

The diet of the future

The challenge of creating a healthy and sustainable diet

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Ethos Public Policy Lab transforms research and experiences into clear and concrete public policy recommendations that address the most pressing problems and challenges facing development and progress in Mexico and Latin America. From innovative economies to sustainable food systems and transparent institutions, we encourage positive change to further economic, social, and political development.

There is no viable future for the planet if humanity does not successfully shift toward a diet that is both healthy and sustainable. We've been focused on the first objective for decades, so we're probably pretty close to achieving this goal, right? Wrong. The "triple burden" of malnutrition is global, and it's getting worse: More than 820 million people experience hunger.¹ More than a quarter of the global population lacks the necessary nutrients in their diet.² Across all continents, food insecurity is more prevalent among women than among men. One out of every five school-age children and almost two out of every five adults are overweight or obese, and obesity currently causes more than 4 million deaths worldwide.

Now what if we add the additional challenge of making our diets not only healthy, but sustainable? The complexity of the potential solutions increases exponentially. Policymakers, politicians, legislators and experts around the world are struggling to address these issues. If humanity has been unable to improve the indicators associated with global hunger and nutrition, how are we going to reduce the almost 37% of greenhouse gases that are produced by the food systems that support our diets?³ How can we shift away from the current focus on monocultures, one of the

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primary causes of reduced biodiversity and the increased extinction of species?⁴ How can we ensure that our agricultural practices do not have devastating impacts on soil and water,⁵ as current practices have caused decreased productivity across almost a quarter of all land area, use 70% of freshwater resources, and are major contributors to water pollution?⁶

Although we're decades behind where we should be, the last few years have seen the emergence of concrete proposals to support the shift towards the sustainable and healthy diets that humanity so desperately needs. The "planetary health diet" proposed by the EAT-Lancet Commission⁷ last year grabbed headlines around the world.⁸ Much of this media attention was due to the commission's recommendations regarding the consumption of no more than 98 grams of red meat per week, a significant reduction for North American consumers, whose current dietary patterns include almost 300% more red meat than the recommended intake. However, the response to and coverage of the publication helped position the importance of diet within public opinion.

Last year the FAO also proposed nutritional guidelines in its publication Sustainable and Healthy Diets: Guiding Principles. In addition to being healthy and sustainable, the diets proposed in this document are socially and culturally acceptable and economically accessible. A handful of countries, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark, have joined the cause, publishing their own nutrition and sustainability guidelines.

These efforts all represent important progress, but are they too little too late? Identifying and supporting a diet that

complies with the many nutritional and environmental variables and that is also affordable, safe for consumers, fair for workers and socially and culturally acceptable is something entirely new for policy-makers.

Although the slow response is partially due to the complexity of the issue, it is also rooted in a structural flaw in existing academic approaches and professional development: the lack of a systemic understanding of food systems. Nutrition, agriculture and the environment have traditionally been separated and treated as isolated disciplines, with specialists that focus on a deep understanding of their particular vertical, rather than the various horizontal, interconnections that exist among them. This is also reflected in the organization of national, state and local governments, where siloed ministries and agencies focus on public health, agricultural development and the environment, respectively, without any coordination or cooperation across these three focuses.

Today's reality is also the result of the extreme simplification of the issue of food and nutrition that occurred following World War II, which led to a global focus on a single indicator: the number of people that are hungry, measured using caloric intake.⁹ This produced an extreme increase in intensive agriculture focused purely on yield. Although this system successfully increased yields, it also contributed to global warming, destroyed soil and contaminated water sources with agrochemicals, drastically depleted biodiversity and, ultimately, provided empty calories to feed an ever-increasing population, but did not provide the key nutrients necessary for a balanced diet.

If we're lucky, a new generation of academics, scientists and policymakers that have a systemic vision of food systems will take on these challenges, although this will be dependent on the allocation of additional public funds to universities and research centers.

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However, the health and well-being of the planet (and of humanity) can't wait that long. In the short term, it is urgently necessary to adapt our governments to reflect a systemic, overarching vision of food systems. This includes national, state and local food councils that include representatives from all government agencies involved in issues of food and nutrition, as well as representatives from civil society, academia, individual experts and more. It is also necessary to implement concrete reforms to the policy decision-making process. In the best case scenario, this would

take the form of dedicated food system ministries; in the worst case, inter-ministry commissions that are empowered with decision-making and execution capacities.

The urgent need for systemic action is clear, reflected in the increasingly alarming reports regarding the future of the planet and the destruction of ecosystems¹⁰, agriculture and biodiversity¹¹ and food and nutrition.¹² Although wealthy countries are unlikely to significantly adjust their diets, to the detriment of both people and planet, immediate steps must also be taken to influence food transitions around the world in order to ensure that low- and middle-income countries do not adopt the harmful diets of wealthy countries, which are high in calories, fats, sugars and animal products.

Urgent action must also be taken in an effort to make the most of a window of opportunity that has emerged: the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs present a systemic vision through the indicators associated with hunger, nutrition, agricultural development, biodiversity, the environment and resource sustainability. The agenda also incorporates significant global cooperation mechanisms and clear goals and has an unprecedented level of convening power among governments, civil society, academia, individual experts and the private sector.

And perhaps that last point, that convening power, is also the primary weakness of the SDGs: Who, exactly, has a seat at the table? Ideally, everyone's voice would be heard. It is impossible to create scalable solutions without including the enormous companies responsible for creating the food products that are available

to the general public. But how can these actors be involved in the process without creating conflicts of interest?

Most of the solutions that support a shift towards healthy and sustainable diets stand in direct opposition to the financial interests of multinational companies that offer ultra-processed food, fertilizers, food processing services, etc. Supporting the diet of the future must include the implementation of public policies and regulations that drastically change food incentives, as well as what food is available, how it is produced and how it is made.

»The diet of the future is both healthy and sustainable.«

These measures include national guides for healthy and sustainable diets, taxes on ultra-processed foods that are then used to subsidize healthy products, clear and obvious health warnings on ultra-processed foods, regulations to encourage exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a child's life and mixed breastfeeding up to and beyond two years of age, regulation of agrochemical residue limits on foodstuffs, restrictions that ensure that only healthy and sustainable foods are available at schools and hospitals, significant disincentives to decrease red meat consumption and many more.

Efforts to implement these types of measures have already faced fierce oppo-

sition from industry around the world. An example can be seen in the recent efforts to implement measures that require clear warning labels on ultra-processed foods in Chile,¹³ Peru, Uruguay and Mexico as part of efforts to respond to the public health crisis of obesity and other food-related illnesses. In Mexico, supporters of taxes on sugary drinks and junk food even had to deal with government surveillance.¹⁴

The need for multiple solutions across various fronts is clear. Novel and innovative food solutions, such as the use of insects, algae and lab-grown meat, have the potential to offer nutritional and environmentally sustainable alternatives.¹⁵ It is important to rapidly deepen research and compare these new alternatives to existing vegetable and animal products, particularly in terms of quantifying nutrients, impact on ecosystems and the environment and ways to successfully achieve the acceptance of these alternatives based on the preferences, traditions and customs of each culture.

Many people have already heard of the Mediterranean diet,¹⁶ whose foundation is built on fruits, vegetables, herbs, nuts and whole grains, which are complemented by generous quantities of olive oil and fish, moderate amounts of dairy, chicken and eggs and limited amounts of red meat. There's also the new Nordic diet¹⁷ and the Mexican milpa diet.¹⁸ Based on local sustainable production, cultural preferences and traditional knowledge accumulated over the course of hundreds of years, each of these diets offers adequate alternatives within certain geographies. These regional diets have also attracted significant media attention, and this momentum should be used to implement clear public policies in

support of these diets, including sustainable and healthy dietary guides that incorporate clear metrics regarding nutrition and environmental impact.

This public attention must also be channeled to support other policies with both short- and long-term results, including awareness campaigns, the urban food agenda and food access, the drastic reduction of food waste and more.

The diet of the future is both healthy and sustainable. But it must also support successfully achieving the objectives of

all the Sustainable Development Goals, including through the implementation of regulations and new and adjusted incentives. Although these changes might have a negative impact on many industries, they represent a net positive for humanity and for the planet. In order to reach this objective, it is absolutely crucial for governments to be free from conflict of interest. Although all stakeholders should have a voice, governments must prioritize the well-being of their citizens over any and all commercial interests.

Putting climate and environmental protection at the heart of European policy

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The Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) is responsible for a range of government policies that are reflected in the name of the ministry itself. The ministry has been working over 30 years now to protect the public from environmental toxins and radiation and to establish an intelligent and efficient use of raw materials, to advance climate action and to promote a use of natural resources that conserves biodiversity and secures habitats.

The 20s are a crucial juncture for global climate protection. In this decade, we must set the course for climate neutrality. Germany and the European Union have decided to become climate neutral by the year 2050. The German government has taken important steps in this direction with its Climate Protection Programme 2030 and its plan to phase out coal. The international community will make a pledge at the next UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November: in compliance with the Paris Agreement, all states must by then present improved national climate protection targets. More than 100 states have already announced concrete plans to do so.

The EU, too, will play its part. With the "European Green Deal", the new Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has presented a proposal to once again make Europe a role model for global climate protection.

The European Green Deal is a smart, resolute, comprehensive concept. The Commission has outlined a roadmap to guide all areas socially and ecologically: