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Online conference

Food retail chains as drivers of environmental sustainability?

23 June 2026: **Presentation of research papers** 13:00 – 19:30 CET (7.00 – 13:30 EST, 14:00 - 20.30 UTC)

24 June 2026: **Panel discussions with and for interested stakeholders** 13:00 – 17:30 CET (7:00 – 11:30 EST, 14:00- 18:30 UTC)

Food retail chains are key actors in food systems. In Germany and the US, at least 80% of all food purchased by consumers is bought in food retail chains. In other, including emerging economies, these retailers' shares are catching up quickly, with a 60% of food purchase share e.g. in Turkey. Food retail chains have an impact upstream upon how sustainable their suppliers produce and downstream on consumption patterns. In sum, they are extremely influential actors in terms of food system sustainability.

This conference brings together new research on the role of food retail chains in the sustainability transition, mostly based on the [SuperSustain](#) consortium, the '[Retail for Sustainability](#)' and [CAPS-projects](#) at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and several other ongoing research projects. Our projects explore (a) how food retail chains' sustainability profiles differ, (b) what determines these differences, and (c) levers and barriers for food retailers in transforming the food system towards sustainability and scaling up solutions. ¹

The online conference combines presentation and discussion of academic research papers (day 1) with panel discussions among practitioners sharing their experiences in making retail industries more sustainable (day 2). While both days are open to everyone, day 2 targets a much wider audience, including speakers and other participants from the food retail industry, business associations, not-for-profit organisations and the public sector.

23 June 2026: Academic paper presentations (timetable in CET)

13:00	Welcome and introductory remarks (Malin Jonell and Tilman Altenburg)
13:15 – 14:35	Session 1: What environmental measures do food retail chains adopt, how do they differ, and what drives their actions? <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Altenburg, T, Reich. C.: Green Leaders and Laggards: Explaining Environmental Commitments in German Food Retail?2. Ross, R.B., Altenburg, T., Karaer, O., Reardon, T., Caputo, V., Hall, M., Polson, H.: A cross-country analysis of retail sustainability initiatives reported in CSR reports: do they support a sustainability initiative Kuznets Curve?3. Hupp, L., Linder N., Rööös, E., Ran, Y., Olosson, P., Jonell, M.: Food retail benchmarking and sustainability governance: Assessing transformative potential4. Bickel, M.; Schoch, K., Hennes, L., Liedtke, C.: Comparing environmental impact reduction potentials of supermarket interventions: a review

¹ In terms of retail formats, we cover super-and hypermarkets as well as discounters.

	<p>Discussant: Christian Schader, Forschungsinstitut für biologischen Landbau (FIBL)</p> <p>Moderator: Charlotte Linnebank, Questionmark</p>
14:35 – 14:45	Short break
14:45 – 16:05	<p>Session 2: What environmental measures do food retail chains adopt, how do they differ, and what drives their actions? (continuation)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Sander, M., Schafhausen, C., Franz-Wippermann, R., Lambertz, C., von Saldern, L., Herzig, C., Weber, C., Seo, H., Schader, C.: How sustainable are Germany's largest food retailers? An indicator-based, multidimensional assessment. 6. Altenburg, T., Never, B., Reardon, T., Ross, B Explaining Retailer Environmental Action: A Multi-Level Framework and the Case of Sustainable Seafood 7. Reardon, T., Caputo, V., Ross, R.B., Polson, H.: Retailers want sustainability & consumer food affordability: what trade-offs? What solutions? 8. Sadikoglu, D., Karaer, O. and Bayindir, P.: Retailer strategies for driving supplier carbon footprint reduction via internal carbon price <p>Discussant: Reena DasNair, University of Johannesburg</p> <p>Moderator: Justus Wesseler, University of Wageningen tbc.</p>
16:05 – 16:20	Short break
16:20 – 17:35	<p>Session 3: The role of retail chains in driving dietary transitions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Linder, N. et al. 2025 (Un)acceptable protein shift: Consumer attitudes toward retail-led interventions promoting sustainable diets 10. Sariman, S.B., Caputo, V.: The effects of a carbon tax on red meat consumption: Evidence from online food markets. 11. Fuhrmann-Riebel, H., Pegels, A., Reich, C.: Busting sustainability myths: Experimental evidence on consumers' willingness to reduce meat consumption 12. Jonell, M., Linder, N., Metson, G., van den Broek, K.: Unpacking governance barriers in food retail: Employee mental models of the protein shift <p>Discussant: Maiken Maier, ETH Zurich</p> <p>Moderator: Valerie Kilders, Purdue University</p>
17:35 – 17:50	Short break
17:50 – 19:10	<p>Session 4: The role of retail chains in driving dietary transitions (continued)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Clémence, S. Fesenfeld, L., Maier, M., Caputo, V. & Wüpper, D. : When people walk away from nudges: the causal effect of relocating meat alternatives in the meat section 14. Jonell, M. et al. Sharing the burden: How supermarkets can support producers in the shift to sustainable food 15. Akgunes, A. Bayindir, P., Karaer, O.: A strategy to avoid food waste: Trade-off between food donations and discounting 16. Ross, R.B., Polson, H., Reardon, T., A 10-year analysis of sustainability initiatives reported in CSR reports over US-operating companies spanning agrifood sectors (farm inputs, food processing, retail/food service): what has changed? <p>Discussant: Jörg Hofstetter, KEDGE Business School, Paris</p> <p>Moderator: Dominic Lemken, University of Bonn</p>
19:10– 19:30	General discussion (Tilman Altenburg)

24 June 2026: Panel discussions with stakeholders

Following the presentation of new research on day 1, day 2 focuses on how sustainability transitions unfold in practice. In three panels, we bring together experts from the private and public sector as well as NGOs to examine key frictions and synergies and the role of food retail chains as possible enablers of system-wide change.

13:00 – 13:30	Presentation of key project findings (based on summary of day 1) Tom Reardon, Malin Jonell and Tilman Altenburg
13:30 – 14:00	Discussion
14:00 – 14:45	<p>Panel discussion 1: Beyond standards: (How) can retailers support producers in the transition to sustainable food production?</p> <p>Retailers increasingly require suppliers to comply with environmental standards, provide sustainability data, or meet certification requirements. However, these approaches often place the main responsibility and costs of sustainability transitions on producers. At the same time, farmers and fishers face rising production costs, climate risks, and growing sustainability expectations. This raises the question of whether retailers could move beyond compliance-based approaches and play a stronger role in enabling transitions by supporting producers, for example through price premiums, long-term contracts, technical assistance, or co-financing.</p> <p>Key questions: What examples exist of retailers effectively supporting producers in sustainability transitions? What role can retailers play in sharing costs and risks with producers? Which incentives or support mechanisms have proven effective—and what limits remain?</p> <p><u>Moderator:</u> Malin Jonell</p> <p><u>Panellists:</u> Cansu Ergun, Migros Türkiye; Lisa Kirfel-Rühle, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development; Helena Allard, Axfood Sweden; Jenny Lönn, ICA Sweden</p>
14:45 – 15:00	Discussion with audience
15:00 – 15:15	Break
15:15 – 16:00	<p>Panel discussion 2: Bargain barbecue meat offers and the vegan boom: The role of food retail chains in the nutritional transition</p> <p>Meat consumption accounts for nearly 60% of the food sector’s climate emissions, thus calling for plant-based alternatives. Yet, meat consumption is deeply embedded in consumer preferences. At the same time, remarkable change in consumer habits towards vegan protein substitutes. FoodRise and Albert-Schweitzer Foundation have analysed which measures different retailers in the UK, resp. Germany, should adopt and which of them have already taken steps to increase plant-based alternatives or even discourage meat consumption. Lidl is among the first discounters having set a protein shift target in line with global decarbonisation pathways and has also decided to price plant-based protein substitutes lower than meat equivalents. The Dutch supermarket Jumbo eliminated price promotions on fresh meat for nearly two years but recently reversed this policy. Others are also strongly betting on plant-based alternatives, amongst others to reach their company-wide decarbonisation target. At the same time, retailers continue to advertise low-priced meat (including the least sustainable categories), especially in the barbecue season.</p>

	<p>Key questions: What does it take to accelerate the dietary transition away from meat and toward plant-based alternatives? How much leverage do retailers have in changing deeply rooted consumer habits? How can public policies complement voluntary retailer initiatives?</p> <p><u>Moderator:</u> Charlotte Reich</p> <p><u>Panellists:</u> Gustaaf Haan, Questionmark, NL; Laura Spengler, German Federal Environmental Agency (UBA); Myriam Taphorn, Lidl</p>
16:00 – 16:15	Discussion with audience
16:15 – 16:30	Break
16:30 – 17:15	<p>Panel discussion 3: When do sustainability innovations scale into retail-wide transformation?</p> <p>Across food retail, sustainability innovation is thriving. Retailers are experimenting with new approaches in areas such as climate, packaging, and sourcing - often using them as a source of competitive differentiation. Yet only a fraction of these initiatives ever scales beyond first movers to become embedded across the entire sector. Experience across markets shows that scaling rarely happens through competition alone. Instead, it typically emerges when competitors align with shared minimum standards, when common metrics or labels create transparency and/or when regulatory frameworks ensure a level playing field. The UK Plastics Pact illustrates how pre-competitive collaboration can accelerate change by allowing retailers to move together on packaging targets without incurring first-mover disadvantages. In France, legislation on food waste has shifted industry practices by making surplus redistribution the norm. Meanwhile, the Animal Welfare Initiative brings together all the sectors involved along the value chain and acts as a support programme, a monitoring system, and a certification body.</p> <p>Key questions: What determines whether a sustainability innovation remains a niche differentiator or becomes a sector-wide standard? How can collaboration between competitors be structured to accelerate progress while remaining compliant with competition law? When is regulation needed to scale proven solutions—and how can it effectively build on voluntary initiatives? How can transparency tools such as benchmarks, rankings, and labels drive faster convergence across the sector?</p> <p><u>Moderator:</u> Tilman Altenburg</p> <p><u>Panellists:</u> Mattis Bergquist, former sustainability director of COOP Sweden; Kim Schoppink, Science-based Targets Initiative; Sara Golden, Oxfam Novib; Laura van Geels, World Business Council for Sustainable Development.</p>
17:15 – 17:30	Discussion with audience & end