

THE ECO-FOOD PROMOTION BY SUSTAINABLE AND EFFICIENT TOOLS

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Abstract

The paper aims to show and explain the usefulness of tools used for the eco-food products promotion. The approach is done from two perspectives: efficiency and sustainability goals. By reconsidering the multiple dimensions of qualitative food and the ecological attitude, we build a dashboard of modern promotion techniques that consider the objectives of sustainable development and quantify the progress achieved. The approach is on three value levels: economic, social and ecological. The analysis is done for the last 5 years, with data from Romania related to the food that is produced and consumed in the *eco* context. All these are in accordance with the requirements of sustainable development. The research is based on thematic description, analysis and synthesis. The specific indicators of sustainable development and others are considered. These indicators are drawn regarding the efficiency of sustainable and efficient tools, the progress achieved in supporting sustainable development and the contribution of eco-food to the wellbeing improvement and economic growth or stability. Even the separated topics are very well approached in the specialty literature, the connection between them and the boldness to expose another face of promotion is mainly an original approach.

Key words: promotion, eco-food, efficiency, sustainability

The present paper approaches three concepts in connection with the aim of highlighting their common core. It is about the: eco-food, promotion and sustainability. The motivation that determined the idea of a joint approach to these concepts is supported by the fact that at the level of the European Union the policies and strategies to support eco-food and the objectives of sustainable development are emphasized, but the transition in the practice of supporting the production and consumption of eco food, including in Romania, is very slow. Moreover, the consumption of such products is limited only to a narrow niche of consumers, although the production capacity is of a high level. In this situation, argued with data, we assumed that one of the factors of the lack of visibility at the market level of the importance of the production/consumption of eco food products, can also be determined by the weak presence of promotional actions for this product category.

We hypothesize that the tools for promoting the consumption of eco-food products are not sufficiently well developed or are insufficiently used. For these reasons, we are going to investigate the nature of the causal factors of this situation.

From another perspective, we considered the concept of sustainable development that is the

basis of European eco-food policies. This support is highlighted especially through three objectives of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals Horizon 2030. Given that the production and consumption of eco-food continues to be reduced, and the promotion of this type of food consumption remains as limited, there is a risk that these objectives will not be achieved. It is about the following objectives: O2. Zero hunger, O3. Good health and well-being and O13. Responsible consumption and production.

The aim and objectives of the paper are oriented to show and explain the usefulness of tools used for the eco-food products promotion, considering the low level of this interest in the production, consumption and sales, as well.

In this regard, the approach is from two perspectives: efficiency and sustainability goals. Also, we aim to reconsider the multiple dimensions of qualitative food and the ecological attitude as support for using the promotion tools, building a dashboard of modern promotion techniques, considering, first of all, the above-mentioned objectives of sustainable development. All these are in the context of presumption of the progress possible to be achieved in the eco-food consumption.

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MATERIAL AND METHOD

The basic concept analysed in the paper is that of eco-food, which is more and more present in the marketing research and used especially as basis for multidimensional analysis: environment protection, agricultural production, wellbeing, marketing tools and policies, population health dynamics, etc. All these are in the context of supporting sustainable development objectives.

One of the basic materials from which this study started is part of European policies that support the concept of eco-food and the emphasis on the promotion of this type of food in its practical version. It is about the *Farm to Fork Strategy* (European Commission, 2020) established for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system. According to the European Commission, the *Farm to Fork Strategy* aims to accelerate the transition to a sustainable food system that should:

- have a neutral or positive environmental impact;
- help to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts;
- reverse the loss of biodiversity;
- ensure food security, nutrition and public health;
- ensure the access to sufficient, safe, nutritious and sustainable food for everyone;
- foster competitiveness of the EU supply sector and promote fair trade.

So, it is not about focusing on production strategies, but, as we can see from the analysis of the information, about a major confusion registered at the level of basic consumption. The presence of the eco-food concept is associated with the implementation of the promotional techniques and tools. Knowledge of the eco-food topic is a relatively new aspect, given that until about 3 years ago (2020), food consumption was predominantly directed towards industrial foods, consumed in large quantities and obtained at low and very low prices. In this sense, the techniques and tools of promotion were extremely abundant and varied, and sometimes even aggressive and far too insistent. At numerous points of sale, the food product was promoted strictly for the quantitative aspect, associated with the exclusive purpose of increasing sales. For example: additional offers, substantial price reductions, in-store promotions, product pairings, etc. However, it has been observed that this trend has brought a real lack of benefits or even major disadvantages in the field of human health (more and more diseases due to unhealthy food consumption) and environmental management (resources consumed unjustifiably and waste difficult to manage). " Environmental problems associated with dominant food production practices are intimately linked to poverty and food security. There is a need to educate citizens and consumers about food production and sustainable development, as well

as encourage changes in food consumption practice." (Solér, 2012) The planet has the capacity to provide a growing world population with enough food, but even so, around 826 million people went hungry in 2021 - an increase of 46 million within a 5-year upward trend. (One Planet Network, 2023) Out of the global adult population, circa 30% is overweight or obese, while around 30% of food produced worldwide is lost or wasted.

A profound transformation needs to address the root causes for the current underperformance in terms of sustainability objectives. A shift towards healthy and sustainable productions / consumption is clearly needed, and the orientation to the eco-food can be an adequate solution.

Considering that recently, *the cultural diversity* has been accepted as the fourth pillar of sustainability (Hawkes, 2001), it is possible to affirm that the eco-food production and consumption orientation is about the attitude, mentality and personal values. Based on these four pillars, the eco-food concept in a practical approach becomes complex and blurred, because between objectives and results it is an evident dissonance. So, the food production systems require an urgent and profound transformation to become sustainable, both in Europe and worldwide (EEA, 2022). But, in this context, what is eco-food? According to GECO company, *eco-food* means turning towards sustainable practices in every area of the food sector, as follows:

- *sustainable production* – the significance is to use new and sustainable technologies for food production;
- *sustainable packaging* – the reference to the impact on the environment of the resources extraction and of the resulted wastes, too; the eco-food production systems consider the effect of food packaging on the environment, aspect overlapped with sustainable development goals;
- *sustainable international commerce with food*, avoiding the import and export of food in an unbalanced or unsustainable manner, favouring the production, consumption and application of the local marketing rules for the autochthonous food and eco-food;
- *sustainable consumption* – directly related to promotion of food education by promotional tools and techniques, for all generations.

From a methodological point of view, the paper is a descriptive analysis, based on the foray into the conceptual and practical literature. The working methods are analysis by monographic incursion, synthesis, interpretation by connecting concepts. Were used official databases, Eurostat being a first support. The data are for the last 5 years, related to the food produced and consumed in the context of *eco*, in Romania, compared with other European countries. The analysis is conducted in accordance with the sustainable development requirements, some specific indicators of sustainable development being considered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The food systems require an urgent and profound transformation to become sustainable; the production of eco-food implies a greater administrative, investment, technological and organizational involvement of production and the market. In this context, the European Investment Bank (2023) has signed a venture debt loan of €15 million, backed by the Invest EU Programme, an online platform for European farmers to sell directly to end-consumers. "The EIB financing helps the research, development and innovation (RDI) activities of the company by enhancing their digital marketplace and developing tools that promote sustainable agricultural practices, and a more sustainable and fair food supply chain."

According to Eurostat, in 2021 the situation of factories for preserving and processing the organic fruits and vegetables looks as follows:

- 93 in Romania, being on 11th place in Europe, after Italy (4,178 factories), Spain (3,304 factories) and Greece (301 factories);
- the processing and preservation units for the organic meat products: 8 in Romania, being on 16th place at the European level, after Italy with 660 factories, Spain 610 factories and the Czech Republic with 217 factories;
- operators in ecological agriculture: over 11,000 in Romania, on the first place in the top counties, where Sălaj county has over 800 ecological operators.

Nowadays, the *eco* products represent 2-3% of the total food products marketed in Romania, compared to Germany with 7% of the total food market. The largest eco-food market is now in Germany: 15 billion euros. In Romania, the eco-food market is about 41 million euros and it is observed a growing consumer interest in the *eco* products in 2022 and 2023. However, the eco-foods remain a niche category in Romania.

In 2023, the consumer is proved to be much more informed and aware of the impact of his shopping choices on the environment. He wants to know: what he is buying, where it comes from, how it was packed and transported etc. For the monetary value, a European consumes, on average, pay for the organic food 102 euros per year and a Romanian only 21 euros per year. But the statistics for the eco-food are not yet very well structured. Romanians allocate a larger budget in 2023 compared to 2022 on these eco-food categories:

- 9.9 dollars (about 45.5 lei) on organic dairy products;
- 8.1 dollars (about 36 lei) on basic organic foods;
- 4 dollars (about 18 lei) on organic hot drinks.

According to Euromonitor (2022), cited by Nicolae (2023), the most popular categories of eco-food products in Romania are: organic dairy products, organic soft drinks, basic foods. *Table 1* present a hierarchy of the European countries with many certified producers. The declaration of Freshful mention that:

- 8 out of 10 placed orders contain at least one fruit or vegetable;
- the most common combination for the shopping basket in a single purchase: parsley, bananas and tomatoes;
- in the top of the most bought eco-food products: tomatoes, pumpkins and peppers.

Table 1
Countries with the most ecologically certified producers (2021)

Italy	75,874
Spain	52,861
Turkey	48, 244
Germany	36,236
Greece	35,813
Austria	26,720
Poland	19,986
Portugal	13,263
Romania	11,562
Switzerland	7,670

Source: Eurostat (2023)

Green Match (2023), considering the Global Sustainability Trends, show the new approaches for the sustainability, taking into account the eco-food production/consumption issue, as follows:

- renewable energy sources;
- reducing food waste;
- standardized sustainable materials;
- increase in efficiency technology;
- plant based diets.

Given that the transition to a new system of production and consumption, in the sustainable *eco* version, involves several transformative aspects, a new conceptual model appears and becomes more and more of an applicative nature. And, it is about social innovation. This plays a pivotal role in transforming today's food systems into ones that are economically efficient, socially feasible and environmentally sustainable.

But, in all this major and complex process of transition from predominantly industrial and unhealthy food to eco-food, the promotional pillar in the marketing sphere becomes essential. First of all, by promoting eco-food in a deterministic educational environment, then in the commercial

environment by stimulating the consumption of eco-food products, or at least healthy, free of major health and environmental risks. So, the main topic as the entry points for the eco-food promotion in the sustainable development context consist in: sustainable diets, ensuring the quality for the entire food value chains, balancing the quantity with quality considering the real value of food, creating the multi-stakeholder platforms for promotion and commerce, diversity in food production categories and the efforts to obtain it to competitive prices. From the market point of view, considering the promotion tools and specific methods for sales, the 4P of marketing takes a new form:

- the production must to be in the ecological area, certified and recognized by authorities;
- processing implies new technologies and packaging forms;
- distribution must be more operative and sustainable;
- the consumption of food must be oriented on good quality, not on big quantity and in this regard is need to approach new learning forms of the food values;
- the promotion of eco-food practice must adopt new forms and nucleus, transmitting the main message based on the new eco-food concept according to the food is an essential ingredient for sustainability.

In this regard, a set of 28 indicators was developed by the European Commission: *Agricultural environmental indicators (AEIs)* track the integration of environmental concerns into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

CONCLUSIONS

For the moment, it's difficult to see if the consumer understands how such food could be promoted, based just on this conceptual framework. But the contribution of the eco-food consumption to the wellbeing improvement and economic growth or stability can be proved with data and statistics. Even the separated topics are very well approached in the specialty literature, the connection between them and the boldness to expose another face of promotion is mainly an original approach.

It is still not clearly conceptualized what eco-food is, which is why no relevant measures can be taken. The mobilization for the protection of resources and, above all, the reduction of waste is maintained favourably. More, it needs to be taken into account that a complex food system

includes various elements: resources and environment factors, people and consumers, input and technologies, infrastructure, management and marketing, institutions, etc.

Concrete changes whose effect will be quantified over time: the use of biodegradable packaging, the reduction of the amount of food purchases, the collection of packaged food, the creation of functional platforms with discounted products and the digitization in public food establishments and reimagining the food system through social innovations.

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