



## POLICY BRIEF

# Changing Habits and Defaults: Behavioural Tools for the Protein Transition

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is not possible to create a more sustainable food system in the EU through product innovation alone. Despite a sharp increase in the availability of alternative proteins in recent years, the consumption of traditional proteins, such as meat and dairy products, remain dominant in consumption patterns, largely due to entrenched behavioural habits and food routines. The use of nudging, a proven intervention in behavioural economics, offers a cost-effective, efficient, and scalable solution to this problem, enabling the transformation of eating behaviour to promote healthier and more sustainable consumption without limiting consumer choice. For example, interventions such as changing default menu options, reconsidering the position of products on shelves, using more taste-based food descriptions, or using social norms are effective tools to influence the consumer behaviour. Bringing together 50 food actors from 22 European

countries, the Transition Arena process of the LIKE-A-PRO Horizon project gathered contributions and opinions from different stakeholder groups, including food service companies, retailers, researchers, and civil society organisations. Following the nutrition recommendations of several countries, there was a general consensus in the Arena to set goals for reduction of meat consumption and production. The Arena recognised nudging as a significantly underutilised but powerful tool for the uptake of alternative proteins while maintaining transparency and freedom of choice for consumers<sup>1</sup>. This pragmatic report draws on the latest behavioural evidence and project findings to provide clear policy recommendations to governments, public institutions, and private actors. The goal is simple but fundamental: to make plant-based alternative proteins more accessible, visible, and appealing as everyday choices, rather than exceptional ones.



## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Current meat consumption trends should be realigned with its environmental, health, and sustainability goals. Livestock production (meat, aquaculture, eggs, and dairy) largely contributes to greenhouse gas emission using ~83% of the world's farmland and contributes 56–58% of food's different emissions, despite providing only 37% of our protein and 18% of our calories<sup>2</sup>.

From a demand perspective, high consumption of red and processed meat is associated with an increased risk of non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular disease and colorectal cancer. At the same time, gastronomic and technological innovation in the field of alternative proteins — from plant-based to fermented and cultured — has introduced a new world of sustainable options. Such foods are increasingly available in supermarkets, restaurants, and public food institutions across Europe. However, supply has not automatically led to widespread uptake. Many consumers continue to prefer traditional meat and dairy products, often out of habit, familiarity, or simply because such products are much more visible and readily available<sup>3</sup>.

Decades of research in behavioural science show that people tend to rely on mental 'rules of thumb' or heuristics when making everyday decisions. When it comes to food, this means that location, default settings, description, and social context significantly influence what and how much people consume<sup>4</sup>. This finding underpins the concept of nudging, i.e. the subtle influencing of the food environment<sup>5</sup> that leads people to certain conclusions without restricting their freedom of choice.

The LIKE-A-PRO project responds directly to this challenge. Its vision for 2040 is a reduction in red meat consumption, down to an average of 300 grams per person per week, and the integration of alternative proteins into all major food environments. To achieve this goal, it calls for collective action to transform the environments in which choices are made. Through its Transition Arena, the project has brought together more than 50 actors from the European food system.

Among the tools identified, nudging has emerged as one of the most promising: extraordinarily adaptable, based on concrete data, and applicable in most contexts (from school canteens and public procurement to shops and food platforms). However, nudging is still largely absent from European-level policies and national food plans. Information and finance prevail in most mainstream strategies, but although indispensable, these tools may not be sufficient to change daily habits.

By applying the principles of nudging to food policies, procurement procedures, and institutional habits, public authorities can do more to create an environment that is increasingly conducive to sustainable diets for those who wish to reduce meat consumption. Our intention is not to manipulate consumers but to support them to make better choices, it is a question of making a range of sustainable choices visible, accessible, and attractive, while always considering consumers' right to transparent and clear information.







## EVIDENCE ON BEHAVIOURAL APPROACHES

Consumer choices regarding food are not exclusively rational actions based on perfect information or consistent preferences. Rather, they are often influenced by the situation: what is on offer, how it is presented, how much effort a decision requires, and what appears “normal” in each location. Studies in behavioural psychology and economics have repeatedly shown that the **structure of the choice situation** — also described as ‘choice architecture’ — has a strong influence on food choices<sup>6</sup>.

This insight forms the basis of nudging: a small change in how options are presented that shifts behaviour in a predictable direction, without precluding any options or substantially altering economic incentives<sup>7</sup>. In the food market, the most common nudging interventions are:

- **Changing default options** (e.g. making a vegetarian meal the standard choice in a public canteen);
- **Reordering menu items** to list sustainable options first;
- **Positioning plant-based products at eye level** or next to conventional meat items;
- **Using sensory or indulgent descriptions** rather than health- or ethics-based labels;
- **Emphasising social norms**, such as indicating what “most people choose”.

Evidence from academic literature and real-world experiments confirms that these interventions — while small in appearance — can lead to **significant behavioural shifts**, while still maintaining the full range of consumer options. A 2021 study in a university cafeteria found that simply adjusting prices (lowering those of vegetarian meals and raising those of meat-based meals by modest amounts) increased vegetarian sales by over 3%, with a stronger effect among consumers already inclined toward plant-based eating<sup>8</sup>. Although not technically a nudge, this study illustrates how even minor contextual changes influence food selection.

More directly relevant are field studies on ‘default’ effects. Changing the default meal in a school or workplace setting (e.g. serving a vegetarian option unless another is specifically requested) has been shown to double the uptake of plant-based meals, among those open to such choices, without triggering dissatisfaction or resistance<sup>9</sup>.



Similarly, the language used to describe dishes matters: research has shown that meals framed with flavour-focused descriptors (“smoky chickpea stew with garlic and rosemary”) are chosen more frequently than those labelled with health or environmental terms (“vegan stew” or “low-emission option”)<sup>10</sup>. Placement is another effective lever: In supermarket environments, when plant-based products are displayed alongside traditional meat — rather than in separate “vegetarian” sections — consumers are more likely to notice and choose them. Studies report measurable increases in sales simply by **relocating meat alternatives to the meat aisle**, taking advantage of habitual browsing patterns<sup>11</sup>.

Above all, nudging works not by imposing a mandatory choice or requiring people to internalise highly complex information, but by ensuring that the food environment is aligned with natural human decision-making. It is precisely this low-friction requirement that makes nudging both **cost-effective and scalable**. Interventions can be introduced in a variety of contexts (schools, hospitals, canteens, shops, and even meal delivery websites) with minimal infrastructural changes.

The LIKE-A-PRO Transition Arena also confirmed these findings by directly involving stakeholders. Nudging was seen as a compelling strategy not only because of its scientific basis, but also because of its **practicability**:

it can be implemented quickly, tested easily, and adapted to different national and cultural contexts. Various actors, from traders to public authorities, reported having successfully tried nudging techniques such as changing ‘default’ options by improving product placement and reformulating menus, resulting in a rise in the consumption of alternative proteins.

Although it has been proven to work, **nudging is still underrepresented in policymaking**. Most national strategies for sustainable diets are still based on awareness campaigns, voluntary arrangements, or fiscal models. While these have their place, they may miss the significance of the context for everyday decision-making. Nudging does not substitute for other instruments, but works alongside them, underpinning fiscal or educational policy by more securely situating sustainable choices in people’s daily lives. The unique feature of nudging is that it can make healthier choices habitual. By reconfiguring what is expected or convenient, nudging transforms sustainable food options into **acceptable default options**. As Europe pursues the protein transition, it is essential that private and public organisations recognise this tool as a fundamental component of effective food policy. New environments must always ensure that consumers are aware of what they are purchasing or eating, both individually and in public or workplace canteen settings.





## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To mainstream alternative proteins and support the reduction of red meat consumption in line with the LIKE-A-PRO vision, behavioural nudging should be recognised and supported as a legitimate public policy tool. Based on stakeholder opinions and scientific evidence, the following actions are recommended to national governments, the European Union, and key players in the food system:

# 1

### **Strengthen behavioural approaches in institutional food policy and public procurement**

Public institutions should apply behavioural insights into practice when creating food environments in universities, schools, hospitals, and other public institutions. This involves making vegetarian or plant-based options a more visible choice and accessible, using descriptive labels on their presence as ingredient, and training catering staff in menu planning. Where relevant, governments should also consider integrating plant-based and alternative protein options into existing school activities such as nutrition education or cooking classes, to familiarise younger generations with these products in a neutral, educational context.

# 2

### **Support retailers and food service providers in redesigning choice contexts**

National governments could provide incentive programmes, for companies to promote alternative proteins. Enterprises could reorganise shelf availability, redesigning menus, and repositioning product signage. Nudging should be adapted to different commercial and cultural contexts and co-designed with local partners to maximise impact.

# 3

### **Integrate nudging thinking into EU food policies**

Policy makers should incorporate behavioural design techniques into existing and future food policy instruments (e.g. the Farm to Fork Strategy) and sustainable public procurement standards. Clarity around choice architecture (positioning, defaults, and framing) can inform Member States and enable a shared strategy for transforming the food environment. Policies must also ensure clarity and transparency regarding the presence of novel ingredients, helping consumers make informed choices without ambiguity. This, in turn, will support their ability to make free and informed choices.





# 4

## Improve the knowledge base and exchange best practices

Public funding programmes such as Horizon Europe should continue supporting research on the behavioural drivers of sustainable diets and evaluate the impact of nudging interventions. The EU and national agencies should also invest in knowledge exchange forums between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to disseminate best practices.

# 5

## Promote behavioural tools that serve the public interest

Policy makers should assure that nudging is not synonymous with manipulation, but a tool for aligning people's eating habits with public health and sustainability goals. Just as the design of physical infrastructure is intended to promote safe mobility, the design of eating habits can also be optimised to function better. To avoid any form of manipulation, consumers must be clearly informed about the presence of new products or ingredients at the time of decision-making, ensuring that trust is built on clarity, not concealment.



## CONCLUSION

A gradual reduction in meat and dairy consumption is still one of the main levers for making diets in Europe more sustainable, and the growing offer of alternative proteins is starting to create some space for this change. People are interested, but interest alone is not enough if the surrounding food environment does not help them make sense of these options or feel confident choosing them.

In this sense nudging can genuinely help. It doesn't replace policies or regulation, but it can support the broader shift. Small changes in how choices are presented often make a bigger difference than expected. By adjusting the context in which people decide, nudges can close that gap between what individuals say they want to do and what they actually end up choosing. Clearer, non-ambiguous information also helps; sometimes it is just a matter of making things easier to interpret. This brief shows that behavioural insights can be used in many different settings to support the protein transition. The tools are there, the evidence is solid, and the overall momentum is finally moving in the right direction. To build on this, political awareness around alternative proteins needs to increase, and it can only happen if businesses, consumers and policymakers pull in the same direction. When information is transparent and trust is not undermined by confusing claims, people feel more comfortable trying something new. Over time, this is how alternative proteins stop looking like a niche and start becoming part of everyday food environments:

**VISIBLE, ACCESSIBLE, AND SIMPLY NORMAL.**



## ENDNOTES

- 1 LIKE-A-PRO (2025). Transition Arena stakeholder co-creation process.
- 2 Poore, J., & Nemecek, T. (2018). *Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers*. Science, 360(6392), 987–992.
- 3 Giacalone, D., Rodríguez-Pérez, C., & Kremer, S. (2022). *Understanding barriers to consumption of plant-based foods and beverages*. Food Quality and Preference, 96, 104393.
- 4 Johnson, E. J., Shu, S. B., Dellaert, B. G. C., et al. (2012). *Beyond nudges: Tools of a choice architecture*. Marketing Letters, 23(2), 487–504.
- 5 Food Policy Coalition (2021). Discovering the role of food environments for sustainable food systems. “Physical, economic, political and sociocultural context in which consumers engage with the food system to make their decisions about acquiring, preparing and consuming food.”
- 6 Thaler, R.H. & Sunstein, C.R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Yale University Press.
- 7 Johnson, E.J., Shu, S.B., Dellaert, B.G.C., et al. (2012). *Beyond nudges: Tools of a choice architecture*. Marketing Letters, 23(2), 487–504.
- 8 Garnett, E.E., Balmford, A., Marteau, T.M., et al. (2021). *Does a small alteration to the price of meat and vegetarian options affect their sales?* Journal of Environmental Psychology, 75, 101589.
- 9 Bacon, L., & Krpan, D. (2018). *The impact of restaurant menu design on vegetarian food choice*. Appetite, 120, 190–200.
- 10 Weijers, D., Kerschbaumer, L., & Langen, N. (2020). *Nudging in education: A review of behavioural interventions*. Journal of Behavioral Economics for Policy, 4(1), 43–52.
- 11 Martin, R., & Norton, M.I. (2009). *Shaping online consumer choice by partitioning the web*. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 19(4), 503–512.

The results of the LIKE-A-PRO Horizon project's Transition Arena were used to inform the topic of this policy brief, however, the content belongs wholly to the authors and are not a reflection of any specific suggestions discussed during the Transition Arenas themselves.

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