

HUNGRY FOR HEALTHIER FOOD SYSTEMS

People need nutritious, affordable and sustainable diets. Transformed global food systems could deliver this for the people and the planet.

As our world lurches toward a population of nearly 10 billion by 2050, the current threat to food security is not necessarily quantity but quality. Three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet.

High food prices and low incomes have resulted in 40% of the global population surviving on unhealthy diets, leaving them vulnerable not only to malnutrition but also to diabetes, anaemia and other diet-related disease, suggests a 2020 report by Tufts University. The report showed that for people on low or uncertain incomes, many healthy foods including fruits and vegetables, nuts, dairy products and fish are consistently more expensive than starchy staples, oil, and sugar: people in poverty are forced to eat less expensive items, or go hungry. Poor or unhealthy diets are deadly — even worse than smoking tobacco.

Increasing global awareness of this problem is producing a range of possible solutions under the umbrella term of ‘food systems transformation’ that proposes radically new food systems that are sustainable, resilient and inclusive.

“Transforming the food system to provide for better diets requires

actions from many actors across the food chain, including producers, transporters, processors, retailers and also consumers,” says Saskia de Pee, a scientist in the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) Nutrition Division. “Today’s diets are not providing for good health, neither of people nor of the planet. This is related to an imbalance of production, which has placed an emphasis on providing enough food, especially in terms of caloric sufficiency, and at a low price, and not enough on dietary diversity and sustainability of production. The cost of even the lowest-cost healthy diet is unaffordable for at least three billion people.”

Health and environmental impacts of diet are often linked, but this view is “unnecessarily narrow” and requires “much deeper understanding of the drivers of food choices in all contexts around the world,” argues Eileen Kennedy in a 2021 paper in *Current Developments in Nutrition*. The United Nations is focusing on the problem through its Sustainable Development Goals, which include tackling climate change and food security alongside other economic and societal outcomes.

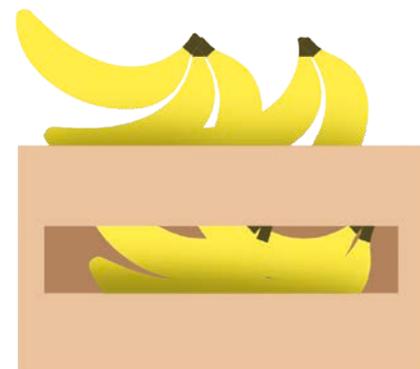
Pre-summit calls for a revamp

In the run-up to a Food Systems Summit in New York in September 2021, more than 25,000 delegates gathered virtually and in-person in Rome in July to discuss how national food systems should change.

“Despite a 300% increase in global food production since the mid-1960s, malnutrition is a leading factor contributing to reduced life expectancy,” UN Secretary General António Guterres said ahead of the Pre-Summit gathering, noting 720–811 million people faced hunger in 2020. “Climate change is both a driver and a consequence of hunger. Our war with nature includes a food system that generates one third of all greenhouse gas emissions. The same food system is also responsible for up to 80% of biodiversity loss.”

Event participants called for producers, smallholder farmers, indigenous peoples, women and youth to be at the centre of efforts to create change. A challenge, though, is the vast diversity of food systems: there’s no one-size-fits-all solution.

One vision to achieve the goal of sustainable, healthy diets was outlined in a 2020 *Nature Food* paper by researchers from the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition. The authors use the example of China’s Loess Plateau to show how ecosystems and food production can be transformed. After centuries of land overuse, the plateau suffered erosion and deforestation, contributing to the poverty of its inhabitants. With international partners,



the Chinese Government launched ecological rehabilitation initiatives to regenerate vegetation, build terraces and convert farms on slopes to grasslands or forest. As a result, substantial parts of the plateau were restored and millions lifted out of poverty.

Reforming agricultural subsidies and taxes, claim the authors, means governments can implement four priority policy actions: making nutritious, sustainable food available to all; improving the efficiency of food value chains; ensuring healthy food is affordable to all; and empowering consumers to make informed choices to drive demand for healthy, sustainable diets. International cooperation is key. "The inter-connectedness of food markets and trade means that no one country alone can fully change their food system," they wrote.

Trialling transformation

Other regions are also considering how to transform their food systems.

A Nordic collaboration of research and innovation agencies has charted eight steps required for transformation across their region.

Country-level transformation for four nations — Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Vietnam — is the focus of the CGIAR's Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH), with each country at a different stage in transforming from a traditional to modern food system.

The COVID-19 crisis has further highlighted the imperative for transformation. The global pandemic and higher food prices have increased the affordability gap — the extra money needed to afford a healthy diet. The WFP Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) analysis outlines constraints for consumers in accessing a diet that meets their needs for good health and nutrition and charts a path to transforming food systems. It suggests interventions such as homestead food production, scaling up poultry and egg production where animal source food consumption is

too low, especially among nutritionally vulnerable groups, and providing nutrient supplements to specific groups including pregnant and breastfeeding women and children under two years old.

The larger the gap, the lower the diet quality, says de Pee, adding that the magnitude of the gap must inform the type and size of support. This is one way in which food systems can be transformed, and it's part of a larger puzzle that researchers, policymakers, UN, private sector and civil society workers are seeking to solve — and soon.

"The external drivers of the food system — including climate change and shocks, conflict and economic downturns, in addition to geography, natural resources, investment and today's status of the system — affect the extent to which food systems are amenable to transformation and how it could be approached," says de Pee. "There is no blueprint for the change: it should be designed and adapted as per a country's needs and possibilities." ●

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