



“What’s allowed cannot be bad”

There is one thing COP 26 and many people’s behaviour have in common: The climate crisis is imminent, but the necessary changes to reduce its effects are only happening in small portions. Why is that? And why is this so similar to our dietary behaviour? Everybody is for healthy food and animal welfare, but when they are in the supermarket, they usually pick conventional grocery. According to [a market report](#) of the German Association of Organic Farmers, Food Processors, and Retailers (BÖLW), the market volume for organic food grew to 15 billion euros in the corona crisis year of 2020. The share of organic food is now at 6.4%. A success which, however, also means that 93.6% of all sales are still generated with conventional grocery, where animal welfare and environmental protection are taken into consideration only to a limited extent. We talked about this with psychologist and behavioural therapist Katharina van Bronswijk, who is also a member of the press team at [Psychologists for Future](#). We asked her how the organic foods sector should best deal with the discrepancy between knowledge and action.

As the spokesperson for the organization “Psychologists for Future”, you examine why climate change is still not seen as an essential problem of society and of each individual from a psychological perspective. Have you already found an answer to this question?

Katharina van Bronswijk: The answer to this question is very complex and often depends on the individual situation and person. The human brain is not exactly made to understand a complex problem such as the climate crisis. In that case, we rely on heuristics, these are fast approaches to thinking. This can prevent us from developing an appropriate problem awareness. The climate crisis is also something that feels far away psychologically

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speaking – in terms of time, space and social distance. It is rather something that will affect people at the other side of the world in 200 years, but not here and now. This way, we can quickly eliminate unpleasant feelings that decide about when we deal with the problem. There is a risk that we do not feel responsible for this complex, systemic problem because we are not able to solve it on our own. In the first place, others should do something about it. In the end of the day, we must acknowledge the role we play in the problem and work together to solve it.

Another example: If we ask people whether they are okay with animals suffering to end up as our food, most people will answer with “no”. Still animal welfare seems not to play a major role in the purchase decision at the supermarket. The problem here, however, neither lies far in the future nor is it complex. How do you explain that?

Different factors make it “easier” for us to ignore how animals are treated in food production: Ads showing flattering pictures, a long production and processing chain, which makes it harder for us to see the direct connection between plastic-packaged pork chops in our trolley and the suffering pig that lies in its own faeces on a slotted floor, and, of course, the impressive ability of our minds to ignore such unpleasant aspects in order for us to feel good about our own actions without having to change anything. This is referred to as “cognitive dissonance reduction” in psychology. This is surely supported by people potentially thinking that “what’s allowed cannot be bad.” Many people cannot imagine that cruelty to animals could possibly be legally sanctioned. Only few people know the standards behind “labels of animal welfare”, so they can be quite confusing. Price also plays an important role: As human beings, we only have a finite pool of worry and attention. And sometimes, we have no other choice at the end of the month than to buy canned ravioli because we simply cannot afford the more expensive meat from regional organic farms.



Opting for organic products is not only connected to animal welfare but also indirectly to climate protection and biodiversity – two large challenges of our time. Do you think this is a factor in people's decisions to replace conventional food with organic food? Or in other words: Should it be a factor?

For people whose values include environmental protection and animal welfare, climate and biodiversity protection are important reasons to buy organic food. But it's worth looking into this matter in more detail and to understand the differences in social groups. There are people that place egoistic values such as their own financial situation and social reputation above other things. Others, however, put hedonistic values such as the taste or quality of the food centre stage. And then, there are also those, for whom altruistic aspects such as fair payment and animal welfare or biospheric aspects such as conservation of soil quality or reduction of the carbon footprint are central values. We could reach all of these people by emphasizing the different benefits of organic products. Our society is clearly divided into two groups: one that appreciates sustainability and another where this is not the case. For the latter, climate protection or biodiversity will not play an essential role.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people became more interested in good, healthy and home-made food. How can this be explained from a psychological perspective?

In studies about eating behaviour during lockdown, participants indicated an actual change in what they eat. Dealing with the burdens imposed by fears about a corona infection and loneliness caused by social distancing, people with functional coping strategies switched a healthier diet, while people with dysfunctional coping tended to eat out of frustration and to eat snacks. For people who switched to a healthier diet, this can be due to the positive effects



of a healthy diet, which can also reduce risks of a COVID-19 infection. Additionally, it is also due to people in home office preparing their own lunch and thereby having to deal with this matter in more detail.

Will we keep something of this even in post-pandemic times?

Of course, we will keep the experiences and insights from the lockdown even once the lockdown is over. But when daily routines start to change again, there is a chance we fall back on old patterns. Eating behaviour is not only defined by our values such as health but also by the framework conditions and actions we can take, that is, time, cooking opportunities in the office, etc., by our routines, by whether we have fun and by social aspects such as going for lunch with colleagues.

Is there also anything producers and retailers of organic food can do to convince more people of a long-term healthy diet.

What we eat largely depends on the things we learn from childhood on and that we consider a “normal” diet. The human being is a creature of habit. That’s why it is so difficult for us to challenge such beliefs and patterns. If routines are interrupted anyway, it is easier for us to change other patterns too. This could be the case when you move and have to find a new grocery store near your new place selecting new products or when you get a child questioning your diet. Which aspects or which visual language convince an individual to eat healthier is a very personal thing. It’s worth examining one’s target group very closely and to get to know their needs and preferences. Similarly, it would be very useful not only to look at each individual consumer but also at the systemic framework: If, for example, the main meal in canteens would be offered as an “organic” or “vegan” version, it would quickly become a habit for us and we would be able to easily discover the many delicious choices and benefits of vegan and organic food. We should particularly look at the food in school canteens so that children and young



people develop awareness for a healthy diet already at an early age. It would surely make sense if organic or regional food producers approached canteens or caterers offering smaller or larger supplies. Many people want to eat sustainably and healthily, even on the move outside one's own kitchen.

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In an [interview about the climate crisis](#), you said that it would not be a good idea to teach people about morals or even to criticize them in order to motivate them to act in a more climate-conscious way. Does this also apply to a more sustainable diet? And if so, do you have specific tips on how organic brands should communicate?

People do not like being reprimanded. If somebody teaches or criticizes us, we refuse this almost reflexively. This is natural as we are being attacked and need to defend ourselves. It is much easier if people convince themselves of the benefits and the necessity to change. We can help them achieve this if we, for example, act as role models for them to copy or if we listen to them and try to understand what their challenges are and help them overcome them. Communications of organic brands can also refer to those challenges and ways to overcome them, address the benefits and to use personal stories of those who buy or produce their products for advertising, among other things.

Do you have a wish or even a request to the new German government regarding the climate crisis and biodiversity?

For me, it's important to find intersectional solutions for the many problems of our society in transformation. Social and ecological problems and their solutions must be dealt with jointly and must not be played off against each other. We need a plan that makes our economies and societies respect the limits of our planet again and is in line with social standards, which we also

Nürnberg, Germany 15.–18.2.2022

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know as “doughnut economics”. I would wish that the next German government considers recommendations by experts and scientists in the respective field more strictly and lets citizens help shape policies, for example, by way of citizen councils.

Thank you very much for the interview.

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