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
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

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

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