

White Paper

The Food System

Abstract

The White Paper¹ is a product of the work of the healthy3 core group and the International Think Tank established as part of the healthy3 initiative. It analyses the current global food system, defining new directions for health promotion. The example of food shows that it is essential to build bridges between the health promotion and sustainable development agendas.

Conceptual parallels

The first two chapters of the White Paper deal with the theoretical basis for joint action in the health promotion and sustainable development arenas. The first principle of the Rio Declaration (1992) states that:

“Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.”

Health promotion and sustainable development work towards this common goal. They are both normative concepts – i.e. they wish to achieve changes in society and call for new political priorities. In what direction is society developing, and how does it define its interface with biological and ecological systems? Questions like these can be the starting point for a paradigm shift in how societal development is understood.

The concept of health promotion already involves a paradigm shift from a deficit model of health, focused on disease, to a socio-ecological model aimed at strengthening resilience and assets for health. This model now addresses in particular the social determinants of health and the capabilities for health.

While numerous conceptual parallels exist between health promotion and sustainable development, they still have different agendas. Health promotion is concerned with populations and population groups, their behaviour and their resources. The sustainability agenda is broader: it deals with the fundamental principle of how we organize our societies.

Food, health and sustainable development (Chapter 3)

Chapter 3 of the White Paper takes the example of food to demonstrate the links between the sustainability agenda and the health promotion agenda.

What and how we eat depends not just on our personal decisions but is significantly influenced by the food system. This system comprises the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food. Each of these steps is relevant both for health and for the environment.

For this reason, the promotion of a sustainable food system is a priority goal for public health.

Poor diet combined with low levels of physical activity has led to a global epidemic of chronic diseases. Healthier diets could save millions of lives every year and support the environment.

The present food system delivers low-cost food at a high cost to the environment and to human and animal health. Agriculture and land-use change are estimated to cause about one third of global warming due to greenhouse gas emissions. Today's largely industrialized food system is highly vulnerable to global fossil fuel depletion.

Dietary patterns have significant effects on the environment. Meat production is a powerful contributor to negative environmental impacts, particularly in relation to the use of energy and water.

The present food system is a consumer of energy. The long-term goal should be to transform it from an energy consumer into an energy producer.

Governance (Chapter 4)

Nutrition is a highly political issue. An approach to feeding the world equitably will require major changes at all levels of governance and a reorientation of many international organizations and programmes.

Food crises have become matters of security. The Center for Strategic and International Studies has

¹ The White Paper “Triggering Debate – White Paper: The Food System: a prism of present and future challenges for health promotion and sustainable development”.

drawn attention to the strategic threat of lack of food and water. The stability of developing countries in particular can be endangered by rising cereal and fuel prices. Thirty countries experienced food-related riots and unrest in 2008, half of them in Africa.

The food industry is one of the largest industries in the world. The World Bank estimates that the food and agriculture sector account for 10% of global gross domestic product.

The liberalization and globalization of the food market have strengthened industrial food production, but food security is not assured as a result. In 2009, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food told the WTO that trade can only help promote human rights and access to food if certain conditions are met.

Growing consumer awareness is creating new patterns of consumption in developed countries. As a response to growing concerns about how food is produced, new social movements are emerging, including Slow Food, La Via Campesina and Anti-GM. But the question of justice is also being raised: the fair trade movement aims to correct the highly unequal power relation between food producers in developing countries and the global food industry.

However, the basis for consumer decisions has become more complex: for example, local food production is not necessarily sustainable. Where food is grown locally in heated greenhouses, it can be more energy-efficient and sustainable to get such products from areas where they are grown in the open.

Matters of nutrition and food production are exemplary for issues of equity. The cause of food policy could well be championed by civil society.

Food justice, food security and food sovereignty

Three concepts – food justice, food security and food sovereignty – have emerged in the debate on the global food system which are linked to concepts in the health debate: health as a human right, health security and empowerment for health.

These concepts provide an ideal starting point for joint action in the health promotion and sustainability arenas.

The concept of **food justice** combines the right to food and the right to health. The right to health and the right to food are at the normative base of a sustainable food system.

The right to food is not about charity, but about ensuring that all people have the capacity to feed themselves.

Food security involves ensuring universal access to food. This is a key dimension of health security.

The global food security situation has worsened. The FAO estimated that the number of hungry people would increase by a further 100 million in 2009 and pass the one billion mark.

The demand for **food sovereignty** arises from concern over the power imbalance in the global food system: sustainable development should also increase people's rights. In many respects, this matches the health promotion concept of empowerment, which helps people to increase control over their own health.

Recommendations (Chapter 5)

Health promotion must make the promotion of healthy and sustainable food systems a priority.

The White Paper recommends a threefold strategy:

- Advocate
- Enable
- Mediate

Advocate: Health promotion advocates a sustainable food system at all levels of governance, based on the principles of food justice, food security and food sovereignty. It supports environmental dietary guidelines.

Enable: Health promotion supports initiatives contributing to healthier food production and consumption. It promotes the concept of “sustainable and healthy diets” as an integral part of education about food choices.

Mediate: Health promotion seeks to engage policymakers, the media, and food production and other professionals in joint efforts to tackle the problems associated with the food system.

Global and local policies

Sustainable development is both a global and a local policy issue. Health can also be viewed from various perspectives, ranging from the societal to the individual. The health promotion agenda is defined accordingly.

At the **global level**, the health promotion community needs to develop an understanding that the food system is a critical determinant of health. It must support global cooperation between the major agencies concerned with the food system, such as the WHO, FAO and others.

At the **national level**, the health promotion community should help to develop sustainable multi-sectoral food policies, setting goals for the whole system, from production to consumption.

At the **local level**, the health promotion community should support initiatives relating to health, food and the environment. It can use existing networks to work on food and health.

Outlook (Chapter 6)

Food and health are examples of the complex problems confronting the world in the 21st century. They can only be tackled by interconnected and multi-level policymaking.

In the governance debate, they are typical of “wicked problems”, i.e. problems which are difficult or impossible to solve. Any effort to solve them may create other problems. In policy planning, “wicked problems” are addressed by engaging stakeholders and – in spite of contradictory requirements – developing a common frame together. But this can also fail, as shown by the example of the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit.

The healthy3 initiative aims to link the public health, health promotion and sustainable development agendas by focusing as a first step on the crucial issue of food and promoting joint action.

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