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Briefing

Sustainable Diets: the challenge ahead

Our diets have changed beyond recognition in the past 50 years. Increasing agricultural production and globalisation of food supplies has led to low food prices and new models of food marketing and retail. Urbanisation and changing incomes globally are also changing the global diet. One consequence is that we are eating more meat and dairy products than ever before and increasingly from industrial, high input systems.

This has serious consequences for our health, the environment and global food security. We need to shift towards a more sustainable diet, and that includes reducing the amount of meat and dairy we eat as well as eating less junk food and consuming more sustainably produced food. This will require political, food industry and public action and action at local, national and international level.

The UK Government, through its Green Food Project, has said it will bring together stakeholders to work on defining a sustainable diet.¹ Progress is likely to be slow and it is unclear how much the stakeholders will be willing to tackle the meat issue and whether any concrete actions will result.

This briefing outlines some of the issues and new research and presents some challenges for government and industry.

The challenges

The past 50 years has seen a dramatic shift in our diets. Never before have we produced and consumed so much food. Agriculture is the biggest user of land and fresh water globally, and is a main driver of land use change. Meat production has quadrupled in the last half century. An astonishing 75 per cent of agricultural land is devoted to raising animals for food. This means that our increasing meat and dairy consumption is driving land use change and unsustainable fresh water abstraction.

While the UK government has recognised the issue of unsustainable diets, there is huge reluctance to tackle the issue.² But diets are a political issue: impacting on health, biodiversity, resource use, food security and climate. The lack of leadership from the Government has meant that food manufacturers and producers are also unwilling to engage in discussions and take action on sustainable diets.

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Climate change

Globally, agriculture accounts for 12–14 per cent of direct greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, including from fertilisers and livestock. Land use change, mainly from deforestation, including land clearance for pasture or crop production, is responsible for another 18 per cent.³ Meat and dairy production is responsible for much of these emissions and is expected to double before 2050.⁴ In the UK there are some serious questions being asked about our ability to meet the emissions reductions set out in the Climate Change Act 2008. The Committee on Climate Change has stated that a reduction in meat and dairy consumption would reduce our emissions far more effectively than with technological fixes.⁵

Health concerns

While eating meat in moderation can be an important part of the diet, providing protein, iron and other nutrients, the health impacts of over consumption are well documented.⁶ Experts have warned that excessive amounts of meat and dairy puts people at greater risk of chronic diseases, such as coronary heart disease and some cancers.⁷

The World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) recommends that people eat no more than 500g of red meat per week, and little processed meat, in order to significantly reduce the risk of cancer.⁸ Obesity is another risk of a high meat fat diet, and it is on the increase globally, as developing nations add more meat to their diets.⁹ In the UK, obesity costs the NHS £5.1 billion per year in direct costs alone.¹⁰

However not all meat has the same health impacts. The way animals are produced can affect the nutritional quality of the meat and dairy produced. Pasture-reared beef has been found to contain less fat and has a higher proportion of omega-3 fatty acids compared with intensively reared beef.¹¹

Healthy Planet Eating

In 2010 Friends of the Earth published research by Oxford University's Health Promotion group, which modelled the health impacts and cost savings of reduced meat consumption. It found that eating meat no more than three times a week would save 45,000 lives a year (from cancer, heart disease and stroke) and save the NHS 1.2bn a year.

Healthy Planet Eating – How lower meat diets can save lives and the planet
http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/healthy_planet_eating.pdf

Food security

The impact of current consumption levels and trends on global food security is considerable. Meat is a resource intensive food, requiring vast amounts of land and water to produce it. A report for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2009 calculated that reducing meat consumption in the industrialised world and balancing it worldwide to the 2000 level of 37.4 kg/capita in 2050 would free an estimated 400 million tons of cereal per year for human consumption – enough to cover the annual calorie need for 1.2 billion people.¹² Stabilising global consumption at the WCRF recommended levels, which amounts to 26kg a year, would free up even more. Oxfam have calculated that swapping just one meal from beef to beans could save around 6,000 litres of water.¹³

But these issues are rarely recognised or addressed in global discussions on the current food price crisis or on-going debates about global food and water security. There is an

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urgent need to reduce meat consumption in affluent societies to free up resources and allow for some increases in developing regions where under-nutrition is a lead cause of poor health.

What's the latest on sustainable diets?

Following on from the growing body of independent analysis that a lower meat diet is good for our health and our planet, there have been attempts to define a sustainable diet. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) defines sustainable diets as:

“Those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources.”¹⁴

Several countries have also attempted to define a sustainable diet:

- The Health Council of the Netherlands produced “Guidelines for a healthy diet: the ecological perspective” in 2011.¹⁵ Its guidelines for a healthy and environmentally friendly diet include a less animal-based/more plant-based diet.
- France’s Environment and Energy Management Agency¹⁶ and the German Council for Sustainable Development¹⁷ also provide advice for healthy, sustainable diets.
- Sweden was the first country to produce guidelines for a sustainable diet.¹⁸ Its proposal to the EU to adopt these guidelines was subsequently withdrawn when the European Commission found recommendations to eat more locally produced food contravened free trade rules.¹⁹

Public interest groups too have proposed more sustainable diets to tackle the issues they are working on:

- Friends of the Earth and Compassion in World Farming’s research *Eating the Planet?* (2009) showed that a move to lower meat diets in the West – based on World Health Organisation guidelines - would help protect natural resources and enable us to move away from factory farms and damaging intensive crop production. It would also allow for fair global food distribution and nutritious diets for people in developing countries.²⁰
- Oxfam produced *The Food Transformation* (2012) their guide to food equality.²¹ It advocates that a lower meat diet is essential to tackle climate change and help ensure that there is a fair and equitable distribution of food and access to water.
- WWF’s *Livewell* report (2011)²² adapts the Food Standard Agency’s ‘eatwell’²³ plate’, which recommended that the average diet contains no more than 12 per cent meat and fish, and 15 per cent dairy to meet the Government’s targets set out in the Climate Change Act 2008.
- The Stockholm International Water Institute’s *Feeding a Thirsty World* (2012) concluded there would not be enough water to produce the required amount of food

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in the future.²⁴ This prompted a series of news stories with titles such as “Food shortages could turn most of the world vegetarian by 2050, warn leading scientists”.²⁵
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- The Sustainable Consumption Institute’s report ‘*What’s Cooking?*’ (2012) found that only by radically reducing our meat consumption could we hope to keep global temperature rises below 2 degrees (along with other measures).²⁷

What needs to be done?

Friends of the Earth is advocating sustainable diets for positive outcomes for the environment, health, food security and the economy. Action is needed at a local, national and global level, requiring firm commitments by governments and the food industry:

- The Government and other stakeholders need to acknowledge the need for urgent action in this area, set a policy and targets for more sustainable diets and undertake research to identify the best mechanisms for change.
- Existing official healthy eating and environmental behaviour guidelines should be modified to include the benefits of eating less meat.
- Clear standards should be introduced to ensure that meals paid for by taxpayers in schools, hospitals and care homes, and in all Government departments, reflect environmental and health factors and rely on less but better meat and dairy in menus.
- The UK and other EU Governments should shift subsidies from factory farming to the production of better-quality meat and a healthier overall food production balance through diverse, resilient and sustainable agriculture.
- European and international agencies need to acknowledge and act on the positive role that sustainable diets can play in tackling global food and water security and environmental problems. Targets and measures should be set to address excessive meat and dairy consumption, ensure more equitable distribution and start to shift the trend away from investment in industrial livestock farming.
- UK and European policy makers should introduce labelling for grass-fed meat and dairy products, as they are healthier and more planet-friendly than factory farmed options. This would help people make more informed food choices and stimulate the market for these products.
- Industry has a key role in trialling new products that have a reduced impact, talking to their customers about more sustainable diets, supporting farmers that produce grass-fed meat and dairy and promoting their products.

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⁷ For a summary of evidence see Friends of the Earth, Healthy Planet Eating 2010

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²³ <http://www.food.gov.uk/northern-ireland/nutritionni/eatwellplate/>

²⁴ http://www.siwi.org/documents/Resources/Reports/Feeding_a_thirsty_world_2012worldwaterweek_report_31.pdf

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