WORLD OBESITY   **sciensano**   **epha** european public health alliance   **iPES FOOD** INTERNATIONAL PANEL OF EXPERTS ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

REINVENTING THE FOOD SYSTEM

A new policy agenda to tackle the global syndemic of obesity, undernutrition and climate change

A reflection of the discussions

In April 2019, over 50 experts came together in Brussels for a symposium titled "Reinventing the food system: A new policy agenda to tackle the global syndemic of obesity, undernutrition and climate change."

The event was focused around 4 panels:

1. The food system: Complex competing policy agendas
2. Cutting through complexity: Obesity, undernutrition and climate change as interconnected challenges requiring integrated solutions
3. Formulating coherent policy response: Examples of progress and trade-offs
4. Reinventing policies for co-beneifts: How to reduce trade-offs and increase synergies for a new food policy agenda?

This report provides a reflection of the discussions that emerged from the meeting about the challenges and opportunities for improving food policy so as to reduce obesity, undernutrition and climate change.

None of the statements or opinions in this report can be attributed to any speaker or participant.

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A food systems agenda can help address existential health and environmental threats

Globally, we are experiencing health and environmental crises, with rising rates of obesity and non-communicable diseases and severe challenges posed by climate change. Food is a fundamental part of society, however it is also at the centre of many challenges we face now, and will likely face in the future from a health, social, economic and environmental perspective. Today, we are faced with multiple challenges including simultaneous challenge of over- and under-availability of food, high availability of ultra-processed food, extensive food marketing, concerns of sustainability, and food systems which are causing the breakdown of our climate and planet. Given the threats we are faced with, urgent radical change is required. The realisation is gaining ground that there is a need to develop more integrated approaches to ensure coherence, avoid conflicting policies, and exploit synergies. The food systems agenda provides an opportunity to help address existential risks, and could assist in alleviating social inequalities. The issue of food systems is not an academic exercise; it is the reality of what we live in.

Momentum for transforming food systems is demonstrated by the recent launch of a number of key reports including that of the Lancet Commission on the Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition and Climate Change – the starting point of this conference,[1] the EAT-Lancet Commission,[2] the European Commission reflection paper "Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030",[3] the IPES-Food report "Towards a common food policy for the EU",[4] as well as the food systems conference hosted by the Austrian Presidency at the end of 2018.[5]

The challenge is to put big ideas into realistic, yet ambitious policy processes

The Lancet Commission on Obesity makes a series of recommendations, including to:

- Reduce poverty and inequities;
- Implement a rights-based agenda, to ensure the right to well-being underpins all policies;
- Reduce harmful subsidies and reorient funding towards sustainable agriculture and green energy;
- Reduce the influence of commercial vested interests in policy development;
- Re-orient business models for people and planet, as well as profits, including by internalising externalities into product costs;
- Provide clear information on health and environmental effects of products;
- Accelerate action on the Sustainable Development Goals and create accountability systems;
- Invest in infrastructure for public transport and active transport;
- Establish an international Framework Convention on Food Systems as the legal scaffolding for healthy, equitable, environmentally sustainable, and economically prosperous food systems.

To advance such complex and wide-ranging agenda, a silo-thinking approach will not deliver: attention needs to focus on common causes and solutions, and promote cross-sectoral work.

This includes shifting the narrative on obesity and diet, away from blaming individual choices and behaviours, to a focus on the structural determinants of health and sustainability, such as the underlying commercial, environmental, economic, social and cultural drivers. Not only does the prevailing individualistic narrative shift attention away from the government policies needed for change, it also creates a stigma around those living with obesity. One part of this shift is the recognition that obesity is a complex and multi-factorial disease, and as such individuals should not be blamed.

Progress around the world is limited by patchy policy implementation which is the result of policy inertia: a combination of opposition, lack of demand and government reluctance to regulate. The number of issues that have to be addressed can leave policy makers' feeling overwhelmed and unsure how to prioritise policies. However, the close interrelationships between the issues and policies outlined in this document present an opportunity to address issues simultaneously, thereby reducing costs, resources and time and allowing quick gains. For instance, existing recommendations for nutrition and physical activity policies have the potential to double up as climate change actions, thus offering double or triple wins. Emphasising these double and triple win policies can help mitigate some of policy makers fears, and help them prioritise actions.

Four pillars for an integrated food policy?

The agricultural system of the Netherlands is renowned globally due to its efficient food production and affordability.[6] One of the factors that led to the successful implementation of these policies was the role Government played in the development of these policies, with a focus on increasing agricultural productivity, impacting both exportation and consumption. However, given the changes in global trends and diets, there has been a significant shift in supply and consumption patterns.

Consequently, the Dutch government shifted focus on developing broader and more comprehensive food policies. This requires expanding policies in two dimensions. First, there is a need to address policy goals to focus on both health and sustainability challenges. Second, there is a need to increase the range and number of players involved in food policy. Experience from the Netherlands points to the importance of four pillars when building an integrated policy:

1. Shared frame: The policy should be framed in a way that enables quick and broad support from a range of stakeholders to carry the initiative;
2. Multiple institutions: The policy should ensure adequate and effective governance structures, including interdepartmental coordination;
3. Policy goals: The policy shuold have multiple goals, including enviornmental, health and economic resilience. While establishing broad goals facilitates the reconciliation between different actors, specific goals which are easier to measure, implement, monitor and evaluate will also be required;
4. Policy instruments: The policy needs to identify a policy mix including voluntary and regulatory instruments.

No need to wait for governments to take the first step: cities are inspiring food policies

A series of policies introduced at the local level in Ghent highlights that cities can impact systems. Ghent is spearheading a holistic approach to food through a series of key instruments and activities, including:

- The implementation of a Food Policy Council gathering a wide range of interests;
- The launch of a cooperative logistics system to scale up local food chains;
- The establishment of a food waste platform focused on redistributing food and reaching people in poverty;
- Investments in schools, food procurement and education.

As a consequence of this set of diverse actions, the city has been able to nudge and influence people's actions towards healthier and more sustainable behaviours, while adding social value and increasing cohesion.

Implemented ahead of national legislation, the city is 'learning by doing'. Co-creation is therefore a central concept: all stakeholders who will be implicated in implementing the food policy will be involved. There is no need to wait for national governments to take the first step: cities are at the forefront of sustainable food policies and the interest among cities for such initiatives is growing.

Europe is lagging behind on health policy-making: concentrated power is a barrier to change

Today, Europe is lagging behind in terms of health policy. The policy framework remains very entrenched in, and created by, lots of commercial vested interests. The World Health Organization's 'Best Buys',[7] for example, offer a number of innovative interventions, but these are implemented much faster in other places than Europe. In regions such as South America, East Africa and the Caribbean, large civil society movements are leading the way. This is cause for hope.

To help make the paradigmatic shifts needed for climate mitigation and dietary diversity, and to rectify the underinvestment in ecological food production, amongst other factors, we need to take a political economy approach and understand where power is concentrated and why this presents challenges for moving towards more sustainable systems. It is urgent that we shift and navigate the power concentration: we need to focus on holding companies to account for their policies and actions, and hold governments to account for their duties to protect and promote public interests.

The 'feed the world' narrative is dying: long live sustainable diets, agro-ecological farming and safe operating spaces

Today, the 'feed the world narrative' is dying, and the focus is shifting onto the unsustainability of our current food system and towards the need to achieve future food and nutrition security. A new paradigm is needed to look at nutrition, climate and the environment. The concept of a 'safe operating space' of a food system could be such a potent new model. It is about working together, setting boundary conditions and finding consensus about shared goals and actions which will have minimal push-back. When firm principles are set, it will make it easier to put forward actions and identify transgressors.

Sustainable diets should be a strategic policy objective of governments. To reduce food emissions by 40-70%, there needs to be a reduction in livestock production and consumption. However, many farmers heavily invested in equipment to sustain production levels ('stranded assets') and are therefore highly resistant to change. To allow system transformation, farmers should be supported to diversify. Consequently, the EU's agricultural policy (CAP) needs to serve as a transition policy enabling producers to embrace change.

While our agricultural systems have become heavily mechanised and industrialised, more diverse farming – when implemented correctly – can be economically better as it increases the independence from external outputs. There needs to be a shift towards diversified agro-ecological farming systems – this is a paradigmatic triple duty action. At present, there has been an under-investment in ecological food production, and this has to change. We therefore need to push for a shift from agricultural to food policy, simultaneously broadening the scope of goals and players involved.

The involvement of the private sector is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, some companies, including smaller start-ups, are looking to innovate, and can embrace pro-health and ecological business models. However, corporations are also the defenders of the status quo and often resistant to change. Consumers are demanding healthy and sustainable food, but the current parameters are set by market forces. Policy makers should set the rules of the game, while companies need to become more transparent and pledge to make specific, measurable, smart commitments.

Food systems need a "blue planet" moment to unleash the untapped appetite for change

There is an untapped appetite for change. Younger generations are waking up to the need for action as shown through their mobilisation with youth climate protests, and some part of the private sector are looking to innovate. We may be at the tipping point for mobilisation and involvement, allowing for the emergence of unconventional alliances. However, politicians are resistant to take bold action unless they feel the population is behind them.

Food systems need to get a "blue planet" moment: a surge in people's awareness about what is happening and what the consequences will be if no urgent action is taken to

transform food systems. The complexity of the food system requires greater transparency to allow a better understanding of sustainability, and in particular in relation to social equity. Governments need to help catalyse the alignment of ideas and consensus development. While it is a collective effort, will the great transformation moment come when policy-makers realise their function is to lead the way towards a sustainable future, and they feel supported in doing so?

1. Swinburn et al. (2019) The Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change: The Lancet Commission report. The Lancet.
2. Willett et al. (2019) Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. The Lancet.
3. European Commission (2019) Reflection paper: Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030.
4. IPES Food (2019) Towards a Common Food Policy for the EU.
5. Austrian Presidency of the EU (2018) Conference: "People's food - people's health: Towards healthy and sustainable European Food Systems."
6. De Vries et al. (2014) Towards a Food Policy. WRR.
7. WHO (2017) "Best buys" and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases.

Useful links

To learn more about the event and view the list of speakers, click here
You can access the Lancet Commission page here