



RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 02/2023

Sustainable and healthy food at work

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Purpose of the study

In this study, we have investigated employees' food practices at work and how they are influenced by initiatives to promote sustainable and healthy food in the workplace. We have also looked at the connection between food practices at work and at home. The research was conducted in collaboration with Oslo Municipality's Agency for Urban Environment (BYM), in connection with their initiative to promote sustainable and healthy food in the canteen in one of their office buildings, Karvesvingen 3.

Background

The canteen in Karvesvingen 3 has been established as a *Living Lab demonstration site* as part of the EU project FUSILLI.¹ The study is part of the project [How can local circuits contribute to sustainability transformation?](#) in Include. The study was initiated by BYM and has been conducted in close dialogue with them, both with regard to the study design and data collection. We have conducted document analysis and qualitative interviews with relevant actors in the municipality, the company that operates the canteen and the building owner. We have also carried out observations in meetings held by the working group for the project and visited the canteen for lunch to observe the practices of users of the canteen. Finally, we participated in events related to the FUSILLI project, including a seminar series, where we made observations.

We used social practice theory as an entry point for understanding employees' and organizations' food practices in the workplace, especially in the context of lunch and in meetings, and how this can affect their food choices outside of work. Social practice theory shifts the focus from the individual and their behaviour to practices, such as eating at work, eating at home, cooking, etc. The way we eat lunch at work is influenced by our understanding of eating (for example: do we eat for energy or is it also linked to socialising), eating procedures (for example: sitting down when eating lunch in the canteen), and how we eat (for example: finishing quickly to return to other tasks or slow eating to extend the lunch break). The dynamic between organization and individual is also important for practices and their potential for change. Eating in the canteen is influenced by, among other things, how the canteen is run, the goals different organizations have for their operations and how goals correspond across organizations.

¹ FUSILLI: *Fostering the Urban food System transformation through Innovative Living Labs Implementation*



What did we find out?

The study shows that how the canteen is organised, associated technology (e.g. apps), social relations, and norms and food preferences held by the individual affect the food practices of employees. The canteen in Karvesvingen is perceived as pleasant and well adapted to different needs, both for large and small groups and if you want to eat your own packed lunch instead of food served in the canteen this is allowed. However, the organisation of the canteen and the information provided about food served are not perceived as optimal. There is a long queue around lunchtime, and there is insufficient information in the app or in the canteen itself about what is offered. The cost level in the canteen is also an issue. The individual's preferences and attitudes to food are also a factor that influences food choices and use of the canteen. Some have allergies or intolerances to gluten, others believe that dishes without animal protein are not sufficiently filling. Knowledge about the climate and environmental impacts of different types of food and animal welfare also helps shape expectations for what should be served and what to eat in the canteen. The office canteen is an important learning arena for tasting new dishes. Several people therefore wish to have more information about sustainable and healthy food in the canteen. Food is also perceived to be a personal matter. One can be inspired by what is served in the canteen, but it is not seen as acceptable to try to force people into changing their food habits.

The various organisations of relevance to the canteen in Karvesvingen influence how the canteen looks, what is served and the available expertise and resources in the work toward more sustainable and healthy food. In the canteen's kitchen, the ability to make good vegetarian food is affected by the fact that there is no barbecue. The costs of offering good plant-based alternatives when the canteen also has to make a profit poses a dilemma. The goals and perspectives of the organisations also influence what is possible to achieve. Sodexo (the company that operates the canteen) have emphasised sustainability in their business strategy and have guidelines for environment and health. However, fully vegetarian menus are not part of Sodexo's strategy. The guidelines given by Oslo Municipality for promoting vegetarian food are perceived as "soft", i.e. that reduction in meat consumption should not be forced on employees, but instead achieved by providing inspiration and simple measures that "nudge" employees in a new direction. Issues for which all the involved organisations have the same priorities provide more opportunities. Reduction of food waste and the aim of serving healthy food in the canteen are examples of such issues. These also coincide with what users of the canteen regard as important measures. Animal welfare, climate emissions and biodiversity are seen as more 'activist' concerns, and for those who are especially committed.

It is easier to bring about change in practices where the goals of organisations (such as Sodexo and Oslo Municipality) coincide with the knowledge and experience of the users of the canteen and their values and daily life. In this sense, reducing food waste and removing single-use plastic items are easier measures to implement than changing to a more plant-based diet. Sustainability is not yet accepted as a sufficient argument for implementing more drastic measures. As such, it is perceived as more achievable to focus not on measures that are seen as intrusive, like serving only plant-based food in the canteen, but rather to attempt to inspire users of the canteen to eat and cook more plant-based food in their everyday life.



Implications

Based on our results, we can make some recommendations regarding strategies to promote more sustainable and healthy food at work, including how this can influence food choices outside of work.

- Our analysis indicates that measures that combine environmental effects and cost reductions are easier to achieve. The same applies to measures that correspond to health recommendations, such as reduced portions or more fruit and vegetables. It is therefore important to identify measures where goals and priorities in different areas align. Where there are conflicting objectives, it is important to highlight these, and over time work to achieve a greater degree of consistency between goals.
- Allowing for the active participation of users of the canteen in the planning of measures for more sustainable and healthy food can enable more and more comprehensive interventions. This is in line with results from other studies of interventions in canteens to change lunch habits and studies that shed light on experimenting with habits to achieve change.
- It is important to help normalise vegetarian food to a greater extent. Vegetarian food as the standard when serving food in meetings (which has now been introduced) and information about the climate emissions of different types of food can be part of this. It can also help to host events inviting public figures who are not perceived as activists to talk about their own vegetarian food choices and by highlighting those who regularly eat vegetarian food.
- An increased proportion of plant-based food in canteens requires that there are funds for the purchase of equipment that can enable high-quality vegetarian food to be served, such as a barbecue. In addition, one must ensure that chefs have sufficient knowledge of how high-quality vegetarian food is made.

You can read more about the study and our results in the Norwegian-language report from the project:

[Bærekraftige matvalg i en av Oslo kommunes kantiner](#)