

Policy Issues around Sustainable Diets

Presented by Kate Clancy, Food Systems Consultant
at the Briggs Nutrition Science Symposium

“Toward Sustainable Diets: Current Evidence and Future Challenges”

SNEB Annual Meeting, Minneapolis

July 22, 2018



Source: FAO and Biodiversity International, 2012. In Mason, P., and Lang, T. 2017 . Sustainable Diets. Routledge/earthscan. London and New York.

A larger global context

- Food crises across the world demonstrate that food systems issues cross all scales and sectors.
- Food policy is a field for which there is a clear need for better integrated policies across sectors.
- This integration is quite challenging – but critical to global stability and food security.

Characteristics of low environmental impact diets consistent with good health

- Diversity – a wide variety of foods
- Balance between energy intakes and energy needs
- Based on minimally processed tubers and whole grain, legumes, and fruits and vegetables; meat in moderate quantities
- Dairy products in moderation
- Unsalted seeds and nuts
- Small quantities of fish sourced from certified fisheries

Source: Fischer, C.G., and Garnett, T. 2016. Plates, pyramids, planet. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and The Food Climate Research Network at the University of Oxford.

Table 1 Seven broad policy responses to dietary (un)sustainability

Policy position	How it manifests	Example(s)	Rationale	Comment
There is no problem (or if there is, it's 'not your business')	Marginalisation of the agenda associated with sustainable diets	Downplay food and climate change; or stress the costs of action	This is progress; broadly neo-liberal trust in market dynamics	Business-as-usual. This is tantamount to 'this is none of your business'
This is a rich society problem	A persistent focus on under-consumption / hunger	The focus is on hunger; down-playing complex health and environmental implications	Retain western model of eating as the ideal; choice, if one has little, would be progress	Ignores growing evidence of nutrition transition and food-related environmental problems in global South
It is a consumer responsibility	If consumers are to make informed choices, they need help	UK carbon labelling of selected food products	Consumer choice depends on education; self-interest	This assumes food markets work with maximum flow of full information
Choice-editing	Product reformulation; new supply chain efficiency goals	Smaller product size to cut carbon, packaging or calories	Corporate responsibility	Brand protection; prevention of future litigation; 'below the radar' actions
Focus on high risk issues / hotspots	Particular issues are championed as 'the key'	Cut waste, or reduce/contain meat & dairy consumption	Data on impact is strong whether measured by science or finance	This is critical control point thinking borrowed from HACCP in food safety. It misses the systemic nature of the challenge
Stick to the health message	Follow health advice and the environmental will fall	Reduce meat and dairy	There is no need to confuse signals to consumers with environmental or cultural norms	It ignores the cultural dimension of food. It also assumes consumers are driven by health
Sustainable diets	National guidelines	National eg Sweden (2011), Germany (2013); intergovernmental eg Nordic Council (2012)	Food citizenship should replace consumerism	Has cost implications; requires changed policy frameworks beyond diet, too

Source: Lang, T. 2015. Sustainable diets: another hurdle or a better food future? *Development* 57(2): 240–256.

Major reasons for inability to adopt Sustainable Dietary Guidelines (1)

Professional

1. We cannot get to sustainability without understanding the environmental, social, and economic affects of production and consumption.
2. We have intellectual fragmentation when interdisciplinary, systems perspectives are needed.

Major reasons for inability to adopt Sustainable Dietary Guidelines (2)

Commercial

1. Industry leaders don't want any food disparaged
2. Sustainability moves discussion from food groups to individual foods
3. Sustainability discussion has potential to forge new political coalitions
4. If DGAs address sustainability, will elevate discussion of sustainable diets, and could lead consumers to purchase "greener" foods

Source: Merrigan, K., Griffin, T., Wilde, P., Robien, K., Goldberg, J., and Dietz, W. 2015. Designing a sustainable diet. *Science* 350 (6257): 165–166.

Major reasons for inability to adopt Sustainable Dietary Guidelines (3)

Political

1. Lack of leadership in U.S.
2. Assaults on science
3. Consumer choice culture-"this is folly"
4. Multiple interventions and instruments required
5. Lack of policy coherence between government and industry

What to do next?

- Educate nutritionists about sustainability and systems thinking
- Revive the long-time elements of nutrition science (life sciences, social sciences, and ecology)
- Provide a rational policy framework to guide producers and consumers to sustainability
- Study sustainable diets efforts in other countries
- Work at national, regional, and local levels to increase discussion and action re: sustainable diets