.2 Which factors have led to a change of dietary habits?

Many people had made changes to their eating habits as the **amount of information** on food production and its impacts increased, for instance thanks to their own interest or studies. Dietary changes had been made for reasons of **animal rights, climate, environment and health**. There may have been people in the immediate vicinity who had given an example for changing eating habits. For some, the change had taken place gradually, and in the end, they got used to not eating meat any more. Those who had not made changes to their dietary habits **had not felt it was necessary**, or they found **cooking and looking for new recipes to be challenging**, and they thus preferred to cook the same familiar foods that had already been proven good.

4.3 How can holidays promote sustainability, or is it even necessary?

Traditions related to holidays were considered important, and it was felt that they **need not be changed** if, for example, ham at the Christmas table is considered important. However, it was pointed out in the discussion that **not everyone needs to eat the same foods** and that the choices made by others should be respected. It also seemed easy to turn **recipes for traditional foods into vegetarian versions**. Traditional holiday meals involved plenty of seasonal raw ingredients and vegetables. Holidays provide a **good opportunity** to try and develop new dishes.

4.4 How can society promote dietary change?

The discussion highlighted that dietary change could be promoted by **motivating** consumers to make healthier and more sustainable choices. Motivation could take place by **increasing consumer information** based on **research data** collected by the authorities. **Legislation** could also make it possible to facilitate certain solutions for consumers. **Societal discussions**, such as Timeout discussions, were regarded as a good way to promote dietary change, since they enable constructive and equal discussion while increasing understanding of the topic and the views of others. In addition to increasing knowledge, society could promote dietary change through **education**. In **home economics classes**, for example, pupils could learn to prepare tasty vegetarian dishes and get used to new flavours. **Pupils could be involved in planning school food**, which would help them to improve their relationship with school food and make sure they find it tasty. It was felt that **public catering services** could promote dietary change through their own food supply and procurements.

In the participants' view, dietary change could also be promoted by means of **nudging**, which would discreetly steer people to make healthy and sustainable food choices. The discussion highlighted that in general, making healthy and sustainable food choices should be **easy for consumers**. The **taxation** and price of food should encourage the consumption of sustainable and healthy foodstuffs. The discussion mentioned features such as the reduced value added tax on vegetables. Unhealthy products can be more expensive than healthy products. It was considered that the **price of food** might be able to influence the appreciation of food and thus the purchase volume:

“I wonder if the price might be the solution to make us appreciate what we are buying and what has been produced, so that we end up buying less.”

It was discussed whether **town planning** could influence people's dietary behaviour, for instance with the location of food stores or fast food restaurants in cities. The change in young people's alcohol consumption also emerged in the discussion, and it was considered whether cultural change could help with dietary change if it was possible to determine the factors behind the behavioural change related to alcohol consumption.

4.5 What is preventing us from making dietary changes immediately?

It was felt that **learned habits and prejudices** prevent us from making dietary changes, which is why a strong change of attitude is required for each generation. It was discussed whether successful

dietary change would only start from young people or whether the change should take place among all generations. **Money and lack of money** were mentioned as a factor preventing people from making healthy and sustainable food choices. In addition, **lack of time and coping with the demands of daily life** were seen as obstacles to making dietary changes in daily life, since learning new things and breaking old habits requires a lot of repetition, which cannot necessarily be maintained in the long term due to lack of time and other daily stress. A participant described the impact of coping with the demands of daily life on dietary change as follows:

“...being able to cope, I feel that everyone is quite overburdened. Nowadays, there are all kinds of concerns and stress about other things, and then learning new things always requires repetition, and unlearning them requires even more repetition. For myself, if I adopt new eating habits, I get excited for a few weeks and then I forget about them again for a long time.”

The use of semi-finished products and prepared foods mentioned earlier was discouraged by their taste, even if they could easily and effortlessly increase the consumption of vegetables and fish. The **product development** of semi-finished products and prepared foods was considered necessary in order to produce tasty, healthy and sustainable solutions that facilitate everyday life. It was also highlighted in the discussion that it is difficult to make changes on a societal level because the **structures of the systems** created aim to keep the system unchanged. This is why making changes is challenging and calls for major, conscious efforts to change the systems in place:

“Structures are always aimed at resisting change. The pressure always works in that direction, and getting over the pressure requires a truly focused effort.”

An **individual-centred** world view was seen as preventing dietary changes. The idea was based on the fact that an individual-centred culture motivates people to change in a way that allows them to bring attention to themselves, but in connection with climate change, individuals cannot draw attention to themselves in the same way without very radical measures. A person may also feel that highlighting themselves is more important to them than making a change for the world. One participant described their reflections as follows:

“[An individual] will not be able to put themselves in the spotlight in the same way, unless they declare themselves fully vegan. In many cases, it can also be that people are... That it’s much more important to draw attention to myself than to do something to change the world.”

There was also discussion on whether the **structure** of trade and production is such that it neither prevents nor encourages the production of more vegetables. It was pointed out that **EU legislation** sets a framework for activities and can prevent certain types of action.

5 Timeout method

The Timeout method was considered a good and successful way of discussing sustainable food and dietary change, as it enabled a constructive discussion on a subject involving a lot of emotions. It also allowed all participants to be heard. The views of others were respected in the discussions, even though there were differences of opinion. The Timeout method enabled citizens to be involved and consulted in a meaningful way and also reached those who would not normally participate in societal discussion on the topic. Although all the Timeout discussions had to be held remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussions were a success, and there were no major technical difficulties. The chat box can be used in virtual discussions, which made it possible to go through some parts of the discussion more rapidly. In all discussion sessions, time seemed to fly, and many participants were surprised how quickly they passed the time. The participants also gave a lot of praise to the Timeout method and the pleasant and rewarding way to discuss the topic with strangers. Investing in the invitation process was considered particularly important for the organisers in order for them to involve participants from all walks of life. Personal invitations took up a lot of time, but it was rewarding to include people who do not usually attend such discussions.