



UNRAVELLING THE FOOD-HEALTH NEXUS

ADDRESSING PRACTICES, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND POWER RELATIONS TO BUILD HEALTHIER FOOD SYSTEMS

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Alongside many positive impacts, our food systems have increasingly affected health through multiple, interconnected pathways, generating severe human and economic costs. Although it is generally understood that good food is a cornerstone of good health, the full picture is often lost from view, allowing the connections to be obscured and the root causes of poor health to be left unaddressed.

Unravelling the Food-Health Nexus: Addressing Practices, Political Economy, and Power Relations to Build Healthier Food Systems, authored by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food), seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of these issues, identifying the channels through which food systems affect human health, and how prevailing power relations and imperatives in food systems help to shape our understanding of the impacts they generate. The report asks why evidence gaps persist, why negative impacts are systematically reproduced, and why certain problems are not politically prioritized.

An urgent case for reforming food and farming systems can be made on the grounds of protecting human health. The report emphasizes the need to explore the social, structural, and environmental determinants of health associated with food systems, and identifies five co-dependent leverage points for building healthier food systems:

- Promoting food systems thinking;
- Reasserting scientific integrity and research as a public good;
- Bringing the alternatives to light;
- Adopting the precautionary principle; and
- Building integrated food policies under participatory governance.

This report was commissioned by the Global Alliance for the Future of Food in support of its broader strategy to strengthen the fundamental role that food systems play in creating and sustaining health and well-being in all communities and populations.

We have enough evidence telling us that the current food system is not supporting health — we must take action to trigger a shift from a system that too often results in harm to a system based on health promotion.

— Ruth Richardson, Executive Director,
Global Alliance for the Future of Food



KEY MESSAGES

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- 1. Alongside many positive impacts, our food systems have increasingly affected health through multiple, interconnected pathways, generating severe human and economic costs.** People get sick because: 1) they work under unhealthy conditions; 2) they are exposed to contaminants in the water, soil, and air; 3) they eat certain unsafe or contaminated foods; 4) they have unhealthy diets; and, 5) they can't access adequate and acceptable food at all times.
- 2. An urgent case for reforming food and farming systems can be made on the grounds of protecting human health.** Many of the most severe health impacts of food systems trace back to some of the core industrial food and farming practices, e.g., chemical-intensive agriculture; intensive livestock production; the mass production and mass marketing of ultra-processed foods; and the development of long and deregulated global commodity supply chains.
- 3. The health impacts of food systems are interconnected, self-reinforcing, and complex — but we know enough to act.** Food systems impacts are caused by many agents, and interact with factors like climate change, unsanitary conditions, and poverty — which are themselves shaped by food and farming systems. This complexity is real and challenging, but should not be an excuse for inaction.
- 4. The low power and visibility of those most affected by food systems jeopardizes a complete understanding of the health impacts, leaving major blind spots in the evidence base.** The precarious working conditions across global food systems create a situation in which those exposed to the greatest health risks are not seen or heard. These blind spots make it less likely for problems to be prioritized politically and allow health risks to continue to afflict marginalized populations.
- 5. Power — to achieve visibility, frame narratives, set the terms of debate, and influence policy — is at the heart of the food–health nexus.** The industrial food and farming model that systematically generates negative health impacts also generates highly unequal power relations. This allows powerful actors including the private sector, governments, donors, and others to set the terms of debate. The prevailing solutions obscure the social and environmental fallout of industrial food systems, leaving the root causes of poor health unaddressed and reinforcing existing social-health inequalities.
- 6. Urgent steps are required to reform food systems practices, and to transform the ways in which knowledge is gathered and transmitted, understandings are forged, and priorities are set.** Silos in science and policy mirror one another. Governance and knowledge structures are currently ill-adapted to address the systemic and interconnected risks emerging from food systems. Steps to build a healthy science-policy interface may be just as important as steps to reform food systems practices.
- 7. The evidence on food systems impacts must continue to grow, but a new basis is required for reading, interpreting, and acting on that evidence in all of its complexity.** The basis for action must increasingly be informed by a diversity of actors, sources of knowledge and disciplines, and by the collective strength, consistency, plausibility, and coherence of the evidence base.
- 8. Five co-dependent leverage points can be identified for building healthier food systems:** 1) promoting food systems thinking at all levels; 2) reasserting scientific integrity and research as a public good; 3) bringing the positive impacts of alternative food systems to light; 4) adopting the precautionary principle; and, 5) building integrated food policies under participatory governance.
- 9. The monumental task of building healthier food systems requires more democratic and more integrated ways of managing risk and governing food systems.** A range of actors — policymakers, big and small private sector firms, healthcare providers, environmental groups, consumers' and health advocates, farmers, agri-food workers, and citizens — must collaborate and share responsibility in this endeavour.