

Transcript Interview Moira Dean on “Food Trust”

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Intro Voice: Welcome to TrustTalk. Our guest today is Moira Dean, a professor in consumer psychology and food security. She has carried out research into consumer food choice, food safety, food fraud, risk perceptions, and food supply chain management and food labeling. She talks about her research, which focuses on studying the head, heart and hands, where the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of consumers and producers along the food supply chain to explore food security challenges and create trust in food. She talks about global food integrity and how we will feed the world's growing population in a sustainable, cost-effective and environmentally friendly way. Your host today, Severin de Wit.

Podcast Host: Moira, thank you for being our guest today.

Moira Dean: Thank you very much for inviting me.

Podcast Host: There is a lot to be said about food and trust, but today I'd like to focus on another aspect than food safety, as we had already published an episode on this subject where I interviewed Robert van Gorcum, Director of Wageningen Food Safety Research at Wageningen University. So I would like to focus today on sustainability and food production methods and the future of farming. But before we do that, what effect, if any, did the COVID lockdown measures have on consumers food practices on our diet?

Moira Dean: That's a very interesting question. And one of the reason being that we did some research, consumer research over the COVID period. So I'm going to kind of give you some results of what we found in the European context. And then if people are interested, they could also go and read the paper that's been published. So around September 2020, we did a survey in ten European countries, Germany, Spain, Finland, UK, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Sweden. We sort of chose the country because they were diverse in geography but also diverse in food culture and also different, they experience the effect of pandemic in different ways. And we chose about 500 sort of nationally representative consumers from each of their countries.

So it was a survey that was done online. And what we wanted to know is what did people do in terms of their food choices during the pandemic? Was it the same before the pandemic or have they made some changes? Remember, this is their perception, so it's not actual behavior, but what they say, what their behaviour is. We measured it on, I think it's like 22 items in terms of what kind of food, so I'll give you some examples, dairy produce, fish, meat, poultry. Did you do the same as what you did before? Or did you change? Collected all the data and we asked some other questions as demographic questions who they were. But you also asked other psychographic questions, their intention, their goals towards food and so on. And then we put all their answers together and we found that there were clusters. So there were people who behaved in different ways. So 60% of the people that we collected data from they what we call resilience, so they didn't change their behaviour, their eating behaviour, consumption behaviour during the pandemic. They carried on from what they were doing before. But there were changes of 40% of the people and they also at 40% they were different behaviours, so 35% of them said that they enjoyed more of the cooking part, they enjoyed the food more in terms of they cooked with their family and they spent more time with the food. But within that there were differences. So there were about 17% who we would call went towards a more healthful, sustainable diet. Yes, so they were much more mindful about what they were eating. They were eating more vegetables and pulses and they were cooking more. But there were another 12% who did spend more time with the food. But they more move towards more enjoyment. They went for more convenient, more enjoyment, more indulgent food treats and so on.

Podcast Host: Not necessarily. Not necessarily healthier.

Moira Dean: Not necessarily healthier. Yes, absolutely. There were about 5% who were less involved in food. They were the ones who suffered more in terms of financial, so there were different clusters. I mean, that's what I would say, so it depending on your circumstances, depending on your financial situations, depending on also the country that you were from, because when we clustered them, there were two different groups. So North and West Europe is sort of similar and South East to a kind of similar. So for example, if you were from a country where you ate out in or your culture was that you ate out a lot of food, then of course that wasn't possible. So then you have to change your behaviour more than those countries where you only ate out, like for example, UK, you would go out for a treat, yes. So it depended on

country, depended on your circumstances, depend on your financial. I would say about 20% of the population that did actually change their behaviour in a much more, I would say positive sense, which was more helpful, more sustainable in terms of their diet.

Podcast Host: You mentioned resilience. Can food systems be resilient to crises such as the COVID pandemic if they are not sustainable?

Moira Dean: It does depend on what crisis you are facing. So if you think about the pandemic, it was imposed, it came and it was very quick. I know you knew it was happening in China and places, but you knew when it came to Europe, the government made the decision we are going to shut down and so on. So it wasn't something that we had to plan in advance. I mean, there was some panic buying, but initially when people knew there was food available, there were some shortages in terms of supply chain, there were some shortages in terms of not having the workforce to be able to source the food and so on. But overall, generally from the UK and most European countries, food was available so you could manage with what was there because we have a lot of choice. If you go to the supermarket, it's not about the need, yes, it's about so many different versions of the same food. So therefore, even if they were shorter in one that you could substitute from another brand or so on, so it was possible for most people who didn't suffer financially to be able to be resilient, to be able to adopt their behaviours, to keep going more or less what they were doing, even though sometimes they changed. So quite a few people, if they would have gone to the shop and bought the stuff they went on to online. So there were other ways that they could keep doing the same thing that they were doing previously.

Podcast Host: Well Moira, trust is the core of our podcast. So let's talk about trust a little bit. Consumers are increasingly looking for products that can be trusted, sustainably produced and environmentally friendly. In March 2021, Deloitte did a survey into consumer attitudes to environmental and ethical sustainability. One of the findings is that 28% of consumers have stopped buying certain products due to ethical or environmental concerns. So what do you think are the short and long-term challenges for food producers and food retail in terms of trust?

Moira Dean: We've been working on trust for a long time, and I think if you do surveys and ask people, do you trust the food that you buy? Do you trust the producers? You trust the retailers? The trust is reasonably high. But what happens is when there is some sort of problem, so like in the U.K., when we had the beef scandal, when horsemeat was substituted for beef, even though there were no health implications, we soon found out that there were no steroids and stuff that were problematic. But then there were a repercussion in terms of trust about people asked how was it produced? How is it manufactured? Do we know what's happening and so on. So trust does go up and down depending on what is happening within the context or in the rest of the in terms of the food production. But when it comes to sustainability, I think what's happening is people want to know more how their food is produced. So is it animal friendly? Are they using pesticides? Are they being good to the workers? So there are extra questions being asked in terms of how the food is being produced, the food that they are being given. Also, there has been a lot of exploratory work done by journalists to look to see and when there are stories about how animals are housed, how they are treated, how they are slaughtered and so on, then people are thinking about how is it going to affect me and do I want animals to suffer for those kinds of things? So people are wanting to know more information about their food production and they also want that information to help them in their choices. Now, when I talk about the public, we have to think that is not one group. They are publics. There are multiple because it does depend on your financial situation as well, because if you are from a low income family where you have to do multiple jobs to find food to feed your children, you are in a very different position when you are looking for food than when you have extra income. When you do have time to make those decisions, you are in a better position to be able to make food choices. So we are talking about publics, but if you are talking about publics, you're talking about the public that has a little bit more disposable income and they could make choices. They are worrying more about the planet, more about sustainability. So the question then is how do you make the food system transparent?

Podcast Host: Yes. Yes, I had a question about transparency because as you mentioned, it's a key factor in establishing trust in food. Distrust is caused by a lack of knowledge, you just referred to the people who want to know more where the food comes from and how it is produced. The same Deloitte survey asked UK consumers: " Which of the following do you think would help you to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle?" upon which 46% said, "more clarity on

the origins or sourcing of products". So you were just about to say something about clarity and transparency. How important is it?

Moira Dean: I think it's very important. I think it has changed from having enough food. So after the World Wars, it was about not having enough food, how can we produce enough food to feed the nation, growing population and so on? And so it was about from the land getting more efficient. That was the buzzword, value for money, efficiency and so on. But now we are in a position. We know efficiency may be one thing, but we are running out of those resources, but also we are producing so much waste and we are also producing so much byproducts that are actually hurting the planet. And we are like a whole system. So all the rubbish that we throw out is then going into our air, land, water and it's polluting it and that is where when you are growing your food then is going back into you. So we are thinking more about the complete chain, if you like, rather than just producing more and more food at a cheaper price so that we can eat and also have more abandons in some places and not enough, the unfair distribution of food is also important. So the question is how do we then communicate with the consumer and tell the consumer what is happening, how the food is produced, but also not only educate them, but to know that they can make choices when there are two products on the market. How do they decide which one is better than another? So one of the things that we've been looking at is front of pack label. So on the package, on the front, you could have different labels. So it would say it's organic or it could say travel miles, there are lots of different sorts of labeling that has been put on the pack to claim its credential, if you like, as how it's produced. So we have been looking with consumers to see what do they understand by it. We know does that help them to make the decision and so on. And the work that we've been doing seems to suggest, yes, it helps. But at the moment what we are looking to see is there are lots of different ones on the package, which sort of confuses the consumer as well.

Podcast Host: Too much information.

Moira Dean: Too much information, but too different information, so, for example, if I want to buy eggs, right, I want to be sustainable, I want to make sure the hens are treated well, the farmer is getting a reasonable profit and so on. I would go and I look at the eggs, so there is the normal traditional egg with no label, but there's another one saying organic and the other one saying free range. So how do I know is free range better for the animal than organic? While it is

good to have this information, it doesn't actually help me make the decision because I don't know on what parameters these were measured and how it was measured and so on. So one of the things that we have been looking at is maybe we are all very proficient in having QR codes right now, especially with the COVID passport and so on. So could we give more information that we don't actually put on the pack, but also communicate with the consumer about the traceability? Because I don't know how much you know about traceability, but at the moment, if you are a company, you only need to know one up, one down. So where did I buy my product and what happened to it when it goes? But nobody is aware of the whole chain from the beginning for how something was grown to ending up on the supermarket. So what we are talking about is traceability plus. So transparency for the whole chain because, you know, we have the digital platforms, we can collect these information. It is being collected for marketing purposes. But why not use that to communicate to the consumer, to show the consumer what's happening for the whole thing and then what we are trying to find out, how do we communicate that? And one could be through a website, but also could be maybe a QR code. So one of the things we looked at is so for example, if it's like a beef steak, we could give date of birth, the animal has an ear tag when it was bred, how far it travelled, when it was butchered. So you could have all those information in one place. If somebody is interested, they could have a look. It doesn't mean that you have to. We asked the consumer, would that be something that would be useful? And they said, yes, I know I won't use it while I'm shopping, but the fact that the industry is willing to share that information is like an insurance certificate. Yes, because none of us read the fine prints of insurance when we get car insurance. But because it's there, we know it gives you the confidence that it's being monitored. It's everybody knows and also it's been shared. So that is one way you can increase your trust in the product, trusting the producers at the same time, when you look at that, you understand what happens to the animal. Yes, you understand the cow was it was born here and then it was bred here. It was moved here to a to be finished off. So, you know, it goes to three different farms.

Podcast Host: Now you are a scientist, so you often work like you just explained with surveys and the way scientists work to find out the consumer's attitude and wishes. But there is often a significant difference between consumer aspirations and intentions on the one hand, and their individual behaviour on the other in areas of sustainability. So are consumers practising what they preach?

Moira Dean: Absolutely excellent question. If you think about it, when you ask somebody and this is one of the problems with the methods of data collection. So when you ask people's intention and what you find is their intention is different from their actual behaviour, because when you do a study where you look at their consumption patterns and when your intention there is a difference and the question is always why is there a difference? I think it's because something is aspirational when you ask people's intention is aspirational. That's what we would like to do. And that is sort of like saying when everything is held constant, that's what we would like to do. But in reality, when you actually go shopping and when you're going to buy something, there are lots of other things in your head. So for example, if you if you've got a certain amount of money that you want to shop, something might have happened, your boiler is broken or the heating has gone up or your child needs a pair of shoes or something. There are other factors that come into play that maybe you do not operational, you actually don't behave in the way that you said you would do. That's one. And the second thing is, we are a creature of habits. Breaking habits is very hard, especially when that has been ingrained from the time that you were born, like all the food that you ate from your parents house and so on. So unless there is a reason why you want to change your eating behaviour and there are instances where you do, yes, when you, when you become an adult, when you want to make your own home or when you become pregnant, or when you're going to be a father or a mother, or when a doctor tells you that your high risk of getting something. So there are instances where you want to change your behaviour, in which case then you would move more towards your intention. But other than that, other things come into play, it's a multi-factor situation. So while you want to do something, you don't always end up doing it. And the second thing is habit also plays a large part in how we behave.

Podcast Host: So let's move on to the to the EU-initiated Farm-to-Fork strategy. This strategy aims to accelerate our transition to a sustainable food system by reducing the environmental and climate impact of primary food production, whilst ensuring fair economic returns for farmers, for fishers and other food producers. So where are we in Europe with implementing this Farm-to-Fork strategy?

Moira Dean: I would say early stages. Because it's very hard and I'm not making excuses, We have been practising a particular system with different underlying assumptions and goals for a long, long time, and to actually dismantle that system and to have different goals and with

different assumptions, it's a culture change. It's a really hard thing to do. Also, it's difficult for industry that has been practicing and doing certain things to suddenly go to a different system. And so therefore, while the aspirations are there, for example, legislatively we work on antimicrobial resistance. So I know in that area farmers there are new legislation coming and farmers have to implement it. So for them to make that cut in antibiotic use, they have to change their farming practices. They are being, I suppose, incentivized through legislation and through other motives to make the change. But changing behaviour on the farm, changing farmers to take up different strategies, to implement strategies, especially different methods, is going to take a while because a particular way of farming is being through generations. So that accumulated generational knowledge sometimes contradict all the new practices. And so that transition is going to take some time, but it's been fast-tracked as much as possible. There is also vested interest of companies to keep going, doing the same things. So it's an interesting space and it will take a while, but I think it is very important that we do make these changes.

Podcast Host: That same strategy, the Farm-to-Fork strategy, encourages not only the food industry but also the retail sector, so the supermarket, to show the way by increasing the availability and affordability of healthy, sustainable food options to reduce the overall environmental footprint of the food system. Now, however, from another Deloitte online survey among two groups of 1,500 Swiss consumers, it appeared that almost 2/5 of correspondents, so 39% believe that the main responsibility for sustainable food and nutrition lies with the food producers. And just under 1/3 third believe that the main responsibility lies with the consumer that is themselves, while a considerably smaller proportion believes that it lies with the retailers and wholesalers, and that's only 16%. So the role of food retail seems small, but this feels contradictory.

Moira Dean: Yes, I totally agree with you. I think it's two reasons. One, partly not understanding how the food system works and and the interactions between the actors. So we did some work where we're one of my PhD students looked to and he interviewed the farmers, the processors, the retailers. And he wrote a paper looking at the dynamics between these groups, the power, the trust and the agency of actors and farmers feel very powerless because they feel that the retailers had a lot of power because unless they can sell it to the retailers, they are not going to get the profit. And therefore the retailer dictated to them what they would buy and therefore they were limited by what they could sell because that was their market and so on. So I think

from a consumer perspective, me, as a consumer, I wouldn't have that knowledge to know what is the dynamics between all the food production actors, to know where the power lies and who is responsible for what. So if the consumer got it wrong is because of lack of understanding and lack of knowledge of how the system works. But in terms of how much they feel that they need to do, I would say it's 50/50 because usually retailers would say this is what the consumer wants, that's why we are trying to produce this food. So it is a push and pull. But I think the retailers do have power in the sense that when something comes on the market as natural or something like that, it is used as a marketing strategy and then sometimes it's very difficult to deliver. But then when consumers want that, then they push the farmers to have to produce that. So it is a much more connected, intricate system. The consumer is not aware of how the system works. That's maybe one of the reasons for that. But I think it has to be both push and pull, consumers can demand that they want a particular type of food. So if they want more sustainable food, if they want more healthy food, those that it does filter down and makes the changes. But retailers could also make the change if they want a different type of system in terms of they want locally produced food, minimally processed food. They could get the farmer and the processor to make the foods that go into that. So power is shared, but I wouldn't know what percentage, but it does depend on alternatives. But now the farmers themselves, if they get into a co-operative and they find out different mechanisms of sales, so for example, e-commerce is becoming a big thing. So it could be that in the future there may be a different platform of sale for the producers, that they may not having to go through the retailer, for example, during the pandemic or in Northern Ireland, the local producers, urban farmers who are using organic as their systems, they're not accredited as organic, but they are using the organic system, are doing delivery service. And that picked up, even I buy directly from the local farm. So there are alternative systems now coming into play through different mechanisms which may shift the power a little bit, but I wouldn't say that the retailers are powerless as it came out in the survey.

Podcast Host: As we have only little time left for the podcast, I have a couple of short questions and maybe you have some short answers, too. Food production touches on just about all the major problems of our time, hunger, climate change, biodiversity, public health, and fair trade. What, in your view, is the greatest challenge of all in food production?

Moira Dean: I think it's very difficult to say, but I think the one that we are not so aware of as consumers is how climate change is going to affect our food production. Because at the moment, because we have a global supply chain, we are not localized. So, for example, it may not be essential, but your peppers comes from a particular place. If the temperature of that country where you buy peppers changes by a few degrees and they can't produce that food anymore, and then the retailer, they have to source that food from somewhere else, so the climate change is going to change where the food is produced, how they are produced to something that cannot be produced anymore. So that's going to affect the food supply chain itself because we are reliant on a global system. So I would say it's not that that's the most important thing or lack of important, but I think that's what we are unaware of as consumers.

Podcast Host: So there are those who have an unwavering belief in technology as a remedy to sustain food production. Are you one of them?

Moira Dean: Well, I'm a kind of complicated person because I started life as a physicist, so I am a natural scientist. And then I ended up as a psychologist and I'm working as a psychologist, so that's more social. But I would say it has to be, I don't think technology is going to solve all the problems. I think it's a combination of technology and the application of technology, which means that's a human being who applies it. So whether it's the farmer or the consumer, so it's the actors who apply those technologies are as important and our behavior is also important. So one of the things that we are doing at the moment is looking at all these technological advances that are out there for farmers. The uptake is very low. It's on the Northern Ireland context. So we are trying to find out why, why are they not taking up those technologies? Why are they not applying, what are the barriers and how can we help them to implement them so that they gain but also the technology is used?

Podcast Host: Yeah. So my last question. Currently there are many areas of discourses in food science, animal welfare, climate change, use of chemicals and genetic techniques. So how do you see that consensus can be reached on all those issues?

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Podcast Host: I'm not asking you the easiest the easiest questions, but.

Moira Dean: No, no, I don't think you will have consensus. Whatever is necessary in some ways will push the agenda towards one or the other. But I think we need to be open. We need to have discussions. We need to take the majority with us, if you like. I don't think we will have 100% consensus, but there will always be early adopters. So we need to look at those early adopters, but we need to be properly evaluated and accept our mistakes, learn from it, and then move in a particular way. But I think we need to try and have discussions, more discussions, more open, more transparency and take the majority with us so that it helps everybody as much as possible.

Podcast Host: That's well said, Moira, and a good way of ending our interview. I mean, if you talk about food, there are so many more questions that you can ask. You can make a podcast of hours, but we are limited in time and I think you did a great job. Thank you very much for that and for being available at TrustTalk. And I wish you good luck with your further science.

Moira Dean: Thank you very much. Thanks for inviting me

Podcast Host: You're welcome.

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