

Catalyzing change in our diet



Research gaps

The final forum of the series discussed the need for research that helps policymakers to undertake bold interventions at a population level that can effect behavioural change which leads to a healthy and sustainable diet.

Professor Tim Lang stated that despite vast resources being poured into non-communicable diseases the food system is currently unsustainable, and we need to calibrate a 'good' diet that factors in ecosystems and health and social considerations. Although most effort currently focuses on production issues, looking at consumption and dietary shifts is vital. He emphasised that our current food supply and dietary issues require a multi-disciplinary and multi-criteria approach. The latter should focus on six overlapping areas: food quality, health, the environment, social and cultural issues relating to diet, economics and governance. A crucial challenge is creating food cultures that live within environmental limits. Whilst culture has plasticity, there are very few policy frameworks for fashioning dietary changes at a population level.

Dr Brent Loken examined further the level at which policy should focus. The scale and pace of the problem suggests that rapid transformation of the entire food system is required. As a result his approach has shifted from seeking small-scale changes to large-scale population-level interventions, as localised thinking can neglect large economic and political forces that can massively impact small communities. Although it is easy to assume people want to adopt a good diet or protect natural resources, other factors can easily override these drives. Thus research is needed to understand the leverage points that alter food cultures. Despite a generally good evidence base regarding what constitutes a healthy and sustainable diet, telling people what to do is ineffective. However, universal targets and guidelines can help policymakers and governments to make effective interventions.

Professor Theresa Marteau's research seeks to generate evidence regarding effective or ineffective ways of changing behaviour. Food policy needs to tackle the availability and affordability of certain types of food in order to create sustainable diets. To do this, we need to embolden policymakers by increasing public support for policies that encourage behavioural change. One possibility is that there is evidence to suggest that communicating the evidence and efficacy of an intervention can make a policy acceptable to the public. Another, although challenging ethically, is to reverse the usual progression whereby changes in belief lead to behavioural change. Instead, changing behaviour, as with the smoking ban, can lead to cultural shifts. For example, changing public sector environments could signal model behaviour, and more studies are needed on how great an impact such policies could have.

Wicked problems and questions generated by the open discussion

Have we reached an understanding concerning exactly what is a sustainable and healthy diet?

Although there is a large evidence base, there is still disagreement regarding exactly what diets would be suitable for environmental and human health, and indeed how far we should go in creating universal recommendations. Should our approach be to create a global concept of a sustainable and healthy diet or to have regionalised versions that factor in local contexts?

How can the public be empowered to make good decisions? Healthy and sustainable diets must not be separated, but may be in conflict. This can lead to government departments and media giving mixed

messages, which in turn can cause public scepticism. Clear communication and improved education are key drivers that can empower the public to make good decisions.

Should food policy intervene at a population or local level or would a mixture of these be most effective? The urgency and scale of the problem seems to dictate that population-level interventions, which can have the quickest and greatest impact, are needed. However, cultural influences on food choice are very strong so local or community-level interventions and changes to food environments could catalyze behavioural change. Deciding which groups—religious, cultural, linguistic, geographical, age-related—to target and which interventions would be most effective needs further research.

What are the opportunities for policy to intervene that would lead to large-scale changes in our diets? Disruptions such as war or food scares can have a large impact on people's food choices. Policy 'nimbleness', and the ability and preparedness to seize such opportunities for change, is crucial.

Can food policy meaningfully change within the current economic and political status quo? It is important to work with existing large-scale economic forces as these currently have the most leverage. However, most discussions assume that the current global system will be maintained, but is even more radical thinking required?

Witness profiles

Professor Tim Lang

Professor of Food Policy, Centre for Food Policy, Department of Sociology, City, University of London

After a PhD in social psychology at Leeds University, Tim became a hill farmer in the 1970s in the Forest of Bowland, Lancashire. This shifted his attention to food policy and for years he has engaged in academic and public research and debate about its direction, locally and globally, and how policy can make food serve the environment, health, social justice and citizens. Tim founded the Centre for Food Policy at City, University London in 1994 and, amongst other things, he has also been a consultant with WHO (e.g. auditing the Global Top 25 Food Companies on food and health, 2005), FAO (e.g. co-chairing the FAO definition of sustainable diets, 2010) and UNEP (e.g. co-writing its 2012 Avoiding Future Famines report). He has also been a special advisor to four House of Commons Select Committee inquiries.



Dr Brent Loken

Science Liaison Office, EAT Foundation, Oslo

Brent is a social entrepreneur and an interdisciplinary, conservation scientist involved in research pertaining to the integration of sustainability science and resilience thinking regarding the role of NGOs, power and politics in conservation initiatives. He currently works for EAT, an Oslo based organisation working to transform the global food system to feed 9 billion people healthy and sustainable diets. For the past 20 years he has been involved in coordinating, building and organising large projects and teams in various contexts around the world, most recently as Executive Director and co-founder of the NGO Integrated conservation.



Professor Theresa Marteau

Director of the Behaviour and Health Research Unit, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge

Theresa is Director of the Behaviour and Health Research Unit in the Department of Public Health and Primary Care, and Fellow and Director of Studies in Psychological and Behavioural Sciences at Christ's College, Cambridge. Her research interests include the development and evaluation of interventions to change behaviour (principally diet, physical activity, tobacco and alcohol consumption) to improve population health and reduce health inequalities, with a particular focus on targeting non-conscious processes. She also works on risk perception and communication, particularly of biomarker-derived risks, and their weak links with behaviour change as well as the acceptability to the public and to policymakers of population-level intervention to change behavior.



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