

Q&A

UNRAVELLING THE FOOD-HEALTH NEXUS

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



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What roles did IPES-Food and the Global Alliance play in developing The Food-Health Nexus report?

- The Global Alliance circulated a request for proposals to identify a team to undertake research on the health impacts of food systems. Members of the Global Alliance's Advancing Well-being Working Group assessed the submissions. IPES Food was the successful applicant based on the expertise of their members and their proposed approach to the research.
- IPES-Food researched and wrote the report. The Global Alliance provided considerable feedback on drafts and managed the peer review process.

What is the unique contribution of the Food-Health Nexus report?

- The report reviews the latest evidence on the whole range of global health impacts associated with food systems to provide a full picture.
- The report identifies the multiple, interconnected pathways that generate health impacts and the core food systems practices to which they trace.
- The report examines the political economy of food systems: why evidence gaps persist, why negative impacts are systematically reproduced, and why certain problems are not politically prioritized.

Is this report about unhealthy diets? How else are food and health linked?

- Unhealthy diets are only one of the many ways in which food systems impact human health. These impacts range from cancers linked to nitrate pollution in drinking water to systematic injuries and stresses on workers on food production lines.
- Five channels of impact, and the costs they generate, are identified and reviewed in the report:
 1. Occupational hazards (people get sick because they work under unhealthy conditions).
 2. Environmental contamination (people get sick because of contaminants in the water, soil, or air).
 3. Contaminated, unsafe, and altered foods (people get sick because specific foods they eat are unsafe for consumption).
 4. Unhealthy dietary patterns (people get sick because they have unhealthy diets);
 5. Food insecurity (people get sick because they can't access adequate, acceptable food at all times).
- Chemical-intensive agriculture, intensive livestock production, mass production and mass marketing of ultra-processed foods, and long, deregulated global commodity supply chains are some of the food system practices that contribute systematically to a range of negative health impacts.
- The health impacts generated by food systems result in high human and economic costs, are self-reinforcing, and are compounded by climate change, poverty, and poor sanitation.

Why does power matter when it comes to the impacts of food and farming on our health?

- Many of the health impacts in food systems disproportionately affect poor and marginalized groups, e.g., small-scale farmers in the Global South, migrant workers. The power and visibility of these groups determines whether these impacts will be seen and addressed.
- 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. It is therefore crucial to look critically at the prevailing “solutions” for addressing the health risks in food systems.

What levers for change are identified in the report and who are the actors who need to be engaged?

- Five co-dependent leverage points are identified for building healthier food systems:
 - 1) Promoting food systems thinking;
 - 2) Reasserting scientific integrity and research as a public good;
 - 3) Bringing the alternatives to light;
 - 4) Adopting the precautionary principle; and,
 - 5) Building integrated food policies under participatory governance.
- Diverse stakeholders — the private sector, government, policymakers, civil society, researchers, food systems workers, citizens, and farmers — need to work together to better understand the health impacts of food systems, address the most harmful practices, and find new pathways forward.

What is the precautionary principle and how could it be applied to food systems?

- The precautionary principle requires applicants to demonstrate conclusively that potentially noxious products are harmless before being approved for use.
- The precautionary principle was developed to manage environmental and health risks in food systems and beyond, and requires policymakers and others to weigh the evidence on risk factors and act accordingly.
- The report calls for use of the precautionary principle to protect human health from food systems practices.

Why did the Global Alliance commission this work? What are the next steps?

- Since fall 2015, members of the Global Alliance have been exploring how to support the transition to more sustainable, renewable, resilient, healthy, and interconnected food systems. The Global Alliance’s Health and Well-being Working Group aims to strengthen the fundamental role food systems play in creating and sustaining health and well-being in all communities and for all people.
- Following the publication of the report, the Global Alliance plans to engage in and support a global dialogue on putting health at the centre of food systems.
- The Food-Health Nexus Report will inform the Global Alliance’s strategic priorities, including our work on true cost accounting and agroecology.
- The research demonstrates the need to amplify the voice and experience of those most vulnerable to the health impacts of food systems: women, children, people living in poverty, and migrant and undocumented agriculture and food workers. The Global Alliance is committed to collaborating with organizations working with these communities to tell their stories and contribute to discussions about solutions.
- The Global Alliance is interested in better understanding the positive health impacts of food systems.

NOTE

This report was commissioned from IPES-Food by the Global Alliance for the Future of Food for use by Global Alliance members to stimulate an understanding of critical issues related to food systems reform, inform individual member foundations, and guide Global Alliance collective action. The Global Alliance has chosen to make it available to the broader community to contribute to thinking and discussion about sustainable food systems reform. It constitutes the work of independent authors. Any views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the Global Alliance or of any of our members.