Make organic food possible for people on a tight budget.

Petition to the Utrecht City Council – Energy (Transition), Sustainability, Real Estate and Housing Committee

Utrecht City Hall, 8 February 2024, 9.45-10.00 a.m.

Dear members of the Utrecht City Council,

In 2022 and 2023, in the initiative Duurzaam Utrecht 2030, we spoke to hundreds of residents of the city of Utrecht with a small budget about their wishes to live sustainably. Many people said they would like to eat organic or sustainable food, but that organic groceries were too expensive. From September 2022 to February 2023, five environmental science students from the HAS University of Applied Sciences in Den Bosch therefore developed three options for a system that could bring sustainable fruit and vegetables from local suppliers to a central point in the Lunetten district and distribute them to people with a small budget.
Conversations with the target group showed that they would rather have a voucher with which they could choose organic products themselves. That is why we conducted a trial with subsidised organic groceries in Lunetten from June to November 2023. We handed out vouchers worth 10 euros, with which residents with a small budget could try out organic products from the organic shop Ekovers (125 vouchers) and city farm Koppelsteede (40 vouchers). The project was funded by the municipality of Utrecht (Initiatives Fund), the Catholic Caritas Utrecht and part of the third prize of the Mantel of Sint Maarten 2022. The vouchers were mainly handed out in the giveaway shop of the Limoenz Foundation, Treek 15 in Utrecht-Lunetten.
The (at least) 50 different participants were very involved in the project, and showed a lot of interest in sustainable living, with an emphasis on the quality and health benefits of organic products. However, important challenges emerged, mainly focused on price, accessibility, atmosphere and the need for education and transparency.

1) *Price*: The affordability of organic groceries was a recurring concern. The participants expressed a desire to balance ideals with budgetary constraints.
2) *Accessibility and convenience*: Participants emphasized that organic groceries are not easily accessible. This suggests that there is a need for more availability in larger supermarket chains.
3) *Atmosphere*: Some were unhappy with the visual appeal and atmosphere of organic stores. This indicates a preference for a welcoming appearance.

4) *Education and transparency*: A major theme was a lack of information about sustainable living and the origin of products. There seems to be a need for more education and transparency in stores.

More information and reports on the trial with subsidised organic groceries can be found here: https://duurzaamutrecht2030.nl/bioboodschappen.

Request to the City Council:

The participants in the trial certainly do not expect the municipality of Utrecht to be able to remove all the obstacles mentioned. Nevertheless, the municipality can take the lead to ensure that Utrecht residents with a small budget can also buy organic or sustainable groceries on a regular basis. This fits into the municipal Food agenda (2022) and efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (Utrecht and the Global Goals, 2023).
We ask you to do the following:

1) *Food Pass Project*: Adopt successful models such as the Rotterdam Food Pass. This gives low-income people the flexibility to choose their own groceries, which helps reduce food waste. This ties in nicely with an oral question in the Utrecht city council on 7 October 2021.
2) *Involve merchant associations*: Work with merchant associations to provide bonus cards for organic products, potentially funded by the entrepreneurs' fund, as well as to promote sustainable businesses and support lower-income individuals.
3) *Expand sustainable community centre operations*: If necessary, increase funding for community centres for activities that go beyond giveaways. Examples include educational events on sustainable living, cooking classes, and workshops.
4) *Address policy fragmentation*: explore ways to overcome resource fragmentation and ensure that people who are just above certain income thresholds also have access to support for sustainable living.

We are very curious to see what you will do with these recommendations. At the same time, we are also entering into discussions with partners in Lunetten about a local follow-up to our trial with subsidised organic groceries, and we want to do a similar trial in one or more other neighbourhoods. We also want to give residents with a small budget in those other neighbourhoods the opportunity to try out organic and sustainable food, after which we want to map out their wishes and suggestions. Follow us on the website duurzaamutrecht2030.nl!