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Diverse, healthy diets for all:
How a focus on healthy diets can transform food systems and climate action

This statement is the outcome of the Health and Climate Network (HCN) workshop on "Putting nutrition and healthy diets at the heart of agrifood systems reform and action on climate change" on the 28th February 2023. The workshop was attended by international experts who work across food and agriculture systems, climate change, nutrition, and health. This is a call to those working on food system reforms and climate action on agriculture and land to put sustainable, healthy diets for all as the central objective.

Co-existence of hunger, obesity and climate threat – our food system is killing people and planet

The current global food system does not provide adequate access to healthy diets, but is instead threatening the health and lives of more than half of the world's population. Levels of obesity, diet-related non-communicable disease (NCDs) and the consumption of unhealthy ultra-processed foods are growing, while levels of food insecurity and undernutrition persist[i].

World Obesity Atlas 2023[ii] predicts that over 50 percent of the world, or more than 4 billion people, will be living with obesity or overweight within the next 12 years. But in 2019 close to 750 million people were food insecure, and an estimated 2 billion people lacked adequate access to safe and nutritious food. In 2021, the number of people affected by hunger rose to 828 million[iii]. In Brazil alone, diets high in ultra-processed foods cause over 50,000 deaths each year[iv] , while 30 million people go hungry[v].

Solutions for feeding the world are focused on increasing yields and calories rather than promoting the right to adequate food and nutrition. This has distorted the global food systems narrative and resulted in profit-driven food systems that harm human, ecological, and animal health. The predominant industrial food system is characterised by fossil fuels dependency (such as fossil fuel derived-fertilisers and pesticides), monocropping, intensive livestock production and commoditization of food, resulting in environmental pollution, loss of biodiversity, and health and social issues.

This industrial approach to food production is one of the main reasons why the food we eat is responsible for one third of all global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. It will not be possible to achieve the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement without a transformation of our food systems. Even if fossil fuel emissions stopped today, we would not meet the 1.5°C temperature target due to food systems related emissions[vi].

Yet, countries continue to provide subsidies, incentives, and policies to support unsustainable food systems. A recent analysis showed that emissions-intensive and unhealthy commodities (such as industrially produced and processed sugar, beef, rice, and dairy) receive the most public fiscal support compared to fruits and vegetables[vii]. From a supply side, this public support has the dual effect of increasing the production of these unhealthy commodities, which can be a threat to the country's food sovereignty, while creating disincentives to produce healthy and culturally acceptable food. In addition to shaping farmers' decisions during food production, public subsidies can also influence demand (consumer purchasing behaviour) through distorted higher prices for more healthy and sustainable foods that do not receive subsidies. A study[viii] carried out in Brazil showed that an organic and whole grape juice produced by the family farming pays on average five times more taxes than the large industries (big food) that produce ultra-processed beverages with grape flavour.

In many parts of the world, ultra- processed foods, high in salt, sugar, and fat, are becoming cheaper and more accessible than healthier, minimally processed and fresh food. This creates communities or neighbourhoods which are nutrition deserts[ix] with little or no access to healthy food[x]. Increasingly industrialised foods are displacing traditional diets and farming practices.

Additionally, food and agriculture systems have significant implications for land-use. Livestock (meat and dairy) occupies 77% of the world's farmland to produce 18% of all calories and 37% of all proteins produced globally[xi]. This is a lead driver of the biodiversity and nature crisis.

Furthermore, caution must be taken when heralding industrial food technologies which are presented as solutions but do not deliver the transformative change needed. For example, there is a growing market for 'alternative proteins' that are presented as meat substitutes[xii]. However, these protein-sources are often highly processed, high in fat, salt, and chemical additives, and therefore not necessarily healthy for people or the planet. Furthermore, short term fix technologies such as pills for livestock to reduce the methane emissions from intensively reared animals, do not address the wider climate and nature impacts of the land use required for industrial livestock farming[xiii].

The impacts of climate change and the destruction of nature are increasing food inequality worldwide, with vulnerable communities susceptible to both malnutrition in all its forms and climate shocks. This threatens to undermine progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the overarching aim of Agenda 2030 to leave no one behind. Food inequalities and vulnerability exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic are further exacerbated by concurrent crises, including energy security and the war in Ukraine. After remaining relatively unchanged since 2015, the proportion of people affected by hunger escalated in 2020 and continued to rise to 9.8% of the world population in 2021, compared with 8% in 2019 and 9.3% in 2020.

The most recent science from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)[xiv] states with high confidence that increasing climate-related extreme weather events have exposed millions of people to acute food insecurity and reduced water security, with the largest impacts observed in many locations and/or communities in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the Arctic.

Four-point plan for diverse, healthy and climate positive food systems

Sustainable Healthy Diets – IPCC AR6

"Shifting toward sustainable and healthy diets requires effective food-system oriented reform policies that integrate agriculture, health, and environment policies." **IPCC AR6**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Sixth Assessment Report (IPCC AR6)[xv] is clear on the climate, biodiversity and health benefits of shifting to sustainable healthy diets, with a higher share of plant protein, moderate intake of animal-source foods and reduced intake of added sugars, salt and saturated fats:

- The term 'sustainable healthy diets' refers to dietary patterns that promote all dimensions of individuals' health and well-being; have low environmental pressure and impact; are accessible, affordable, safe and equitable; and are culturally acceptable.
- Healthy, sustainable diets will contribute to preventing all forms of malnutrition (i.e., undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency, and obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases) in developing countries.
- Co-benefits include lowering the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, as well as reducing mortality associated with these diet-related non-communicable diseases.
- A shift to healthy sustainable diets could lead to substantial decreases in GHG emissions and reduced land occupation and nutrient losses to the surrounding environment.
- In addition to climate mitigation gains, a transition towards more plant-based consumption and reduced consumption of animal-based foods, particularly from ruminant animals, could reduce pressure on forests and land used for feed, and support the preservation of biodiversity and planetary health.

The food systems of the future should not be based on the destructive and unhealthy food systems of today. Transforming our food systems requires embracing the new objective that prioritises human, ecological, and animal health and well-being. We should challenge the prevailing obsession with production and output that shapes today's food systems to ensure that all people do not just have calories to consume but that everyone is able to eat sustainable and healthy diets.

We propose the following four-point plan for food system transformation for people and the planet.

1. Political will to transition towards a diverse farming system for healthy, sustainable diets

The transition to healthy, sustainable diets will require a just transition of food systems, involving a diverse farming system, producing varied and healthier food. The transformation needs a mindset shift away from a commercially-centric perspective. It can only work if local, national, and global political leaders and decision makers demonstrate the political will to drive change.

This requires a move away from a focus on the big numbers of increasing quantity and yields of foods, and toward drivers of diversity, quality, and accessibility of a healthy diet. Solutions for a sustainable, food and nutrition secure future should not be measured by the quantity of the food, the yields and the calories delivered by agriculture, but rather by the quality of the food and the availability of diverse, healthy food for all.

A diverse food system must protect and conserve the rich agricultural biodiversity, including crops, seeds, and livestock breeds. It should provide diversity in healthy diets, markets, technology, and in local knowledge processes, traditions, and cultural heritage. And ensure resilience and better farmer livelihoods, consumer well-being and health, and environmental protection.

The current global food price crisis calls for systemic solutions, which prioritise food sovereignty and ensuring access to healthy and adequate diets for all. National commitments need a food systems approach to ensure access to affordable whole foods, especially for low-income and climate vulnerable communities. This should support local agroecological farming, indigenous farming practices, traditional diets, and small-scale producers.

We need to take a food system approach that includes all food chain activities (production, processing, distribution, preparation, consumption, and post-consumption of food) and the reduction of food loss and waste. Food system outcomes should be assessed by food nutrition, the livelihood of food producers and other actors in food value chains, and the impact on the environment.

2. Building the knowledge and evidence base for diverse farming solutions

We need to harness knowledge, data, and evidence to inform the food system transformation for diverse farming systems. This means increasing the knowledge and evidence for the contribution that indigenous, agroecological and small-scale farming can give to provide sustainable, healthy diets for all.

Political decisions on food systems are usually made using available scientific evidence and economic analysis influenced by corporate interests, often missing insights from a diversity of important actors. The dearth of knowledge on local, indigenous, agroecological and small-scale production in decision making is in stark contrast to the huge investment in knowledge and data for industrial foods[xvi]. This gives an immediate evidence bias for political and financial decision making for food and farming.

There needs to be greater focus on and investment in building evidence and data on traditional and local solutions, ensuring that holders of local and indigenous knowledge and their insights are included in decision-making processes and in the elaboration of solutions. There should be better evidence for the role that ecological food systems can play towards feeding the world. In this way, we can harness indigenous knowledge and traditional foods as part of the solution, combining evidence on healthy diets, jobs and livelihoods, nature, and ecosystems.

Philanthropy can play a role in resourcing the gathering and promotion of local, traditional knowledge, over big industry data. Public policies can re-direct support and learning towards evidence on small-scale and family food producers and agroecology. Global processes (such as the COP27 Sharm el-Sheikh work programme on the implementation of climate action on agriculture and food security) can ensure that evidence for traditional and local foods becomes a foundation for effective implementation plans.

3. Re-balance power and influence

Rebalancing the power and diversity of voices at the decision-making table is essential for a just transition of food and agriculture systems[xvii]. This should allow decisions on our future food systems to be informed by and respond to many voices and views of the world, including from youth, women, Indigenous peoples, small scale farmers and consumers.

Big food industry players are frequently given considerable access to international and national food systems policy making spaces. The voice of over 600 million smallholder farmers, many of whom are women and Indigenous peoples[xviii], are often not represented in decision-making[xix]. For effective decision-making on our food systems, there needs to be a rebalancing of the influence of to give a stronger voice for, farmers, local communities and consumers.

Re-balancing must have two components:

- **Limiting the interference of industrial food producers and the food and drinks industry**

Those with vested interests in the industrial food systems that are driving the shift to unhealthy and unsustainable diets – including agriculture biotech companies, fertiliser producers, industrial-scale farmers, fast food producers, and food commodity traders - have a high level of access to decision making at international and national level[xx,xxi]. To deliver a balanced voice and influence for the sector, it will be important to reduce the influence of large food industries with vested interests. Such regulation could be based on existing stipulations such as Article 5.3 of the Framework Convention of Tobacco Control, and existing guidance for WHO staff on limiting engagement with the alcohol industry.

- **Elevate the voices of local communities, consumers, Indigenous peoples, small-scale farmers and youth**

There are many existing platforms for engaging the diversity of voices needed to reform our food systems for sustainable healthy diets. For example, the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has recognised youth, Indigenous peoples and women's constituency groups who can be consulted. The role of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform is to bring together diverse ways of knowing for designing and implementing climate policies and actions. The Conference of the Youth (COY) has already brought the voices of young people engaged in food systems to the attention of high-level decision makers. Greater prominence should be given to the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism for Relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security (CSIPM), which gives a particular voice and space to those most affected by food insecurity and malnutrition. These groups need to have greater access and influence over decision making on the future of our food systems.

4. Getting policy, practice, and finance right

There are many very practical ways to start the transformation towards sustainable, healthy food systems, through local, national, and international regulation, guidelines and finance.

Examples of practical steps that local and national governments and global processes can take to start this transformation include:

Local

- Prioritisation of sustainable healthy foods for public procurement in public kitchens and canteens (e.g. prisons, elderly care, hospitals and schools).
- Implement food and nutrition education programs, inside and outside schools.
- Connect local producers and consumers to increase access to affordable locally produced food products.
- Strengthen the transformative potential of agroecology and other integrated approaches that consider ecological and social aspects.

National

- Facilitate participation of all stakeholders from marginalised communities (peasant farmers, Indigenous peoples, women, youth, small producer) so that they are included in the formulation, execution and monitoring of food and nutrition security policies.
- Integrate food systems and healthy diets into the next round of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement.
- Redirect public finance and subsidies away from food commodities that are unhealthy and unsustainable towards nutritious, sustainable, and culturally appropriate whole-food diets produced through sustainable agroecological practices.
- Introduce policies that address obesity and diet-related NCDs such as restrictions on marketing of highly processed foods (ultra-processed foods), regulating product placement and offers for unhealthy foods in supermarkets, particularly to protect children and youth[xxii].
- Implement national Front-of-Packaging labelling models that provide clear and full information to support selection of healthier options.
- Develop national Food-Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs) which are recommended by the FAO, WHO, and IPCC to meet health, biodiversity, and climate goals.
- Improve protections for nature and ecosystems regulations for farming.
- Invest in national campaigns on healthy and sustainable diets.
- Fund research and advocacy to influence government policy and industry practice toward improved food environments i.e., for the development of digital tools that can bring transparency to the world's food supply and its environmental impacts[xxiii]

International

- Strengthen WHO Guidelines on processed foods with clear definitions and health guidance, clarifying concepts such as food processing and the negative impact of adding certain ingredients (such as sugar, fat, salt, flavours, and colouring).
- Introduce regulations on trade sustainability criteria on imported products, such as prioritising deforestation-free commodities in free trade deals.
- Leverage moments such as the UNFCCC global stocktake and UN Food Systems Summit stocktake to advocate for food systems transformation.
- The COP28 Presidency plans to focus on both food systems and on climate and health during 2023, opening the opportunity for sustainable, healthy diets to become a legacy of the COP28 meeting in December.

For all of the above policy changes a focus on diversity of farming, diet and inclusive voices will be critical in delivering for people, planet and health.

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