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The Policy–Cost Gap in Sustainable Food Transitions: Public Support, Affordability and Farm-to-Fork Policy in Europe

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Abstract

The transition towards sustainable food systems depends not only on technological innovation and regulatory reform, but also on public acceptance. However, support for sustainability may differ substantially across policy instruments, particularly when sustainable food choices imply higher consumer costs. This study examines how environmental food-purchase priorities, cost sensitivity and financial vulnerability are associated with public support for sustainable food policy in the European Union. Using individual-level data from Eurobarometer 93.2, the analysis focuses on EU27 respondents and compares three policy-related outcomes: support for stricter sustainability standards across the food chain, willingness to spend more for food that protects health and the planet, and support for compulsory sustainability information on food labels. Weighted descriptive statistics, bivariate chi-square tests and binary logistic regression models with socio-demographic controls, occupation controls and country fixed effects are employed. The results reveal a clear policy–cost gap. Public support is very high for compulsory sustainability information on food labels (91.5%) and stricter sustainability standards (86.7%), while willingness to spend more is lower (77.3%). Cost sensitivity is strongly associated with reduced willingness to pay: respondents who mention cost as an important food-purchase criterion are substantially less likely to be willing to spend more for sustainable food. In the logistic regression model, cost priority is associated with much lower odds of willingness to spend more (OR = 0.44, $p < .001$), while its association with support for stricter standards (OR = 0.91, $p = .029$) and compulsory labels (OR = 0.80, $p < .001$) is weaker. Financial vulnerability follows a similar pattern, with respondents who frequently have difficulty paying bills showing markedly lower willingness to pay. The findings suggest that European citizens do not necessarily reject sustainable food policy; rather, support weakens when sustainability is translated into direct private expenditure. This has important implications for Farm-to-Fork policy design. Regulatory and informational instruments appear to enjoy broad public legitimacy, but sustainable food transitions should not rely primarily on consumer willingness to pay. Policy packages need to combine sustainability standards and transparent labelling with affordability-sensitive measures that prevent the transition burden from falling disproportionately on financially vulnerable households.

Keywords: sustainable food policy, affordability, willingness to pay, Farm to Fork, Eurobarometer