

8.O. Workshop: Healthy and Sustainable Diets for European Countries

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Organised by: EUPHA (FN)

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Dietary habits are a major determinant of the global burden of non-communicable diseases. Public health organisations have traditionally focussed on the adverse direct physiological effects associated with specific dietary components. However, dietary habits have far broader impacts on population health and health of the planet, including threats to climate, biodiversity and ecosystem resilience. While there have been substantial improvements in some aspects of European diets over the past decades, concern has been expressed that health agencies, including the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe, have not included sustainability as an integral part of multi-sectoral food policy. Sustainable diets are nutritionally adequate, safe, and healthy, while having low environmental impact. They are rich in vegetables, fruit and whole grains, with limited intake of saturated fat, trans fats, sugar and salt.

In October 2015, Martin McKee, the then President of EUPHA, suggested that the Food and Nutrition Section of EUPHA might assist public health leadership in this field by preparing a policy paper outlining the current state of scientific knowledge regarding sustainability of healthy nutrition, and calling for a greater alignment of its health and sustainability messages on diet and nutrition. Such a statement would be targeted at European leaders operating in the fields of health and nutrition, agriculture, food safety, health, education, consumer affairs and environmental protection. The aim would be to encourage a broader perspective on sustainable food and nutrition policy, including by bringing together the dual objectives of tackling not only the present burden of diet-related non-communicable diseases, but also future priorities for public and planetary health.

Accordingly, an appropriate working group of the EUPHA Food and Nutrition Section was formed, and this group carried out the work. Members of the working group will present the report, key findings, and recommendations, to the participants at the workshop. It is expected that the group discussions will provide useful suggestions for follow-up and future action by EUPHA and by its Section on Food and Nutrition. Specific emphasis will be given to challenges for public health in Europe in relation to the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The aims of the workshop are to:

1. Present and discuss the Section's paper on "Healthy and Sustainable Diets for European Countries";
2. Determine next actions for EUPHA, for its Food and Nutrition Section, and for the public health community in general.

After the presentations, a group discussion with audience (10 min) will be moderated by Tim Lang, City University, UK (5-minute feedback).

Key messages:

- EUPHA's Food and Nutrition sections considers the promotion of sustainable diets a key lever to improve food systems and public health in Europe.
- EUPHA's Food and Nutrition section advocates for sustainable and healthy diets and calls for integration of sustainability aspects in European food and nutrition policies.

Background and methodology

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At the European Public Health Conference held in Milan, in October 2015, the EUPHA Food and Nutrition Section held two workshops, at which both dietary healthiness objectives and dietary sustainability objectives (especially in the context of global warming) were both highlighted. Noting that these two series of objectives appeared to be only rarely brought together in discussion in the same papers, or even in the same journals, the Governing Council of EUPHA challenged the Section to carry out a literature review with a view to making combined recommendations, for dietary healthiness and sustainability, which would be relevant to European countries. The Section Committee established a working group to carry out this review. It was agreed that a systematic review was not suited to the complex issues to be studied, and a more pragmatic methodology was used. The first scoping of papers was carried out by two postgraduate students. On the basis of the initial 92 papers they read, the subject area was divided into six sub-areas, each to be addressed by two members of the working group. Each pair added further papers to the original 92, as according to the ways their studies led them. Their various sets of findings were shared at a two-day workshop held in Slovenia in summer 2016, following which these sets of findings were combined into the first draft of the report. A short version of this was presented to the EUPHA Council in November 2016, and the full report finalised in Spring 2017.

The wider context for the Healthy and Sustainable Diets for European Countries' report. How should EUPHA use this?

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Methods and findings

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Food consumption in Europe is changing: some countries are moving towards healthy and environment-friendly diets, while others are moving away from them. Despite economic and geographic differences, the direction of change seems to be towards a common European dietary platform, with local and regional variations. Through the analysis of FAO Food Balance Sheets, household budget survey, and data from pan-EU projects, temporal trends have been identified over the last decades: increased availability of meat; increased trend of out of home eating; and increased demand and consumption of locally produced food. Geographical, cultural and socio-economical differences define European diets: for instance, the supply of vegetables is lower in northern countries than in southern and eastern ones; a geographical gradient is observed for fruit as well, whose supply is at its lowest in eastern countries. Women are more likely than men to eat fruit and vegetable; similarly, highly educated people consume more fruit and vegetables than people from low socio-economic status.

The political reaction has so far been inadequate. The report highlights the roles of the European Union and its regulatory framework, that of the food supply chain, including the agricultural sector, the food processing industry, and the distribution sector, and the role of consumer organisations and public health bodies.

Sustainability is a difficult concept for policymakers and relies on inter-sectoral responses and thinking. There is a need for various approaches, from improving efficiency of production to creating a more equitable balance of power, with a view to changing eating patterns and reducing food waste along the whole supply chain. There are many potential interventions to change the way we eat, including regulation and legislation, fiscal measures, changing the environment of (and possibilities in) choice, enabling and supporting, education, information and awareness raising.

Recommendations

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Without aiming to exhaustive, the assessment of the literature and workshops on sustainable diets by the EUPHA Food and Nutrition Section show considerable evidence regarding the role of food and human diet on public and planetary health. Diets and food systems in Europe affect environment and public health in both Europe and low- and middle income countries.

Despite important commitments such as SDG 2030, RIO, decade of Nutrition action, progress on sustainable development and food systems has been patchy. There are useful experiences in various European countries to build on. Although there is considered momentum around the topic

and consumer awareness, experiences are mostly limited to ad hoc and small scale initiatives on the ground. Comprehensive action is lacking in Europe.

EUPHA food and nutrition sections considers the promotion of sustainable diets is the key lever to change food systems. Concerted action at scale is urgently needed to produce tangible effects and improve population health. Although food and nutrition policies are powerful instruments to promote population changes, to date, sustainability is not well integrated in these policies.

The way forward

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Statements, recommendations and reports on healthy and sustainable diets are useful in promoting action towards more sustainable and healthy diets in European countries and beyond. However, that is not enough. We need to have commitments from key players followed by concrete action to change our unsustainable production and consumption patterns. Sustainability needs to be well integrated in to food and nutrition policies.

We need to learn from past failures and build on success stories. Political will and leadership together with intersectoral cooperation that involve key stakeholders is crucial.

- Policy makers should have sustainable nutrition in the agenda, and use all available tools to promote it, including public procurement, fiscal policies and educational system.
- International actors like WHO could incorporate sustainability on food based dietary guidelines and develop accountability mechanisms.
- All actors in the food chain are needed to produce, promote and distribute sustainable and healthy products with useful consumer information.
- Public health experts, institutions, and non-governmental organisations could be active stakeholders in influencing policy processes through their expertise and dialogue from consumers to political leaders and European Commission.

There are processes that could have great impact such as CAP2020 reform. Moreover, there are potentially useful international activities such as United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025 that offers operational framework to implement commitments made at 2030 Agenda for sustainable development with a possibility to create action networks.

EUPHA's food and nutrition section will collaborate with EUPHA, its members and other NGO's in advocating sustainable and healthy diets, facilitate and promote engagement of public health community in this this process, and promote and disseminate research to ensure best possible public health outcomes.