On 12 December 2017, the Global Alliance for the Future of Food hosted a webinar on the Unravelling the Food-Health Nexus report. Lead author, Cécilia Rocha, and our discussants, Roberto Ciati, Simon Poole and Olivia Yambi kindly agreed to respond to some of the questions that we were not able to get to during the webinar Q&A.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Cécilia Rocha responds...

1. “Thank you for this webinar. A question regarding the precautionary principle - it recently became clear to me that under free-trade agreements such as CETA, TAFTA, locally / nationally decided precautionary measures could be challenged by companies as "anti-trade" (for example, NYT article, “A Nasty, Nafta-Related Surprise: Mexico’s Soaring Obesity”). What can be done to raise the awareness of trade negotiators, and more largely policy-makers, about health consequences for consumers of such arguments and to make sure precautionary principles are included?”

   CR: There are precedents in recognizing the relationship of trade agreements with public health (see, for example, http://www.who.int/trade/resource/wtoagreements/en/). More awareness is certainly needed, and it needs to be promoted on many fronts. Public health associations can be front and centre on this (see, for example, https://www.phasa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Statement-from-the-WFPHA-on-trade-areegements-and-public-health.pdf). More research on the links between trade and public health can help. Making policy-makers and other decision-makers aware of the high and rising human and economic costs of the health impacts of trade can be a powerful tool.

2. “Given the role of overuse of antibiotics in intensive livestock production, and growing antibiotic resistance, which threatens to make advanced medical procedures unsafe (surgery, chemotherapy), is this a way to bring privileged people to understand and act on food system change?”
CR: I think this is certainly a good “entry point” for understanding the connections between food production and health. It is an issue that impacts everyone, and not just marginalized groups. There is, however, the possibility that this issue will gather more attention (through media reports, for example) than other issues impacting marginalized groups disproportionately (for example, pesticide poisoning).

3. “In terms of alternatives, what seem to be the most promising alternative production systems to bring into the discussion? In particular, for meat production, which has especially significant and complicated implications for the environment and human health?”

CR: In terms of crop production, the promotion of agroecology seems promising. Moving to a diversified food system (less monocropping) will require significant changes, as IPES-Food has been reporting (see, for example, http://www.ipes-food.org/images/Reports/UniformityToDiversity_FullReport.pdf) In terms of meat production, I believe that significant changes can be driven by consumer demand. Moving to a more plant-based (and healthier) diet everywhere will allow for changes in the meat production system.

4. “What strategies and tactics have you seen work well in educating people on better consumption and food choices in the Northern hemisphere? How about in the Global South? Oxfam is thinking of working on a campaign and we are looking for good practices and partnerships.”

CR: Sorry I don’t have any specific examples. The problem with public health campaigns and education initiatives is that they don’t usually present results in a short period of time. That is, changes come slowly, but they do come. Thus, it is difficult to show “concrete evidence” of results of any specific initiative. Change in behaviour does not come easy or fast. (That is also why we tend to look at campaigns against smoking as a model.) We need initiatives on all fronts. Certainly, in schools – nutrition and food literacy is fast deteriorating; but also through public health campaigns. I also believe in the educational power of policy debates (a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages?) and legislation. Some of the recent changes in dietary guidelines (the one from Brazil is the one I know best) are a good example.

5. “Is there a larger issue that shapes action (if not wholly preventing it): the entrenched commodification of food within what continues to be a growth-centric economy?”

CR: I would certainly agree that the entrenched commodification of food and the fascination with economic growth at all cost are part of the larger issue. So are the entrenched power relations that this creates, which then prevents (or, at least, delays) significant changes. The political economy of food systems is a central concern of IPES-Food reports.

6. “How do we adopt the way forward and the five leverage points for change and integrate these into existing policy implementation processes - like the territorial localization of the SDGs - and mobilizing food systems elements that are already in place with the NUA (new urban agenda)?”

CR: While a significant change will have to be global in scope, I do believe such change can be sparked by initiatives and policies being developed at national and regional levels. That is why answering “how” is difficult. It depends on local conditions and dynamics.
7. “In academia, what are the best examples of programs that bridge the divide between food, agriculture and health? Here at UC Berkeley we have a Public Health Nutrition program that barely focuses on agriculture.”

CR: This is a significant problem everywhere, I believe. I don’t have examples to give now, but I think we are seeing some changes in academic programs in some universities. At this point, the best examples may be found in research centres, which attempt to serve as a space for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary inquiry on those issues. Here, at Ryerson University, we have had the Centre for Food Security, which proposes to provide that space.

Roberto Ciati responds...

8. “How would you translate "food systems thinking" for retail and food companies, who have an interest in preserving the long-term company and brand value?”

RC: In our way of doing business, Good for You Good for the Planet is a clear and real commitment to develop and sustain the company over time and give value to its products and brands. Our conviction is to act, taking into account the well-being of people, through:
- The launch of new products that meet the different needs of people (from the highest content of whole grains to products for specific targets, such as gluten-free products) and to the reformulation of the nutritional profile of existing products (reducing saturated fats, salt, sugar) keeping taste and flavour;
- The communication about contents that brings more knowledge and transparency, and the development of sustainable supply chains that preserves the planet’s resources and reduces the environmental impacts.
This is the way to develop the company’s value and its brands.

9. “For public education, would it be useful to advocate for governments to reorganize all policies to focus on the health of the whole food system? For example, what if dietary standards and agriculture were focused on the health of soil, plants, animals, and people, instead of ROI?”

RC: Innovating the approach used to evaluate the well-being of a country is a well-known theme that has had several key steps of proposals and attempts at application. Certainly, the correct evaluation and the introduction of parameters that support and complete the classic economic parameters would surely help to act and move towards sustainable development, as well as clearly indicated by the SDGs of the United Nations.

Probably, focusing on informative and educational action on the SDGs, primarily by the public sector but also in collaboration with the private sector, it’s possible to promote a change of approach and therefore prepare people, particularly the new generations, and the whole agri-industrial system to pursue sustainable development models, habits, behaviours and reduce current agri-food paradoxes.

10. “What is the ideal role of the private sector in realizing healthy food systems, considering that the sector currently plays a role in innovation and service provisioning in the agri-food system, but also holds a lot of power and may set the terms of debate?”

RC: The role of the private sector is to develop and offer products and communications content that
promotes healthy and environmentally friendly eating habits. This is a path that many companies have already undertaken, making it a business model, for example, Barilla’s Good for You Good for the Planet. In addition, international organizations, bringing together various private actors, such as the Consumer Goods Forum, which develops projects and capacity in various areas such as health and nutrition or sustainable development. Besides these direct actions, for the private sector it is relevant to collaborate, as a partner, within activities carried out by public institutions and NGOs: public-private collaboration is a key alliance for the future of our planet.

11. “Is ‘improvement’ enough? Isn’t one big problem the existence of Barilla’s 300+ products in place of the rather small number in, for example, the traditional Mediterranean diet?”

**RC:** At Barilla the continuous improvement of our offerings is a journey, and as such will be carried forward into the future: the Mediterranean model is our polar star. This reference model has clear and well-supported scientific evidence, and is based on a few simple concepts: fruit / vegetables / cereals are at the bottom of the Mediterranean pyramid, and the variety of products consumed is essential for healthy food habits; no product is excluded, only quantity and frequency must be looked at. We offer products that are the basis of healthy eating habits such as pasta, wholegrain pasta, new products based on legumes, tomato-based and many baked products such as breads and wholegrain versions and crispbreads. For the other products, that have a different role, we act every year to improve their nutritional profiles, reducing salt, saturated fats and sugars, always maintaining taste and flavour, and providing clear and transparent suggestions for consumption.

**Simon Poole responds...**

12. “Given the role of overuse of antibiotics in intensive livestock production, and growing antibiotic resistance which threatens to make advanced medical procedures unsafe (surgery, chemotherapy), is this a way to bring privileged people to understand and act on food systems change?”

**SP:** I agree. Unfortunately, we commonly see government departments acting in silos. Whenever public health messages are broadcast on the subject of antibiotic resistance and the risk to human health, there is a focus from health departments and professionals on the inappropriate use of antibiotics in humans. Of course, this is important, but it fails to address the wider use of antibiotics in agriculture and the food chain. We need to learn lessons from the way in which the related issue of climate change has resulted in a broad consensus, beginning with scientists, the understanding disseminated through education and the media, resulting in pressure on policy-makers to make changes at all levels of the executive in order to deliver change in everyday aspects of all our lives, rather than to confine issues to one particular department or initiative.

13. “Is the letter that you delivered at the G7 publicly available? If yes, where can we see it?”

**SP:** Yes, here it is. The list of signatures in itself is interesting - many highly influential individuals who are committed to see change aligned to the principles espoused in the report.

14. “For public education, would it be useful to advocate for governments to reorganize all policies to focus on the health of the whole food system? For example, what if dietary standards and agriculture were focused on the health of soil, plants, animals, and people, instead of ROI?”

SP: Yes, it is so important for scientists and health professionals to describe the way whole systems influence the bigger picture, and why we need to "join the dots" to understand the impact of food production and consumption on health at every stage of its journey. Health is not simply dependent on the nutritional content of foods, but ultimately is also profoundly influenced by changes to our environment as well as the diminished quality of food. Unravelling the Food-Health Nexus represents a landmark report. We need to work to deliver its objectives to see a much more integrated approach to understanding these complex interactions, and to describe how whole systems can change to create a more sustainable future and reduce the burden of chronic disease and environmental harm.

15. “Health prevention messages must surely be linked to issues of poverty, food security and education and information, and the underlying issues of human rights across the world in policy formation?”

SP: It should be a human right to be able to access education to improve "food literacy" and to understand the factors involved in food systems which influence nutrition and health. Food security is of course dependent on many factors, including poverty, conflict, education etc. We should also view food security in the context of having access to foods which provide the nutrients which reduce the risk of chronic disease. We might have access to calories, but if the nutritional value is diminished and foods are of poorer quality, particularly without public awareness, then we should regard that as insecure. It is morally unacceptable that in many countries health inequalities are compounded by choice architecture which results in poorer nutrition in more deprived areas. For example, often the more unhealthy, ultra-processed foods are discounted by retailers and made more available to populations who are also denied adequate education. It is ironic that the most traditional plant-based diets relying on local sustainable methods of production are cheaper and more nutritious than "modern" diets. The Mediterranean diet, as an example of a healthy and sustainable diet, has been portrayed as a more expensive way of eating and adopted by the middle classes; whereas the reality (as demonstrated by excellent studies from Dr. Mary Flynn at Miriam Hospital, Rhode Island) is that these kinds of diets, when adopted with education about food preparation, are less expensive, and the "cucina povera" first described in southern Italy, is more healthy, less costly and affords greater protection to the environment than many dietary patterns recently adopted across the world.

Olivia Yambi responds...

16. “In terms of alternatives, what seem to be the most promising alternative production systems to bring into the discussion (in particular for meat production which has especially significant and complicated implications for the environment and human health)?”

OY: Agroecology is considered a good alternative. In its report, “From Uniformity to Diversity: A paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems” (IPES-Food, 2016), we make a very strong case for transformation in our food systems. In addition to discussing eight lock-ins that are keeping industrial agriculture in place, the report presents opportunities and entry points that would facilitate transformation. Further note that there are many documented success stories in agroecology as summarized for example in the report “Agroecology: The Bold Future of Farming in Africa” (www.afsafrica.org).
17. “What strategies and tactics have you seen work well in educating people on better consumption and food choices in the Northern hemisphere? How about in the Global South? Oxfam is thinking of working on a campaign and we are looking for good practices and partnerships.”

**OY:** Let me quote just one example I have seen at work in Sweden. In addition to public education, products are labelled in a way that facilitates identification of what are good food choices. The “green keyhole” label seems to have worked very well and is an easy guide when shopping. Any public education campaign has to be accompanied by requisite availability of foods that are readily accessible, including affordability, for the intended population. A thorough situation analysis is necessary prior to intervention, to ascertain what more beyond knowledge is shaping people’s food choices.

18. “With women playing a growing role in agriculture (and in some countries comprising the majority of the agricultural workforce), and considering research done on improved nutritional outcomes when women are empowered, what are concrete ways to increase women’s participation in higher levels of governance, where they are still underrepresented?”

**OY:** Affirmative action accompanied by capacity strengthening for true representation has been pursued in some countries.

About the Global Alliance for the Future of Food

The Global Alliance for the Future of Food is a strategic alliance of philanthropic foundations working together and with others to transform global food systems now and for future generations. We 1) forge new insights and strengthen evidence for global systems change, 2) convene key food-systems actors and facilitate meaningful dialogue, and 3) stimulate local and global action for transformational change in collaboration with other committed stakeholders to realize healthy, equitable, renewable, resilient, and culturally diverse food systems.

The Unravelling the Food-Health Nexus 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 and by report authors and webinar discussants do not necessarily represent the views of the Global Alliance or of any of our members.