

# Food policy consumer panels

## About the project

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### What are the consumer panels?

“Food policy consumer panels” is a project where the Consumer Council has invited ordinary people to participate in group discussions on food and food production. The Ministry of Agriculture has initiated the project, which is financed by The Norwegian Food Control Authority. The Consumer Council is responsible for the setting up and management of the panels, including its own information activity about and from the panels. Project leader is Ellen Bjørkum. Stine Wohl Sem is in charge of the project

The Consumer Council establishes consumer panels in 7 of the Norwegian counties, that is Troms, Nord-Trøndelag, Hordaland, Vest-Agder, Telemark, Oslo/Akershus and Oppland. The panels are going to meet twice a year and will discuss topical questions that have to do with food.

### What are the consumer panels aiming at?

The object of the consumer panels is to:

- become a channel where the consumers can express their opinion
- increase the consumers' influence

- increase the knowledge of the consumers' opinion and attitude towards food
- obtain increased debate and focus on consumer interests in the food area
- incite consumers to be active, involved and conscious.

The Consumer Council is responsible for the establishing and management of the consumer panels. The contact with the panels will give us a unique possibility to enter into dialogue with a range of consumers. The panels' thoughts, preferences and experiences in the food area will give us important information as to what people are absorbed with. Through the contact with the consumer panels we will also get an insight into whether our work and our consumer political points of view are in line with general consumer demands and wishes.

Even if we have a number of organisations that speak in favour of the consumers in Norway, the consumers have all the same few *direct* channels where they can express their opinion except through buying-not buying preferences. It is therefore our objective that the consumer panels shall become a channel where (a range of) Norwegian consumers can express their opinion and enter into dialogue with various participants in the food market.

The consumer panels' views shall be presented to authorities, politicians

and other participants in the food area as well as be used actively in the Consumer Council's efforts to influence the public.

What we wish for, is that the consumers' points-of-view to a larger extent shall form the basis when the policy is being modelled and intentionally be integrated in the policy modelling. The Consumer Council's idea is, that this will contribute to a better and more entire policy.

The work in the consumer panels shall contribute to focus on important consumer political problem areas, in addition to stimulate to an increased involvement and debate about food related questions. The Consumer Council intends to work actively in order to initiate and participate in the public debate about subjects and questions that are up for discussion in the panels.

It is desirable that the participants themselves shall initiate discussions within their local environment, e.g. in the local newspapers, in various organisations, at work, in the school etc. It will also be possible to participate in debates on the Consumer Council's web site called Forbrukerportalen.

### **Why establish Consumer panels?**

Norwegian authorities are aiming at *increased* consumer orientation towards food policy and will to a larger extent let the consumers come forth with their points of view.

The authorities want to lay more emphasis on the consumers' wishes,

points of view and preferences in connection with food political questions. This is specified in White Paper No. 19 (1999-2000), About Norwegian Agriculture and Food Production and in the Ministry of Agriculture's action plan on consumer orientation (2000).

In order to increase the consumer orientation in food policy the authorities have acknowledged need for getting more information about what ordinary consumer makes a point of when he/she goes shopping and eats food. The authorities want to be able to be in dialogue with the consumers and let them come up with their points of view directly. The consumer panels will have an organizational structure that makes it possible to lead a continuous dialogue with a group of consumers for some time.

It is the Norwegian consumers who mainly make *the market* for Norwegian produced (and imported) food. It is the Norwegian consumers who buy and eat the food that is offered in Norway. For that reason it is important to pay attention to what the consumers have to say.

The various food scandals that have hit a number of countries the past few years have made the importance of *confidence* more evident. This again has lead to a greater focus on consumer interests. Absolutely fundamental in a consumer directed food system is respect for the consumers' rights. When it comes to food, it is perhaps (in our community) about the right to safe and nutritionally wholesome food of good quality and at a reasonable price. But also more generally, about the right to

able to choose food in line with own values, preferences, wishes and needs.

A large share of the food we eat today is processed and composed by the food industry in such a way that we as consumers only have limited knowledge of how it is produced and what it consists of. As a consumer it can also be difficult to understand what consequences some substances in foodstuffs may have upon the health in the longer term. It is therefore quite decisive that the consumer finds the food safe and that it is produced in an honest way. The consumers must have *absolute confidence* that the food is both produced, handled and controlled in a way that does not put life and health in danger.

Even if we in Norway have been less affected by the most extensive crises in the European food market, it does not mean that we do not have problematic conditions also here in our country. The situation in Norway has lately been characterized by anxiety about hygienic conditions, dishonesty within some parts of the trade, breaches of regulations etc. Small and big crises have put our confidence to producers, food industry, distributors, everyday commodities shops and authorities continuously to test. An open and continuous dialogue, where consumer points of view are being listened to and given an *actual influence* in important decision-making processes, is of vital importance when it comes to confidence. The consumer panels could prove to be an important implement in this connection.

## Dialogue between consumers and authorities

The authorities in the food area want a more open dialogue with the consumers, and the consumer panels constitute one of the measures that shall ensure this.

After each “round” in the panels a report will be prepared which is handed over directly to the responsible ministry. The ministry in question undertakes to report back to the panels on how their points of view are to be followed up. The authorities also undertake to give an account of why they perhaps do not choose to come into line with the panels’ suggestions. The communication between the panels and the authorities shall be available to the public.

The project is subject to a steering group that besides the Consumer Council consists of the various food ministries together with their belonging departments. The Ministry of Agriculture directs the group. The steering group’s task is to approve of the scope of the project both financially and otherwise. The steering group shall also come forward with suggestions to the panels and approve of questions and matters intended to be dealt with in the panels. In addition the steering group has a responsibility to prepare instructions on how the panels’ points of view and opinions on a subject should be followed up by the authorities. The steering group is responsible for reporting back to the panels on how their points of view and suggestions within a field should be made use of in the political work.

The steering group is not in a position to control the panels' internal work or influence the results that the panels reach at. It is the *participants* in the panels who stand for the conclusions. The Consumer Council's task is to pass on the results from the panels in a way that is as neutral and objective as possible. At the same time we will make use of the results in our work to promote consumer interests in the food area.

### Who are participating in the consumer panels?

63 participants have been selected to the panels, dispersed on 7 different counties. There are 9 persons in each panel. The participants are recruited through announcements in local newspapers and are picked out on basis of certain criteria. Each panel consists of people with different background, attitudes and values. The panels are not representative in a statistical sense, but will reflect some of the variety that exists in the public. This means that the panels consist of people of different age, with different education, professions, class, sex etc.

All participants are lay people in the food area. This means that people with *close* connection to food production, processing or distribution of food do not participate. Persons who are engaged in farming, breeding, have a leading position within processing or distribution, are working in administration and so on, are not taking part.

The participants will take seat in the panels for a minimum of 1 year, and maximum 3 years. All will receive a small remuneration for their presence,

and in addition their travelling expenses to and fro the meetings will be covered.

### How will the panels work?

The panel participants will meet twice a year and discuss current questions and subjects that have to do with food and food politics. "Kick-off" for the project was 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> of February 2003. Then all the participants came together for the weekend in Asker (Oslo). The idea with this meeting was primarily that people should get acquainted, both with each other, with the Consumer Council, and that they should be introduced to the project and what it means to participate in the panels. The participants were also introduced to the way of thinking that forms the basis for letting lay people offer advices in political processes.

The local meetings will take place in each individual county and extend over 2 nights each time. The first meeting in the panels will be held in the course of March 2003. The subject at this first panel meeting will be "*Meat from farm to table – what do you want to know about the meat you eat?*" The goal is that the participants shall reach at informed and well-considered points of view and ideas in matters being discussed in the panels. Much importance should be attached to dialogue and debate, where everyone is stimulated to take an active part in the discussion. The goal is *not* to reach an agreement among the participants, but to explore different standpoints and points of view.

The panel participants will have to use some time prior to each meeting in order to acquaint themselves with various information on the relevant subject that is to be discussed. There is also a possibility to call in lecturers on own initiative. The Consumer Council is responsible for collecting and making relevant information available to the participants. All information plus notes and summaries from the meetings will be publicly available and published at the Consumer Council's home page [forbrukerportalen.no](http://forbrukerportalen.no).

The project leader Ellen Bjørkum of the Consumer Council will administer the meetings together with a representative from the local consumer office. The chairperson's responsibility would be to impel the group discussion and see to it that everyone gets the chance to express his/her opinion. We will attach much importance to having the participants' *different* opinions and view points presented. The participants themselves are responsible for the conclusions drawn. The project leader has a responsibility to gather the panels' view points in a report, which is to be handed over to the authorities.

In addition to the local meetings we assess the possibility of setting up a special site on the web for those who participate in the project. There we can arrange web meetings, actuate discussions and publish information. This is something we are planning to do little by little.

## Questions and answers in the panels

The subjects and questions that are being discussed in the panels will have to be relevant and current consumer questions. The questions should be attached to politically relevant subjects and public debate as far as food is concerned.

The Consumer Council, members of the steering group or panel participants themselves may suggest current subjects and questions to the consumer panels. The Consumer Council and the steering group in collaboration will assess the subjects. It is the steering group that makes the final approval of subject. Every meeting will therefore have a fixed agenda, decided in advance. The Consumer Council will follow up on the matters that the panels take up, and communicate the response back to the panels.

After each "round" with panel meetings the Consumer Council will hand over the results to the authorities in the form of a report. One or more of the panel participants will be present when the report is handed over to the political administration. The results will also be made public on "Forbrukerportalen", the Consumer Council's home page.

## Evaluation of the project

The project will be evaluated after some time in operation. An external, independent institution will make the evaluation. The steering group is responsible for the start-up and approval of the set-up and timescale.

for the evaluation of the project. The evaluation could among other things say something about the importance of the panels' "suggestions" for policy framing in the food area.