



**GREEN
DEAL**

010. EIWITSHIFT
OP ONS BORD

Green Deal

010 PROTEIN SHIFT ON OUR PLATE

A NEW NARRATIVE FOR THE PROTEIN SHIFT



Vlaamse
overheid

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FOREWORD

A large majority of people in Flanders consider climate change the biggest challenge of the 21st century.¹ Increasingly more of them say they the issue affects them in their daily lives while at the same time an overwhelming majority of people in Flanders say they want to take personal action.²

Yet large-scale behavioral change is still lacking.

Nutrition is one of the areas where this behavioral change is necessary. In that area, we see a positive evolution taking place in Flanders today. The number of flexitarians, vegetarians, and vegans has risen sharply in recent years. And more and more Flemish people indicate that they want to eat less meat in the future. The Flemish are - more than ever - open to plant-based alternatives.

With the protein shift, the Flemish government wants to perpetuate and accelerate this evolution towards an environmentally responsible and healthy diet.

The way we communicate about the protein shift to a broad public plays an important role. What words do we use? How can we convince the Flemish to choose a plant-based meal more often? And how do we ensure that everyone can and wants to participate? These questions form the basis of the path we describe in this document.

Our objective: a narrative with concrete recommendations for the partners of the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plate' to communicate about the 'protein shift'.

We built this narrative in co-creation with an extensive group of actors of the 'Green Deal'. It is based on research and insights from experts on food, environment, climate, health, and communication. Finally, we tested the narrative with a diverse group of Flemish people.

This document describes our process, the most important insights, and our conclusion: a new narrative for the protein shift in Flanders.

This report contains the opinion of the author(s) and not necessarily that of the Flemish Government.

¹ MAS Research. (2022). *Klimaatenquête 2021 Eindrapport*. Federale overheidsdienst Volksgezondheid. Veiligheid van de Voedselketen en Leefmilieu - Dienst Klimaatverandering. <https://klimaat.be/doc/klimaatenquête-2021-rapport.pdf>

²European Investment Bank. (2022). *The EIB climate survey : citizens call for green recovery : calls for a green recovery*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2867/414948>

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	2
COLOPHON	3
STEERING GROUP	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	5
THE GREEN DEAL PROTEIN SHIFT ON OUR PLATE.....	6
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROTEIN SHIFT	6
THE GREEN DEAL PROTEIN SHIFT ON OUR PLATE	6
A CLEAR, SUPPORTED NARRATIVE.....	7
APPROACH	8
AN AGILE PROCESS.....	8
8 SPRINTS.....	8
BUILDING BLOCKS.....	10
UNCONSCIOUS BEHAVIOUR AT THE BASIS	10
NOT A WORD ON THE PROTEIN SHIFT	11
FIVE COGNITIVE BIASES AS A STARTING POINT	11
BIAS 1 – INGROUP/OUTGROUP	11
BIAS 2 – FRAMING	14
BIAS 3 – SOCIAL PROOF.....	16
BIAS 4 – LOSS AVERSION	17
BIAS 5 – PARADOX OF CHOICE.....	19
NARRATIVE.....	21
IN PRACTICE	22

THE GREEN DEAL PROTEIN SHIFT ON OUR PLATE

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROTEIN SHIFT

What and how we eat not only affects our health. It also has a significant impact on our environment and climate. According to a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), our current food system is responsible for about a third of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

International attention to building sustainable food systems is therefore high. The United Nations published the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, as a guide to a sustainable and better future for all. Nutrition and food production plays a central role throughout most of the SDGs.

Europe's ambition is to lead the transition towards a future-oriented food system. In 2020, the European Commission proposed the 'Farmer to Plate' strategy.³ This strategy aims to transform the current EU food system into a resilient, innovative, and sustainable model.

To contribute to this European objective, the Flemish government developed a Flemish food strategy.⁴ The Flemish Protein Strategy 2021 - 2030 is an important part of this. In 2021, the Department of Environment & Spatial Planning launched the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plate': a tangible partnership contributing to the Flemish Protein Strategy.⁵

THE GREEN DEAL PROTEIN SHIFT ON OUR PLATE

To make the European future-proof, a 'protein shift' from animal to vegetable proteins is necessary. The 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plate' translates this European objective into a Flemish action plan. People in Flanders today eat proportionally too much animal protein and too little vegetable protein. Currently, this ratio is about 60%-40% respectively. This situation has a negative impact on health and the environment.

The main objective of the protein shift is to bring the ratio of animal and vegetable proteins in Flanders from 60%-40% to 40%-60% by 2030.

A second objective is to reduce total protein intake. Most people in Flanders consume too much protein today.

The 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plates' brings together players from across the food system. The agricultural sector, the production sector, retail, and the catering sector are represented. Next

³European Commission. (2020). *Farm to Fork Strategy. For a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system*. European Commission https://food.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-05/f2f_action-plan_2020_strategy-info_en.pdf

⁴Departement Landbouw en Visserij. (2022). *Go4Food, Een Vlaamse voedselstrategie voor morgen*. (NL) Brussel. <https://lv.vlaanderen.be/beleid/vlaamse-kost-voedselstrategie>

⁵Departement Omgeving. (2021). *Wat is een eiwitshift?*. (NL) Portaal Departement Omgeving. <https://omgeving.vlaanderen.be/nl/klimaat-en-milieu/groene-economie/green-deals/green-deal-eiwitshift-op-ons-bord/wat-is-een-eiwitshift>

to them, knowledge institutions, research groups, NGOs, professional organizations and (local) governments signed the Green Deal Protein Shift on our Plate.⁶

The signatories commit to working together and exchanging knowledge in various domains. One such domain is communication. After all, the way we talk about the protein shift is of paramount importance. The signatories agree that there is a need for a common communication strategy.

A CLEAR, SUPPORTED NARRATIVE

The 60%-40% standard underlying the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our Plate' is complex. On the one hand, it is not clear to the Flemish consumer what proteins are, and exactly how much protein is in certain foods. Moreover, it is very difficult to see how this shift should translate 'on our plate'.

The objective of the narrative is clear: we want to change behavior among the largest possible group of Flemish people. We also pay sufficient attention to Flemish people for whom Dutch is not their mother tongue, and to Flemish people with a lower level of education.

In essence, the narrative is a collection of sentences, words, and 'frames' to effectively talk about the protein shift. It is based on research and insights from experts on nutrition, environment, climate, health, and communication. Throughout the narrative, we avoid the various thresholds that may push back on the desired behavioral change.

The narrative we build is:

- Inclusive. The narrative appeals to the largest possible group of Flemish people.
- Simple. The narrative tells one clear message.
- Compelling. The narrative incites action and gives 'appetite'.
- Distinctive. The narrative is distinctive and recognizable.

We invite all partners of the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plate' to use the following narrative as a basis for all communication about the protein shift. We support our partners in applying the narrative in their own communications. .

⁶ An overview of all the partner of the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plate' (NL): <https://omgeving.vlaanderen.be/nl/ondertekenaars-van-de-green-deal-eiwitshift>

APPROACH

AN AGILE PROCESS

During this project, we worked according to the principles of the 'agile manifesto'. This manifesto was initially developed within a software context, but its principles have since proven their value in strategic and creative processes.

Underlying this approach are five principles:

- We set up a steering committee that goes through all the steps of the project.
- We divide the project into sprints, each with a clear process, timing, and objective.
- At the end of each sprint, we deliver a final product.
- Each final product answers a concrete question.
- After each sprint, we discuss the collaboration and adjust the next sprint where necessary.

8 SPRINTS

The narrative came about in eight sprints. Each sprint answers one or more concrete questions. The different sprints took place between 20 June 2022 and 24 January 2023.

- Sprint 1: Kick-off
 - We agree on cooperation and communication.
 - We divide roles and responsibilities.
- Sprint 2: Target groups and objectives
 - We define and prioritize our target groups.
 - We determine when we will be successful.
- Sprint 3: Research motivations and barriers
 - We identify the main motivations and barriers of our target groups using four surveys conducted by members of the steering committee:
 - The Listening Table (Department of Environment)⁷
 - CO-MEET (Ghent University)⁸
 - Consumer survey Food Triangle (Flemish Institute for Healthy Living)⁹
 - Knowledge, perception, and attitudes on environmentally responsible consumption (Department of the Environment)¹⁰

⁷ Deprez, S., Claeys, N. (2021). *Patroonanalyse Sensemaker Luisterende Tafel - Vlaams Onderzoek eetgewoonten en vleesconsumptie*. Voices That Count. (unpublished, NL)

⁸ Slabbinck, H., Coucke, N. (2022). *Consumptie opportuniteiten monitor voor de evaluatie van de eiwittransitie*. CO-MEET onderzoek naar eiwitconsumptie (NL)

⁹ Vyncke, F., Dheedene, J. (2021). *Aanbevelingen bij de voedingsdriehoek voor gezonde en milieuverantwoorde voeding*. Game Changers Ipsos (unpublished, NL)

¹⁰ Ipsos. (2012). *Milieuverantwoorde consumptie: Monitoring perceptie & maatschappelijk gedrag*. (NL) Vlaamse Overheid Afdeling Leefmilieu, Natuur en Energiebeleid.

- We conducted twelve in-depth interviews with signatories of the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plates'.¹¹
- We collect initiatives and best practices from home and abroad.
- Sprint 4: Building blocks
 - Based on the insights from the previous sprint, we determine the success factors of an effective narrative.
- Sprint 5: Feedback
 - We collect feedback from steering committee members and signatories of the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plate'.
- Sprint 6: Prototype 1.0 - Narrative
 - We convert the building blocks into the first prototype of a narrative.
- Sprint 7: Testing
 - We test the narrative among 25 citizens using five focus groups. When composing the focus groups, we take into account the principle of 'proportional universalism'.
 - We organize focus groups with young people, students, adults, pensioners, and people with a migration background.
 - We gauge understanding and readability and collect key reactions and concerns.¹²
- Sprint 8: Workshop signatories of the Green Deal Protein Shift on our plate
 - Using the world-café methodology, we engage with 30 signatories of the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plates' to find the most effective way to launch the new narrative.

¹¹Contact the authors of this paper for more information on the full research design.

¹²Contact the authors of this paper for more information on the full research design.

BUILDING BLOCKS

During an extensive research phase, we map out the main insights surrounding Flemish protein consumption. We look for the most recent nutritional evolutions and their possible explanations. We map out what the Flemish people know, think, feel, and eat. We examine what stops them from making the protein shift and where the largest opportunities lie. We use the most important insights to formulate building blocks (recommendations). We use these recommendations in the next phase to build a narrative.

UNCONSCIOUS BEHAVIOUR AT THE BASIS

It's kicking in an open door saying that changing behavior is hard. Especially when the desired behavioral change has to do with what is on our plates every day. People in Flanders love to eat. And animal proteins are still a major part of our meal. How can we change that?

One possible answer comes from the work of Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman. This psychologist showed in a series of studies that we are less rational than we think.¹³ The fast, intuitive, emotional part of our brain - which Kahneman calls 'system 1' - plays the leading role in a vast majority of our decisions. The rational, slow part of our brain - Kahneman's system 2 - we prefer not to use. And when we do use it, we often do so to 'post-rationalise' our intuitively made decisions. Conclusion: we often don't know why we do the things we do.

Kahneman's system 1/system 2 concept explains why mere information rarely leads to effective behavioral change. Anyone who wants to change behavior must understand how the system 1 part of our brain works. How our intuitive, emotional brain not only influences but also guides our decisions.

The good news is that we know more and more about how this 'fast system 1 brain' works. Recent research is giving us more and more insights into the thinking errors (biases) that sometimes cause smart people to do unwise things.¹⁴

Specifically, Kahneman's thinking helps us understand what stands in the way of a real protein shift. In the following chapters, we identify the main 'system 1 barriers' towards a protein shift. We then look for the most effective ways to 'nudge' our citizens in the right direction.

Recommendation: We build as a basis for the desired behavioral change an easy-to-understand and easy-to-remember 'system 1' narrative.

¹³ Kahneman, D. (2011). Thinking fast and slow. Penguin: Great Britain.

¹⁴ Ariely, D. (2008). Predictably irrational: The hidden forces that shape our decisions. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

This does not mean that we do not leave room for nuance and scientific substantiation. Those who wish to do so will find this substantiation in supporting documents. We offer this information in a second layer of communication. At the highest level, we keep our message on the level of 'system 1' and therefore simple.

NOT A WORD ON THE PROTEIN SHIFT

Interviews conducted by the Flemish Institute for Healthy Living show that Flemish people hardly know what exactly protein are, or in which food sources they can be found.¹⁵

In addition - according to a language platform¹⁶, developed by 'Gridline' and 'Klinkende taal' - the words 'proteins' and 'proteins' are not B1 words in Dutch. That means they are not easy words that everyone understands. In other words, they're not intuitive 'system 1' language.

The Flemish Institute for Healthy Living indicated during our in-depth interviews that citizens generally experience difficulty with nutrition recommendations that contain percentages of products or ingredients. Citizens find such recommendations less tangible, and not action-oriented.

Recommendation: In our narrative, we do not talk about protein, and by extension, we don't talk about the protein shift nor the 60%-40% target.

FIVE COGNITIVE BIASES AS A STARTING POINT

Cognitive biases are thinking errors that our 'system 1' brain makes. They unconsciously have a big impact on the decisions we make. Knowledge and insight into these key biases, enable us to better understand our target audience. And then to influence or 'nudge' them unconsciously - through a correct narrative.¹⁷

To build this narrative, we take the five most relevant biases as a starting point: the ingroup/outgroup bias, framing, social proof, loss aversion, and the choice paradox.

BIAS 1 – INGROUP/OUTGROUP

We usually divide the world into 'people like us', our ingroup, and 'the others'. We call the latter group our outgroup. When someone from our ingroup speaks, we listen and unconsciously look for arguments to agree with (confirmation bias). For a person from our outgroup, the opposite is true: we do not listen and are more likely to look for errors in her or his reasoning.¹⁸

¹⁵ PEUL-CHAIN Project (2022) - Consumentenonderzoek uitgevoerd door het Instituut voor Landbouw-, Visserij- en Voedingsonderzoek (ILVO) en het Vlaams Instituut Gezond Leven (unpublished, NL)

¹⁶ <https://www.ishetb1.nl/> (NL)

¹⁷ <https://thedecisionlab.com/biases>

¹⁸ Benson, B. (2016). *Cognitive bias cheat sheet. An organized list of cognitive biases because thinking is hard.* Medium. <https://betterhumans.pub/cognitive-bias-cheat-sheet-55a472476b18#f6daic2o3>

A narrative that works starts from the ingroup in which the largest possible group of Flemish people can identify. Based on their eating patterns, we can divide them into three groups¹⁹:

1. Omnivores (60%) - They mostly eat meals with animal proteins.
2. Flexitarians: (30%) - They (consciously) choose a meal without animal proteins once or several times a week.
3. Vegetarians and vegans (10%) - They consciously choose a diet without meat, fish, and/or animal proteins. Notable: Women and people younger than 35 are overrepresented in the groups that eat less or no animal products today.

The target group of vegetarians and vegans already eat enough plant proteins. So our narrative does not address them.

Recommendation: In our narrative, we focus exclusively on omnivores and flexitarians.

To make our narrative relevant to these target groups, it is important to know their views. What do they think about meat, cheese, and dairy products? Recent research gives us an answer.

- Meat eaters - in general - consider meat to be a tasty²⁰, necessary²¹, and healthy element in our food²². In addition, they associate meat-eating with toughness²³, masculinity²⁴, artisanship²⁵, coziness²⁶, indulgence²⁷, and even freedom²⁸. Messages and messengers that reject and/or deny these views evoke resistance from our target groups.

Recommendation: In the narrative, we do not fight the positive associations omnivores and flexitarians have with meat, fish, or dairy products.

How do we then start a conversation about limiting animal proteins? We find a solution in a view shared by most omnivores and flexitarians: too much is never good. This is especially true for meat, according to most Flemish people.

¹⁹Stevens, B. (2023). *Welk vlees hebben we in de kuip? Hoe kijken Belgen naar vlees en alternatieven?* (NL) Belgische Vereniging voor Onderzoek en Expertise voor Consumentenorganisaties. <https://economie.fgov.be/nl/publicaties/studie-welk-vlees-hebben-we-de>

²⁰GfK Belgium, iVOX. (2019). *Belg geniet van een stukje vlees van bij ons, en wisselt regelmatig af met gevogelte, vis of vegetarisch.* (NL) VLAM. <https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlam/sites/default/files/publications/2020-05/Thuisverbruik%20vlees%20Belgi%C3%AB%202019.pdf>

²¹The Smart Protein project. (2021). *What consumers want: A survey on European consumer attitudes towards plant-based foods.* European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. https://smartproteinproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/FINAL_Pan-EU-consumer-survey_Country-Specific-Insights.pdf

²²Fiddes, N. (1991). *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203168141>

²³de Bakker, E., Dagevos, H. (2010). *Vleesminnaars, vleesminderaars en vleesmijders : duurzame eiwitconsumptie in een carnivore eetcultuur.* (NL) LEI, onderdeel van Wageningen UR, Den Haag. <https://www.wur.nl/nl/Publicatie-details.htm?publicationId=publication-way-333933323534>

²⁴De Backer, C., Erreygers, S., De Cort, C., Vandermoere, F., Dhoest, A., Vrinten, J., & Van Bauwel, S. (2020). Meat and masculinities. Can differences in masculinity predict meat consumption, intentions to reduce meat and attitudes towards vegetarians?. *Appetite*, 147, 104559. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2019.104559>

²⁵de Bakker, E., Dagevos, H. (2010). *Vleesminnaars, vleesminderaars en vleesmijders : duurzame eiwitconsumptie in een carnivore eetcultuur.* (NL) LEI, onderdeel van Wageningen UR, Den Haag. <https://www.wur.nl/nl/Publicatie-details.htm?publicationId=publication-way-333933323534>

²⁶Slabbinck, H., Coucke, N. (2022). *Consumptie opportuniteiten monitor voor de evaluatie van de eiwittransitie.* CO-MEET onderzoek naar eiwitconsumptie. (unpublished, NL)

²⁷Bekaert, J., Niesten, E., Raymaekers, J., Segers, Y. (2003). *LEKKER DIER!? Ze zijn wat we eten.* (NL) Centrum voor Agrarische Geschiedenis, Leuven. <https://cagnet.be/page/lekker-dier-ze-zijn-wat-we-eten>

²⁸Block, T., De Roeck, F., Lugen, M. (2021). *Duurzaamheidscontroverses in België: een discoursanalyse.* (NL) Koning Boudewijnstichting. <https://kbs-frb.be/nl/discoursanalyse-duurzaamheidscontroverses>.

- 58% of consumers associate high meat consumption with serious health problems.²⁹ In particular, excessive red meat consumption is known by most Belgians as unhealthy.³⁰
- 89% of Belgians indicate that eating less or no meat has a major impact on the environment.³¹
- 93% of consumers know that current meat consumption and production involves animal suffering.³²

Recommendation: In our narrative, we confirm the 'gut feeling' prevalent among most omnivores and flexitarians: eating too much meat, fish or dairy is obviously not good. We use 'too much is never good' as a starting point for the desired behavioral change.

- 39% of Flemish people say they would like to eat less meat next year.³³

The research 'De Luisterende Tafel' delves deeper into the reasons behind the desired behavioral change.

- The motivations given by meat eaters for changing their diet are mainly health, environmental impact, and animal welfare (in that order).³⁴ Women and younger people are more sensitive to animal suffering than men and older people.³⁵
- But we also know these arguments are not the most important for consumers when buying food. In the shop, the main motivators are price, perception of taste, and freshness.³⁶

Recommendation: In our narrative, we highlight the three main arguments for limiting animal protein intake: health, environmental impact, and animal welfare.

During our focus groups, however, we detect resistance when using the word 'environmental impact'.

- Environmental impact evokes negative and erroneous associations such as activism and pollution.
- The word 'climate' evokes neutral/positive associations such as earth, CO₂, and future.

²⁹Szenderák, J., Fróna, D., & Rákos, M. (2022). Consumer Acceptance of Plant-Based Meat Substitutes: A Narrative Review. *Foods (Basel, Switzerland)*, 11(9), 1274. <https://doi.org/10.3390/foods11091274>

³⁰Vyncke, F., Dheedene, J. (2021). *Aanbevelingen bij de voedingsdriehoek voor gezonde en milieuverantwoorde voeding*. Game Changers Ipsos. (unpublished, NL)

³¹Deprez, S., Claeys, N. (2021). *Patroonanalyse Sensemaker Luisterende Tafel - Vlaams Onderzoek eetgewoonten en vleesconsumptie*. Voices That Count. (unpublished, NL)

³²Tijmstra, B. (2014). *De huidige vleesproductie en de daaraan verbonden problemen en alternatieven. Een onderzoek naar de perceptie van de consument ten opzichte van kweekvlees*. (NL) Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. https://frw.studenttheses.ub.rug.nl/836/1/Eindversie_bachelorthesis_-_S2_1.pdf

³³iVOX. (2022). *Veggie Barometer*. (NL) Eva VZW. <https://www.evavzw.be/nieuws/vleesconsumptie-belgi%C3%AB-blijft-verder-dalen#:~:text=Nog%2068%25%20van%20de%20Belgen,%25%20en%20in%202016%2013%20%25>.

³⁴Deprez, S., Claeys, N. (2021). *Patroonanalyse Sensemaker Luisterende Tafel - Vlaams Onderzoek eetgewoonten en vleesconsumptie*. Voices That Count. (unpublished, NL)

³⁵iVOX. (2022). *Veggie Barometer*. (NL) Eva VZW. <https://www.evavzw.be/nieuws/vleesconsumptie-belgi%C3%AB-blijft-verder-dalen#:~:text=Nog%2068%25%20van%20de%20Belgen,%25%20en%20in%202016%2013%20%25>.

³⁶Stevens, B. (2023). *Welk vlees hebben we in de kuip? Hoe kijken Belgen naar vlees en alternatieven?* (NL) Belgische Vereniging voor Onderzoek en Expertise voor Consumentenorganisaties. <https://economie.fgov.be/nl/publicaties/studie-welk-vlees-hebben-we-de>

Recommendation: In our narrative, we mainly focus on the health argument. We name the arguments that have a link to environmental impact and animal suffering as a whole under the umbrella of 'better for your environment and for the climate'.

Every word counts. And that brings us to the second bias.

BIAS 2 – FRAMING

*The way we phrase information influences our choices. Every word has a positive, neutral, or negative connotation. Unconsciously, this connotation guides our behavior.*³⁷

In our narrative, we choose words that evoke as few negative connotations, and thus resistance, as possible.

- International research shows that the words 'vegan' and 'vegan' generally evoke negative connotations.³⁸ A UK study found that 74% of UK newspaper articles that mentioned the word vegan described this diet as difficult or impossible to maintain. The articles associated vegan with words such as restrictive, hippy, and weak.³⁹
- A social media analysis, scanned 15.4 million posts on Twitter, Instagram, blogs, and forums from Britain and the United States that contained references to plant-based, vegan, and vegetarian food. People used the term "vegan" more than twice as often in a negative context as "plant-based".⁴⁰
- The word 'vegetarian' generally evokes less negative associations than 'vegan'. People associate a vegetarian diet with health, well-being and peace.⁴¹ Yet there are also a lot of doubts. For instance, consumers are concerned about the nutritional quality of a vegetarian diet.⁴² They associate vegetarian eating with a lack of protein and iron.⁴³ Vegetarian food is also often seen as bland, and not tasty or tasty enough.⁴⁴

³⁷Benson, B. (2016). *Cognitive bias cheat sheet. An organized list of cognitive biases because thinking is hard*. Medium. <https://betterhumans.pub/cognitive-bias-cheat-sheet-55a472476b18#.f6daic2o3>

³⁸Wise, J., Vennard, D. (2019). *It's All in a Name: How to Boost the Sales of Plant-Based Menu Items*. World Resources Institute. <https://www.wri.org/insights/its-all-name-how-boost-sales-plant-based-menu-items>

³⁹Cole, M., Morgan, K. (2011). Vegaphobia: derogatory discourses of veganism and the reproduction of speciesism in UK national newspapers. *The British journal of sociology*, 62(1), 134–153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01348.x>

⁴⁰ Wise, J., Vennard, D. (2019). *It's All in a Name: How to Boost the Sales of Plant-Based Menu Items*. World Resources Institute. <https://www.wri.org/insights/its-all-name-how-boost-sales-plant-based-menu-items>

⁴¹Corrin, T., Papadopoulos, A. (2017). Understanding the attitudes and perceptions of vegetarian and plant-based diets to shape future health promotion programs. *Appetite*, 109, 40–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2016.11.018>

⁴²Povey, R., Wellens, B., & Conner, M. (2001). Attitudes towards following meat, vegetarian and vegan diets: an examination of the role of ambivalence. *Appetite*, 37(1), 15–26. <https://doi.org/10.1006/appe.2001.0406>

⁴³Tonsor, G., Lusk, J., Schroeder, T., (2021). *Impacts of New Plant-Based Protein Alternatives on U.S. Beef Demand*. Cattlemen's Beef Promotion and Research Board (CBB). https://www.agmanager.info/sites/default/files/pdf/PlantBasedProteinAlternatives_FullReport.pdf

⁴⁴Lea, E. J., Crawford, D., Worsley, A. (2006). Consumers' readiness to eat a plant-based diet. *European journal of clinical nutrition*, 60(3), 342–351. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.ejcn.1602320>

- The words 'vegan' and 'vegetarian' evoke identity-related connotations. There are a lot of stereotypes about individuals who identify as vegan or vegetarian.⁴⁵ Their image is mainly associated with a healthy, thoughtful, animal-friendly but strict, moralizing attitude to life. People also associate vegans and vegetarians with 'strange habits'. There is a significant proportion of meat eaters in Belgium who find vegans strange or weird. However, this share has decreased compared to 2020.⁴⁶
- During our focus groups, people interpreted the word 'veggie' as an abbreviation for 'vegetarian'. The word was therefore associated with the same identity-related connotations. 'Veggie' was difficult to understand for people with a migration background, and by extension for those with a basic level of Dutch. In addition, there was confusion about whether a 'veggie meal' contains dairy products or not.

To sum up: the words 'vegan' or 'vegetarian' still have identity-related connotations in Flanders. They refer -unconsciously- to who someone is, not about what someone eats. For many omnivores and flexitarians, 'people who are vegan or vegetarian' are still in the outgroup.

Recommendation: We avoid the words vegan, vegetarian and veggie in our narrative.

But what do we do with the word flexitarian (flexitariër in Dutch)?

- There are different degrees of 'flexitarianism', resulting in different definitions circulating.⁴⁷
- There was also ambiguity about the term in our focus interviews. Some defined a flexitarian as a person who eats vegetarian almost every day, and meat or fish on exceptional occasions. Others defined a flexitarian as a person who eats vegetarian about two days a week.
- The majority of retired respondents and those with a migration background had never heard of the term 'flexitarian'.
- In addition, according to a language platform⁴⁸, developed by 'Gridline' and 'Klinkende taal' - 'flexitarian' is not a B1 word.

We do assume that the word 'flexitariër' has neutral and even positive connotations among a large part of the Flemish population. However, the word lacks derivatives that make it useful in non-identity-defining contexts (flexitarians, flexitarian, flexi...).

Recommendation: In our narrative, we do not use the words flexi, flexitarian, or flexitarian.

⁴⁵Naegels, T. (2022). De vrijheid van de hamburger. (NL) De Standaard. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220401_97764707

⁴⁶iVOX. (2022). *Veggie Barometer*. (NL) Eva VZW. <https://www.evavzw.be/nieuws/vleesconsumptie-belgi%C3%AB-blijft-verder-dalen#:~:text=Nog%2068%25%20van%20de%20Belgen,%25%20en%20in%202016%2013%20%25>.

⁴⁷Verain, M., Dagevos, H., Jaspers, P. (2020). Flexitarisme in 2011 vs 2019: duurzame identiteitszoekers. (NL) Wageningen University & Research. <https://www.voedingnu.nl/artikelen/flexitarisme-in-2011-vs-2019-duurzame-identiteitszoekers#:~:text=Pro%EF%AC%81elschets%20van%20een%20%EF%AC%82exitari%C3%ABr&text=In%20vergelijking%20met%20de%20vleeseters.die%20van%20de%20groep%20vleeseters>

⁴⁸ <https://www.ishetb1.nl/>. (NL) consulted on February 20th 2023.

So how do we best talk about an alternative to a diet with animal protein?

- US research on framing and product claims shows that the word 'plant-based' or 'plant-based' works better than the words 'vegetarian' or 'vegan'.⁴⁹
- During our focus interviews, the word 'plant-based' appears to be more approachable and less identity-related than the words veggie, vegetarian or vegan. The majority of respondents associate the term with 'a meal with vegetables'. Although it is also not a B1 word according to the language platform mentioned earlier, most respondents during the focus groups understand that a plant-based meal does not contain meat, fish, or dairy products.
- The word vegetable mainly evokes neutral or positive connotations such as; 'plants' and 'nice' during the focus groups.

Recommendation: In our narrative, we call a meal without animal protein a 'plant-based meal'.

Our language is constantly changing. It is therefore important to -via ongoing association research- keep a finger on the pulse.

BIAS 3 – SOCIAL PROOF

Social proof is the social and psychological phenomenon where people adopt the behavior of other persons in their ingroup. By copying the behavior of others, our brain conserves energy.⁵⁰

We can make convenient use of the social proof bias in our narrative. It suffices to make it clear to the ingroup of omnivores and flexitarians that a large group of 'people like them' are already taking steps towards a diet with more plant-based meals. This confirmation may help to win over any doubters. But what numbers or figures can we use for this purpose?

- Recent research shows that meat has a permanent place on the Belgian's plate, but that she or he is looking for variety more often and eating meat less frequently than a few years ago.⁵¹
- Today, 41% of Belgians are looking for meat alternatives.⁵²
- Today, half of Belgians (51%) no longer eat meat or fish every day.⁵³

⁴⁹Watson, E. (2018). 'Plant-based' plays way better than 'vegan' with most consumers. FoodNavigator USA. <https://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/Article/2018/04/19/Plant-based-plays-way-better-than-vegan-with-most-consumers-says-Mattson>

⁵⁰ Benson, B. (2016). *Cognitive bias cheat sheet. An organized list of cognitive biases because thinking is hard.* Medium. <https://betterhumans.pub/cognitive-bias-cheat-sheet-55a472476b18#f6daic2o3>

⁵¹GfK Belgium, iVox. (2022). *Vlees blijft vaste plek op het bord van de Belg behouden.* (NL) VLAM. <https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlam/press/vlees-blijft-vaste-plek-op-het-bord-van-de-belg-behouden>

⁵²Stevens, B. (2023). *Welk vlees hebben we in de kuip? Hoe kijken Belgen naar vlees en alternatieven?* (NL) Belgische Vereniging voor Onderzoek en Expertise voor Consumentenorganisaties. <https://economie.fgov.be/nl/publicaties/studie-welk-vlees-hebben-we-de>

⁵³Merk, Houben, Evers (2022). *Vleesvervangersmonitor België – 2 meting.* Markteffect, Imperial Meat. (unpublished, NL)

- 39% of Belgian omnivores and flexitarians say they would like to eat (even) less meat in the future.⁵⁴ These figures have never been higher.⁵⁵
- Belgians show a different willingness to reduce meat depending on the type of meat. About 25% want to reduce meat preparations and charcuterie. About 20% to 25% want to reduce red meat consumption. About 14% want to reduce poultry in the future.⁵⁶
- Women and young people are more likely to want to reduce their meat intake. For example, 26% of women say they want to consume less beef compared to 16% of men. Among minus-25-year-olds, 31% want to consume less beef compared to 23% among over-65s.⁵⁷

Recommendation: We make it clear in our narrative that an important (r)evolution has already taken place in Belgium today: half of Belgians no longer eat meat or fish every day.

It is important to make it clear that we are moving towards a diet with less animal protein, but not necessarily towards a world without meat, fish, or dairy products. That does not fit the objective of the Green Deal Protein Shift on our plate today and would meet resistance at this stage. The following bias explains why.

BIAS 4 – LOSS AVERSION

Losing something we have today hurts. That pain is greater than the anticipated pleasure we experience at the promise of getting something (much) better in its place in the future. This bias usually causes us to choose to keep what we have. Even if rationally that is not always the right choice.⁵⁸

The people in Flanders love meat and, by extension, animal proteins.

- The majority say they were brought up with a piece of meat. And that upbringing lives on in later eating habits.⁵⁹ In addition, 81% of Belgians believe that meat is part of the Belgian food culture.⁶⁰

⁵⁴iVOX. (2022). *Veggie Barometer*. (NL) Eva VZW. <https://www.evavzw.be/nieuws/vleesconsumptie-belgi%C3%AB-blijft-verder-dalen#:~:text=Nog%2068%25%20van%20de%20Belgen,%25%20en%20in%202016%2013%20%25>.

⁵⁵Dagevos, H., Verbeke, W. (2022). Meat consumption and flexitarianism in the Low Countries. *Meat Science*, 192, [108894]. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.meatsci.2022.108894>

⁵⁶Stevens, B. (2023). *Welk vlees hebben we in de kuip? Hoe kijken Belgen naar vlees en alternatieven?* (NL) Belgische Vereniging voor Onderzoek en Expertise voor Consumentenorganisaties. <https://economie.fgov.be/nl/publicaties/studie-welk-vlees-hebben-we-de>

⁵⁷Stevens, B. (2023). *Welk vlees hebben we in de kuip? Hoe kijken Belgen naar vlees en alternatieven?* (NL) Belgische Vereniging voor Onderzoek en Expertise voor Consumentenorganisaties. <https://economie.fgov.be/nl/publicaties/studie-welk-vlees-hebben-we-de>

⁵⁸Benson, B. (2016). *Cognitive bias cheat sheet. An organized list of cognitive biases because thinking is hard*. Medium. <https://betterhumans.pub/cognitive-bias-cheat-sheet-55a472476b18#.f6daic2o3>

⁵⁹Deprez, S., Claeys, N. (2021). *Patroonanalyse Sensemaker Luisterende Tafel - Vlaams Onderzoek eetgewoonten en vleesconsumptie*. Voices That Count. (unpublished, NL)

⁶⁰GfK Belgium & iVox. (2019). *Belg geniet van een stukje vlees van bij ons, en wisselt regelmatig af met gevogelte, vis of vegetarisch*. (NL) VLAM. <https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlam/sites/default/files/publications/2020-05/Thuisverbruik%20vlees%20Belgi%C3%AB%202019.pdf>

So for many people, eating meat is subconsciously linked to 'the good life'. Thinking about 'stopping eating meat' therefore means -unconsciously- also thinking about losing part of that 'good life'.

Recommendation: We make it clear in our narrative that animal proteins can be part of a healthy and environmentally responsible diet.

We are not asking to give up meat, fish, and dairy.

The fear of losing the taste and pleasure of meat, fish, and dairy products is reinforced by a lack of knowledge of alternatives. Most Flemish people also have only limited -and often negative- experience with these alternatives.

- Consumers experience 'food neophobia'⁶¹, a general reluctance towards new food sources. Plant-based alternatives, such as tofu and tempeh, remain 'new' foods for a large proportion of Flemish people. Food neophobia is a major barrier to change.
- The main concerns people in Flanders have about plant-based meals and alternatives are taste, nutritional value, and ease of use. For example, 39% doubt the taste of plant-based alternatives.⁶² There are also doubts about supply and accessibility of supply.
- Most Flemish people say they are concerned about the nutritional value of plant-based meat substitutes.⁶³
- Finally, Flemish people are not used to preparing plant-based products and alternatives. There is a lack of knowledge of preparation methods.⁶⁴

During our focus interviews, these barriers are often mentioned.

- Only half of our respondents can give concrete examples or recipes for plant-based meals. Concerns about taste, nutrition, and ease of use of plant-based alternatives also emerge.
- Respondents describe meat substitutes and alternatives to cheese as 'dry', 'tasteless', and 'difficult to cook with'.
- Finally, people expressed concern about the (high) price of plant-based meals.⁶⁵

Overcoming these prejudices and barriers requires a long-term strategy. A clear narrative forms a starting point.

⁶¹Szejda, K., Parry, J. (2020). Strategies to Accelerate Consumer Adoption of Plant-Based Meat. The Good Food Institute. <https://gfi.org/images/uploads/2020/03/FINAL-Consumer-Adoption-Strategic-Recommendations-Report.pdf>

⁶²The Smart Protein project. (2021). *What consumers want: A survey on European consumer attitudes towards plant-based foods*. European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. https://smartproteinproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/FINAL_Pan-EU-consumer-survey_Country-Specific-Insights.pdf

⁶³Profeta, A., Baune, MC., Smetana, S., Broucke, K., Royen, G., Weiss, J., Heinz, V., Terjung, N. (2021). Discrete Choice Analysis of Consumer Preferences for Meatybrids-Findings from Germany and Belgium. *Foods*. 10. <https://doi:10.3390/foods10010071>

⁶⁴Slabbinck, H. (2021). *Effectiveness of behavioral change techniques in retail. Screening of existing literature on how to achieve behavior shift (in retail) by (re)designing the food environment*. EIT Food. https://assets.rikolto.org/paragraph/attachments/eit_food-rikolto-ugent-effectiveness_of_behavioral_change_techniques_in_retail_0.pdf

⁶⁵Stevens, B. (2023). *Welk vlees hebben we in de kuip? Hoe kijken Belgen naar vlees en alternatieven?* (NL) Belgische Vereniging voor Onderzoek en Expertise voor Consumentenorganisaties. <https://economie.fgov.be/nl/publicaties/studie-welk-vlees-hebben-we-de>

Recommendation: In our narrative, we emphasize the positive evolution of taste and ease of preparation of plant-based meals.

Next, it is important that the partners of the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plates' develop and promote healthy, tasty, simple, and affordable plant-based products and recipes.

This brings us to the last question: what do we want the Flemish citizens to do concretely? How often should they choose a plant-based meal?

Too many conflicting standards and messages risk not changing anything about their diet. After all, too much choice causes us not to choose. This is what the following bias is about.

BIAS 5 – PARADOX OF CHOICE

*We love having choices. But just that choice keeps us from choosing. Too much choice paralyzes and makes us unhappy.*⁶⁶

When we present one simple, clear 'system 1 choice', we are most likely to achieve effective behavioral change.

The current Flemish dietary guidelines provide a good basis. Among others, the Flemish Institute for Healthy Living's nutrition triangle provides a direction. This model describes which products we should eat more or less. But even within the recommendations of the food triangle, different dietary patterns - and thus choices - are still possible.

- Most existing recommendations deal with exact grammages or proportions of ingredients/products.⁶⁷ They are not (yet) very tangible, and lack concrete goals or actions that are measurable and time-bound (in the short or long term).⁶⁸
- Thanks to these guidelines and recommendations, most Flemish people do know that eating too much meat is not good. But opinions differ on what is 'too much'.⁶⁹

Conclusion: a clear standard is lacking.

The 60%-40% standard underlying the 'Green Deal Protein Shift on our plates' is too complex for a broad target group.

⁶⁶ Benson, B. (2016). *Cognitive bias cheat sheet. An organized list of cognitive biases because thinking is hard.* Medium. <https://betterhumans.pub/cognitive-bias-cheat-sheet-55a472476b18#f6daic2o3>

⁶⁷ Vlaams Instituut Gezond Leven. *Vlees.* (NL) <https://www.gezondleven.be/themas/voeding/voedingsdriehoek/vlees>, geraadpleegd op 20 februari 2023.

⁶⁸ Vlaams Instituut Gezond Leven. *Gezonder eten? Werk Stapsgewijs en plan!* (NL) <https://www.gezondleven.be/themas/voeding/verander-je-eetgedrag/omgeving-en-gezond-eten/hoe-gezond-eten-als-mijn-sociale-omgeving-niet-meedoet/hoe-gezond-eten-pak-zelfregulatie-slimmer-aan>, geraadpleegd op 20 februari 2023.

⁶⁹ Vyncke, F., Dheedene, J. (2021). *Aanbevelingen bij de voedingsdriehoek voor gezonde en milieuverantwoorde voeding.* Game Changers Ipsos. (unpublished, NL)

Recommendation: we need a clear 'system 1 standard' for the protein shift in our narrative.

- The Greendish 2050 Guidelines describe guidelines for a sustainable, healthy, and tasty composition of a weekly menu.⁷⁰ This 'Menu of the Future' is based on the most recent, scientific insights from the EAT-Lancet report, the Disk of Five, and the expert panel from the Greendish Scientific Council.

From these guidelines, we conclude that an ideal, sustainable, and healthy weekly menu consists of about 50% plant-based meals and 50% meals with animal protein sources. For the first time, this 'norm' translates the Green Deal's objective into meal sizes. The Flemish Institute for Healthy Living confirms that this ratio is in line with the advice issued by the Belgian Superior Health Council (Hoge Gezondheidsraad).

- During discussions with our focus groups, we note that talking about percentages of foods creates confusion. People experience an 'eat 50% vegetable and 50% animal meals' guideline as unclear.

The recommendation becomes a lot clearer when we refer to 'several days a week' instead of 'meals' with no time frame.

- Changing the guideline to 'choose plant-based meals half the week' creates more room for nuance and empathy among our respondents.
- Respondents from the focus groups immediately apply the new guideline in their own lives. Some indicate that they find opting for a plant-based meal more feasible during weekdays. Others prefer a split between midday and evening meals. Still, others say they would like to alternate daily between animal and vegetable meals.

In language, we find that the Flemish word 'halfhalf' (in English this becomes fifty-fifty) is received more positively than the more sterile 50%-50%. During focus groups, we also experience that this word 'sticks'. Respondents immediately adopt 'halfhalf' in their language.

Recommendation: We choose a new guideline in our narrative: Try to go for 'halfhalf'. Choose a plant-based meal for half the week.

In the next chapter, we transform the above recommendations into a clear, 'system 1 narrative'. The purpose of this narrative is clear: we want to encourage the largest possible group of Flemish people to opt for a plant-based meal half the week.

⁷⁰De Greendish 2025 Guidelines. (2021). *Dé guide vol praktische handvatten voor het samenstellen van een duurzaam, gezond en bovenal lekker toekomstbestendig menu.* (NL) Greendish. <https://greendish.com/greendish-2050-guidelines/>

NARRATIVE

1. Almost all of us like a piece of meat, fish, cheese and a glass of milk.
2. But we all know that too much is never good.
3. Therefore, half of Belgians no longer eat meat or fish daily. And more and more Belgians say they would like to choose a meal without meat or fish more often.
4. That's smart thinking. Because a plant-based meal is not only better for your health. It is also better for your environment and for the climate. But how often should we choose a plant-based meal?
5. The new guideline is simple: try to go for fifty-fifty. Choose plant-based meals half of the week.
6. By the way, choosing plant-based is getting tastier and easier. You can start today by replacing one ingredient, product, or meal. Enjoy!

IN PRACTICE

The proposed narrative makes it easier to communicate clearly about the protein shift. The 'halfhalf' guideline makes the recommendations in the food triangle concrete, filling in a 'missing link'. Now it is up to the various players within the Flemish food chain to start working with the 'halfhalf' guideline and the narrative.

We deliberately kept the narrative and this document simple and accessible. The narrative is a starting point. With this document, we try to summarise the reasoning behind the narrative in a readable way. Upon simple request, the authors of this paper answer questions about this narrative and the choices made.

To support everyone in using the narrative, a handy one-pager has been prepared that gives the reason for the narrative, describes the narrative, and gives some tips. This one-pager is available in [Dutch](#), [French](#), and [English](#).

We make the 'halfhalf' guideline tangible on a well-organized website aimed at Flemish people. On this website, we answer the main questions on the application of the directive and share concrete tips.

In autumn 2023, a public campaign went on to raise awareness of the half-and-half guideline. This campaign was carried out by the Flemish Institute for Healthy Living in the framework of the Green Deal Protein Shift and with financial support from the Department of Health Care. On the campaign page www.halfhalf.be, inspiring videos, testimonials, infographics, and recipes can be found in addition to general explanations about half-and-half.

