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An in-depth exploration of food sustainability practices in industry – from initial concept to development and evaluation

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The food industry is intertwined in every continent and culture, shaping dietary habits and economies worldwide⁽¹⁾. Sustainability has become an increasingly important and widely discussed topic in the food industry influencing the decisions and actions of food industry companies and stakeholders worldwide. In an effort to become environmentally conscious and protect the earth for future generations, sustainability practices have been developed and integrated into food industry actions and policies which aim to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs⁽²⁾. This study was part of a joint Erasmus KA2 European-funded project (2022-1-IE01-KA220-VET-000087508 Digitalisation of Sustainable Health Education) and aimed to explore current food sustainability priorities across the food industry in Europe and how initiatives are developed, implemented and evaluated to achieve food sustainability targets.

In-depth semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with 21 employees in the Food Industry sector across Ireland, Poland, Lithuania and Cyprus. These participants were selected based on their knowledge and oversight of their company's sustainability practices. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed^(3,4), whereby the data were coded, themes identified and discussed by all authors.

Three themes were identified in the data: 1. sustainable practice challenges, 2. factors for consideration, and 3. thinking to the future. Sustainable practices were already implemented in all but one of the 21 participating companies. The main drivers reported behind development of sustainable initiatives included complying to the Science-Based Targets initiative (SBTi) and setting emissions targets such as being net zero by 2050 and minimising waste generation. Participants reported cost, time required for monitoring and evaluation, retaining quality of products, and employee engagement as the main challenges for initiative development and implementation. When developing a sustainability initiative, participants felt that employee and stakeholder understanding and acceptance were important to consider for the success of the initiative. Future goals and initiatives were positively discussed as expanding on current priorities to reduce emissions and implement sustainable procurement and production practices, and gaps in research were identified as the proliferation of environmental labels and exploration of greater inter-collaboration between companies to share sustainability data.

A focus on becoming more sustainable was at the centre of innovation development and future proofing for all participating companies, with plans to develop new or further enhance current policies to continue producing quality food in an environmentally sustainable way. Educating employees and stakeholders, including nutrition educators and graduates, on future initiatives and potential impacts is essential for raising awareness, strengthening implementation and ensuring long-term maintenance and success of food sustainability practices within industry. Future research into a policy for sharing of sustainability data, such as raw sustainability metrics between companies could strengthen initiative outcomes and inform nutrition education and research to meet market needs.

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