

# ***The Conflict and Balance Between Modern Convenient Living and the Sustainability of the Food System***

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**Abstract.** Globalization and industrialization have reshaped modern society, making it heavily dependent on commercial food production and the convenience of global supply networks. However, the growing demand for convenience has also posed severe challenges to sustainability of the food system. This essay analyzes the contradiction between convenience and the sustainability of global food systems and explores how to strike a balance between daily convenience and ecological protection. Based on a critical review of existing literature, this article assesses the environmental burden, social resource waste, and health impacts brought about by convenience-oriented food consumption. The analysis suggests that these challenges arise not only from individual consumption choices, but also from industrialized food production systems and the organization of global supply chains. To address these challenges, consumers, enterprises, and governments must collaborate and seek a balance between the demand for convenient life and food sustainability, jointly promoting a healthier, fairer, and more sustainable global food system.

**Keywords:** Convenient lifestyle, Food system sustainability, Ecological environment, Public health, Collaborative governance

## **1. Introduction**

In the Anthropocene, human daily activities have become one of the core driving forces influencing global environmental changes [1]. As urbanization accelerates and the pace of modern life quickens, dietary priorities have shifted beyond basic nutritional sufficiency to prioritize convenience. Therefore, ready-to-eat food, pre-prepared dishes, and processed fast food have become indispensable parts of modern urban life. At the same time, the global food supply chain has facilitated long-distance transportation, large-scale industrial production, and widespread distribution, significantly reducing the time and economic costs associated with food consumption.

However, while consumers readily appreciate the time and cost efficiencies of convenience foods, they often overlook the ecological degradation, health risks, and social inequities embedded within industrial food systems. For instance, the rapid development of the food delivery industry has led to a large accumulation of disposable plastic packaging, causing damage to the urban ecological environment. Existing studies have explored the sustainability of the food system from perspectives such as climate change and industrial emissions, but the attention paid to the relationship between the daily convenient consumption habits of ordinary people and the systemic environmental

degradation is still relatively limited [2]. Further research is needed to understand how individual lifestyle choices are connected to industrialized food systems and globalized supply chains.

This essay addresses three questions: analyzing the specific types of conflicts, the factors causing conflicts, and how to strike a balance between convenient living and sustainable development. This study employs a critical literature review method for qualitative analysis, organizing and summarizing existing literature. By linking individual consumption behaviors with environmental and governance challenges, it provides a new perspective on sustainable development in the Anthropocene, revealing the ecological losses resulting from excessive pursuit of convenience, and offering ideas for building a healthy and sustainable food society.

## **2. Conflicts between modern convenient lifestyle and food system sustainability**

### **2.1. Ecological and environmental conflicts**

There is a clear contradiction between the demand for convenient food and the ecological sustainability of the contemporary food system. The popularity of takeout, pre-prepared food, and ready-to-eat food is highly dependent on industrialized farming, intensive animal husbandry, and global long-distance transportation. These production processes require a large amount of water resources and soil resources. Moreover, excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides can lead to soil degradation, water eutrophication, and a continuous decline in biodiversity [3]. The widespread use of packaging in convenience-oriented food consumption also generates a large amount of non-recyclable plastic waste. The convenience-oriented food culture also encourages consumers to over-purchase and waste food, leading to large amounts of food waste. The waste further increases greenhouse gas emissions during the disposal process. From a macro perspective, the global food supply chain also relies on long-distance transportation and cold chain logistics, and these processes require a large amount of fossil fuel-driven energy, leading to significant carbon emissions and further exacerbating global climate change and ecological pressure [4].

### **2.2. Social health and equity conflicts**

Beyond environmental degradation, the modern convenient lifestyle also exacerbates public health risks and deepens social inequities. Most convenient foods on the market usually contain high levels of fats, salt, and sugar. Long-term consumption of such foods will increase the incidence of chronic diseases such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes, and place a greater burden on the public healthcare system [5]. From the perspective of one health, the industrialized food chain may also increase the risk of disease transmission between humans, animals, and the environment. The expansion of high-density livestock farming and food production chains speeds up the spread of viruses, posing a threat to public health and ecological stability [6]. Social inequality issues are also very obvious. High-quality and healthy convenient foods are mainly concentrated in cities, while rural areas and low-income groups have difficulty accessing safe and nutritious dietary resources. Similar phenomena also exist on a global scale. In the global food supply chain, underdeveloped countries undertake the production of high-pollution raw materials, while developed countries monopolize the high-profit processing and sales, resulting in a serious imbalance in environmental burdens and benefit distribution among regions [7]. A clear example is the global cocoa industry, where producers in West African nations, such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, bear the ecological toll of deforestation, yet the economic value is captured primarily by processors and retailers in the

Global North. This environmental burden and economic imbalance reflect social inequality within the contemporary food system.

### **3. Causes of conflicts between convenience and food system sustainability**

#### **3.1. Driving force of consumer culture and lifestyle change**

The changes in social lifestyles and mainstream consumer culture are the internal driving forces that trigger conflicts. With the acceleration of urbanization, time has become a more important factor in people's food choices. Traditional home cooking requires a significant amount of time for shopping, cooking, and cleaning. However, takeout and fast food precisely fit the modern fast-paced lifestyle, minimizing temporal costs and reducing domestic burdens. Commercial marketing further shapes a value system centered on convenience. After the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-prepared food products launched by enterprises such as Freshippo and Dingdang Maicai in the Chinese market became representatives. Merchants attract consumers with marketing slogans like "15 minutes to have a big meal" and "No cooking skills required, easy cooking," further strengthening the concept of prioritizing convenience in food choices. Most consumers only focus on personal time and economic expenditure but lack awareness of the long-term ecological and social costs behind food selection. Without personal awareness of sustainable consumption, they can hardly form a force to support an environmentally friendly food system.

#### **3.2. Driving force of industrialization and globalization**

Industrialization and globalization have further exacerbated the contradiction between convenience and sustainability. Industrialized food production mainly focuses on maximizing profits. Through large-scale, standardized production, costs are reduced and the market is expanded. However, ecological protection and public health are often placed after economic interests [8]. Globalization further reinforces this trend. Multinational food enterprises establish global production, processing, and sales networks to achieve the lowest production costs and highest profits. At the same time, the geographical separation between food production and consumption locations makes it difficult for consumers to directly perceive the environmental consequences of their consumption behavior, thereby weakening environmental responsibility awareness. In addition, loose international environmental regulation and inconsistent industry standards in different countries lead to institutional differences, allowing some enterprises in the convenience food industry to maintain resource-intensive and high-emission production models without adequate constraints [9]. Therefore, the continuous pursuit of convenience poses significant challenges to the sustainable development of the food system.

### **4. Paths to balance convenient lifestyle and sustainable development**

#### **4.1. Collaborative governance of individuals, corporations and governments**

To achieve a balance between the convenience of life and the sustainability of the food system, it is necessary for individuals, enterprises and the government to collaborate. Since these contradictions have multiple causes, solutions should not be limited to individual dietary choices alone, but should also focus on the social, economic, and environmental structures that shape food consumption patterns. At the individual level, consumers can promote sustainable development by adopting more responsible consumption behaviors. This does not mean giving up convenient foods entirely. Rather,

it means enjoying convenience while reducing reliance on high-carbon, over-packaged products and making more environmentally friendly choices. For example, choosing businesses with eco-friendly packaging, avoiding unnecessary food purchases, and reducing household food waste all help to reduce environmental impact. Additionally, participating in community environmental protection activities and sustainable development promotion projects also helps to raise public awareness of the environmental consequences of daily food consumption.

Enterprises also play a significant role in promoting sustainability of the food system. Food production and catering enterprises can reduce environmental impact by using biodegradable packaging materials, reducing plastic pollution at the source, and improving production, storage and transportation processes. Moreover, enterprises can guide healthier consumption patterns by developing convenient foods with low sugar, low salt, low fat and balanced nutrition. Reducing food waste is also very important. For example, the 'Too Good To Go' software allows restaurants and supermarkets to sell surplus food at discounted prices, thereby extending the food utilization cycle and reducing unnecessary waste.

Government intervention is crucial for creating the institutional environment that a sustainable food system needs. The government can limit the excessive use of disposable plastic products through regulatory measures and strengthen environmental standards for food production and catering industries. At the same time, the government can support the development of biodegradable materials and green agricultural technologies through financial subsidies, tax incentives and research funding. Additionally, continuous public education and publicity campaigns can help raise residents' awareness of sustainable food consumption and promote behavioral changes that are beneficial to environmental protection and the long-term resilience of the food system.

#### **4.2. Building a sustainable and convenient integrated food system**

In the long run, reconfiguring the integrated food system is the fundamental path that balances convenience and sustainability. Developing regional local food supply networks, shortening long-distance logistics chains, and promoting local fresh ingredients and ready-to-eat dishes not only meet the people's demand for convenient food but also significantly reduce carbon emissions from cross-regional long-distance transportation. In recent years, London has promoted the 'farm-to-fork' model. Many farms directly supply their products to consumers through community-supported agriculture (CSA) and food delivery boxes (veg box schemes), cutting out intermediate transportation and storage. It is necessary to integrate green agriculture, intelligent processing, and low-carbon cold chain logistics, and to create a closed-loop food system that combines production, consumption, recycling, and reuse.

At the international level, it is necessary to strengthen global food environment governance cooperation. All countries should collaborate to formulate unified industry environmental protection standards, balance the distribution of interests and environmental responsibility allocation in the global industrial chain, and prevent high-pollution links from being transferred to less developed regions. The "EU Deforestation Regulation" requires that imported goods such as palm oil, coffee and cocoa must be traceable and must not come from recently deforested areas, which helps prevent the environmental burden from being shifted to developing countries and encourages more sustainable production methods. In the future, a more inclusive and collaborative global food governance system needs to be established to address regional development imbalances, promote public health, and strengthen environmental protection. These efforts help to ensure that the food system can operate sustainably in the long term while meeting social convenience needs [1, 10].

## 5. Conclusion

This article explores the contradictory relationship between modern convenient lifestyles and the sustainability of the global food system. The research indicates that the excessive pursuit of food convenience has led to environmental issues such as resource consumption, plastic pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as public health risks and social inequality. These contradictions stem not only from changes in consumption culture and lifestyle but also from the profit-oriented organizational model of industrialized and globalized food systems.

The research shows that convenience and sustainability are not inherently opposed; rather, the problems discussed in this article mainly arise from unsustainable production and consumption patterns. To achieve a balance between them, consumers, enterprises, and governments need to cooperate, adopt sustainable food consumption and management methods to mitigate adverse impacts.

This study is based solely on literature review and theoretical analysis and therefore has certain limitations. In the future, combining questionnaire surveys and case studies, further exploration of consumers' actual consumption attitudes and the implementation effects of the green transformation of the food industry can be conducted. This will help to more comprehensively understand how to coordinate the relationship between convenience and sustainable development in the contemporary food system.

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