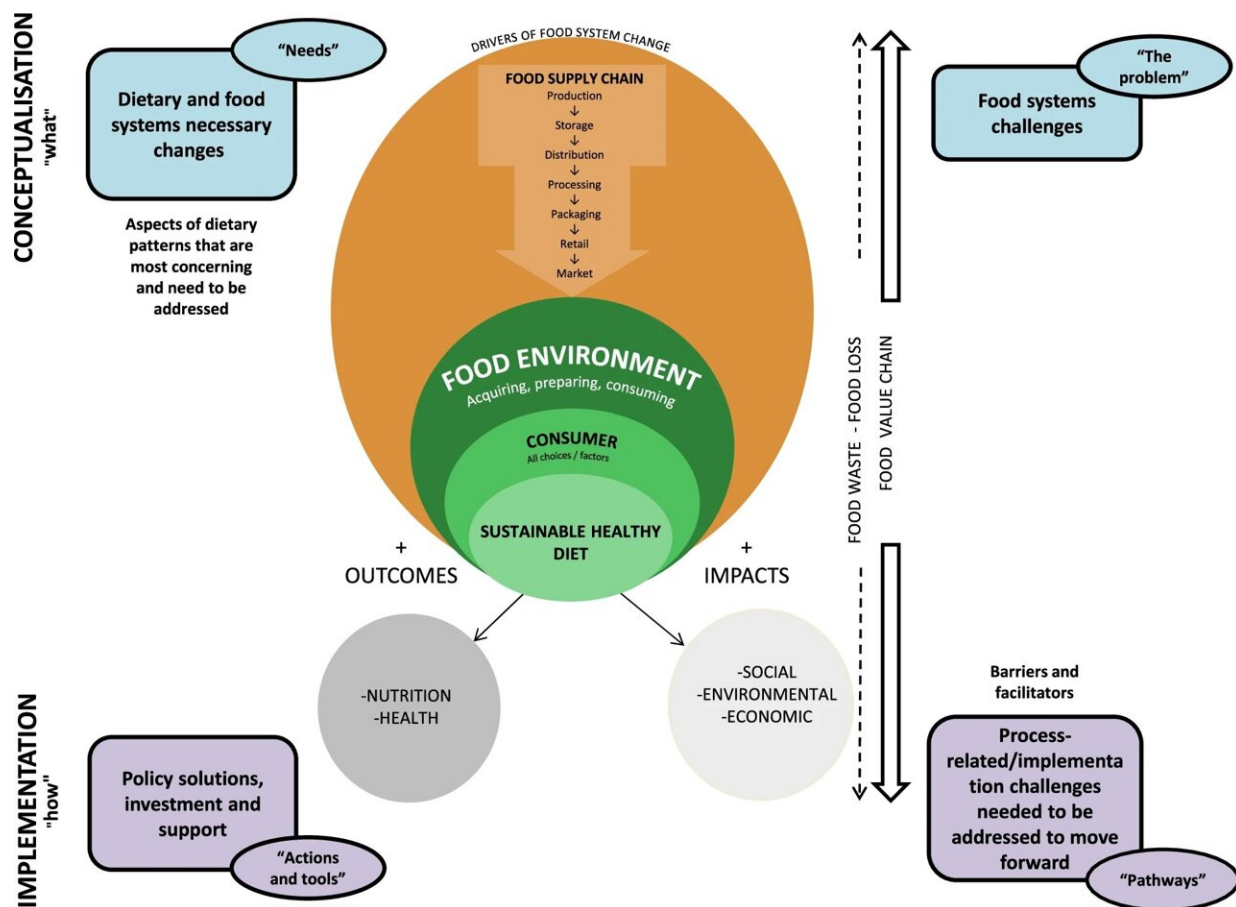


Only 20% of European food-based dietary guidelines include food sustainability

November 8 2022, by Teresa Bau



Framework for building consensus on actions for sustainable healthy diets, as well as the interconnected components and their positive effects on outcomes and impacts. Adapted from HLPE (2017). Credit: *BMC Public Health* (2022). DOI: 10.1186/s12889-022-13756-y

The health of the planet and that of humankind are profoundly interconnected: the way we feed ourselves has a significant impact upon both our own health and that of the environment. The increase in recent decades of non-communicable diseases closely linked to our diet, such as cancer and diabetes, and the fact that food systems account for one third of greenhouse gases, has led a number of international organizations to work to shift people's dietary patterns towards healthier and, at the same time, more sustainable diets.

Anna Bach Faig, a FoodLab group researcher and member of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), has spent two years leading a research project commissioned in 2019 by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The project, titled "Dietary Patterns for Health and Sustainability," had the mission of building international consensus among experts and designing actions to progress towards a more sustainable and healthy food system for Europe. The focus of Bach Faig's research at the UOC has always been the relationship between food and health and in recent years she has added sustainability to this.

She said, "What we put on our plates is so important. For health reasons, and environmental ones, too, we simply can't continue with the current production and consumption model."

Stemming from a meeting held in Copenhagen with international experts in the fields of food and sustainability, the researcher and her team—which included Sergi Fàbregues, member of the UOC's Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences and researcher at its IN3 GenTIC research group, who was responsible for the methodological part—have published an open-access article in *BMC Public Health*, which establishes a shared understanding of what sustainable healthy eating should entail.

The article concludes that there is a need for a multi-stakeholder approach, with the simultaneous execution of an aligned and coherent mix of policies in different fields, such as the formulation of strategic guidelines and changes in legislation.

One important step is the need to update healthy eating guidelines, as most of them do not take sustainability into account: "It is necessary to update existing guidelines, or create and implement new ones. Only 20% of European food-based dietary guidelines incorporate food sustainability," explained the researcher. Recently, AESAN, the Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition, published a report with recommendations on sustainable diets and physical activity for the public.

A mainly plant-based diet is the most healthy and sustainable

"There's broad scientific consensus around the dietary patterns Europeans should adopt to improve their health and sustainability: specifically, there's a need to increase our intake of vegetable-based foods (fruit, vegetables, whole cereals, pulses, nuts and seeds) and cut our consumption of red meat—both processed and unprocessed—and ultra-processed foods high in salt, fat and/or sugar," said the UOC researcher.

This actually means going back to the traditional Mediterranean diet, which is high in vegetables and fish and low in meat (the Japanese diet would be another valid option). In addition to their positive effects upon health, plant-based diets are beneficial for sustainability, given that such foods have a lower environmental impact than animal-based ones, in terms of not only greenhouse gas emissions, but also the use of water, land, nitrogen and phosphorus, affirmed Bach Faig.

"The Mediterranean diet is a good example of a food pattern that is beneficial for health and the environment. Unfortunately, the public's food patterns have become more 'Westernized', with the inclusion of empty calories from refined sugars, fats and alcohol."

This has led to an increase in overweight and obesity, together with a rise in non-communicable chronic diseases. By way of example, according to the European Regional Obesity Report 2022, Spain is one of the European countries with the highest prevalence of child obesity.

Actions for a healthier and more sustainable diet

The other outcome of this research led by the UOC has been the publishing of a WHO report on 'Healthy and sustainable diets: key workstreams in the WHO European Region.' This document brings together a series of lines of action to promote changes in food systems and dietary patterns. These include the need for public procurement processes for meal providers to prioritize healthy and sustainable diets; increasing research into the nutritional value and environmental impact of processed plant-based foods (some of which contain high amounts of salts and sugars); reformulating processed foods, reducing the fat, sugar and salt content, etc.

With changes of this kind, we can achieve a significant reduction in the impact on the planet and improve the public's health. If we bear in mind that "22% of deaths worldwide can be attributed to a high intake of salt and a low intake of whole cereals and fruit, retaining the Mediterranean [diet](#) pattern in our context is crucial for public health," noted the researcher.

Our planet's health is a core strategic theme for the UOC, as is research into nutrition and healthy and sustainable [food](#). The university has just been presented the Catalan Network of Healthy Universities Award for a

master's degree final project on [health](#) promotion with regard to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by a student on its Master's Degree in Nutrition and Health.

More information: Anna Bach-Faig et al, Consensus-building around the conceptualisation and implementation of sustainable healthy diets: a foundation for policymakers, *BMC Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-022-13756-y](#)

WHO report: www.who.int/europe/publication...021-2192-41947-57624

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