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Editorial: Keeping it real - exploring personal sustainability in the context of food systems

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Keeping it real - exploring personal sustainability in the context of food systems](#)

Personal sustainability is a relative concept of time, place, and identity. It shapes how “alternative” or “sustainable” are perceived. It is controversial in terms of agency, scale, and impact. Personal sustainability is transdisciplinary, encompassing food security, nutrition, livelihoods, health, culture, and environment. Food systems are systems upon systems where personal choices, practices, and habits around availability and access, consumption and waste to and of diverse (or less diverse), safe (or unsafe), healthy (or unhealthy) diets influence and are influenced by sustainability drivers like the socio-economic factors, climate change, institutions from government to small and big business, urbanization and culture. In turn, this impacts the wellbeing of people and the planet. Such dynamic within food systems is evident at the individual and household level, extending to small and medium-sized entities within developed and developing countries and formal and informal systems.

In the routines of daily life, personal sustainability can mean reducing meat consumption, increasing consumption of plant-based foods, recycling, or preferencing local or organic foods. However, the meaning of key concepts like “local” varies among individuals. A body of evidence on food systems and personal sustainability exists. However, this focuses mainly on the meaning thereof, food practices, and conventional scientific methods. More knowledge about personal sustainability in different contexts and nuances of scale and agency concerning sustainable food systems is needed. With an increased interest in healthy diets and living within favorable, life-sustaining earth systems thresholds, understanding diverse interpretations and complex relationships between people and food is essential to leveraging the value of personal sustainability in food systems.

[Bandi's](#) work underscores the necessity of a shift in personal attitudes toward fresh food. The article advocates for a change in focus, urging us to prioritize nutrition and flavor over superficial appearance and to embrace the natural diversity of fresh foods. [Bandi](#) suggests that by promoting personal sustainability and environmental responsibility, we can embrace imperfect-looking but nutritionally rich fresh foods. This shift in perspective requires us to detach appearance from nutritional value and to prioritize sustainability. [Bandi](#) believes that by making this transition in practice, we can redefine societal norms

and move toward a future where imperfections symbolize thoughtful living. The emphasis on embracing imperfect appearances aims to urge the public to make sustainable choices in their daily lives as part of their sustainability.

Formality and informality in the food system are critical to personal sustainability. (In)formality in food systems is especially essential for those vulnerable to food insecurity and malnutrition, such as impoverished communities. Three literature reviews combine insights from different regions on local, wet, or traditional food markets, where personal sustainability and food intersect. Pariza and Cho's analysis examines harmful foodborne microorganisms in food sold in "informal food establishments" across seven Spanish-speaking Latin American countries. This research emphasizes specific microorganisms, food types, and food handling and safety practices crucial for people's and environmental health (Pariza and Cho). Hofman and Trevenen-Jones critically assess wet markets and the availability and access to healthy diets in Southeast Asia within food environment domains such as convenience, quality, and sustainability. This article highlights the importance of these markets for livelihoods, food security, and nutrition, illustrating the complexity of these markets as key elements in urban and peri-urban food environments (Hofman and Trevenen-Jones). de Kanter et al.'s review on gender, traditional food markets, food security, and nutrition in sub-Saharan Africa sheds light on the intersection of these food system elements and sustainability. This article argues for explicit definitions of gender at this intersection and emphasizes the importance of considering all perspectives and experiences to ensure inclusivity (de Kanter et al.).

The link between consumers, food, and sustainability is evident in visible and invisible food waste. Vicherat Mattar et al.'s research, based on a study of food waste in The Hague, challenges our perception of waste. The aim is to show how people, initiatives, and objects can transform discarded food. The article discusses practical examples and the role of everyday household items in this process. It compares two volunteer-driven initiatives that collect and repurpose discarded food. By challenging traditional ideas about food waste, these diverse relationships reshape public spaces in the city through grassroots food waste management. They also show it is necessary to renegotiate social connections and find areas of collective support in cities such as The Hague to change the conventional notion of waste (Vicherat Mattar et al.). The effort involved in using the cargo bike and refrigerator transforms what is typically discarded into a source of sociability and connection, creating a network of weak ties that can address food waste and scarcity. The stories of these items reveal the complexity of waste generation and recycling processes: who is involved, when, where, how, and for what purpose. At the same time, these stories offer insight into alternative regenerative pathways for food waste management and connections.

Finally, Saravanan examines the gap between broad, overarching sustainable development strategies and individual drinking water choices in Nakuru, Kenya, and North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. His findings reveal that both countries resort to practical approaches to meet the demands of a materialistic world despite limited water resources. Overcoming the challenges of sustainable development and poverty requires combining scientific and non-scientific knowledge and practices.

The case studies from Kenya and Germany illustrate that government strategies have focused on sustainability's collective and external aspects rather than human consciousness, emotions, and worldviews. The key to achieving sustainable transformation is addressing personal and human elements (Saravanan). Furthermore, education and capacity development for decision-makers and the public are crucial for fostering transformative capacity.

The research emphasizes understanding personal sustainability in food systems, prioritizing nutrition and flavor over appearance, and embracing natural diversity in fresh foods. It explores sustainability challenges and opportunities within the formality and informality of food markets, visible and invisible food waste, and awareness, emotion, and attitudes that infuse drinking water choices. The findings highlight contextual relationships between people, places, everyday household items, and food and sustainability. Our results emphasize integrating sustainable transformation by addressing personal and human elements, such as collective engagement with food systems, redefining societal norms through conscious and thoughtful living and consumption practices, recognizing (in)formal food environments in access to healthy foods, and addressing the gap between macro measures in food and sustainability practices with micro-practices. It also aims to connect scientific approaches with non-scientific knowledge and practices for essential research and policy interventions in sustainable food systems.

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MC: Conceptualization, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AT-J: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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