

## Agriculture Policy Briefing



Transitioning our food systems is a unique opportunity to implement cross sectorial public policies, writes Guillaume Lhermie veterinarian, professor of animal health economics and policy, affiliated research at the One Health Consortium, and director of the Simpson Centre for food and agricultural policy, at the University of Calgary. Photograph courtesy of rawpixel.com

# We have the power to shape a food system for both people and the planet

We are facing interdependent challenges that call for a shift in our agri-food system. And there is one way forward: the One Health way.

Guillaume Lhermie

Opinion



We understand the true worth of things when we invest significant effort in defending them. This sentiment holds especially true for our food system.

There is now ample evidence to show that the Western diet (low in fruits and vegetables, high in fat, salt and sugar) and food habits are a disaster for our health (and arguably for our palate). On March 1, 2024, the World Health Organization highlighted that one in eight people in the world were now living with obesity. While

obesity is a disease triggered by multiple factors, nutrition is a major one, and the WHO is pointing the finger on public interventions to regulate “harmful marketing” and implement “fiscal and pricing policies to promote healthy diets.”

It turns out that Western diets are also costly for the health of the planet. Yes, we tripled food production in 50 years. Yes, the share of household budget (less than 15 per cent in 2021) dedicated to food has steadily decreased, notwithstanding a six per cent inflation for consumers in 2023 and another expected four per cent in 2024, but it came at the expense of environmental pressures, degrading soil and water health, enhancing deforestation and endangering wildlife. The latter posing a serious threat to human health, as viral pandemics are most likely to be wild animal borne diseases transmitted to humans.

And the last straw that broke the cattle’s back: the price of commodities is highly volatile on a globalized market and quite often not satisfactory at the farm gate, jeopardizing the renewal of aging generations of producers.

We are facing interdependent challenges that call for a shift in our agri-food system. And there is one way forward: the One Health way.

“One Health” is an approach recognizing the connections between the people, plants, animals, and their environment, aiming at fostering inter-sectoral interventions. Food security depends on agricultural systems health, livestock, and fisheries health, and affects human health. This means that agricultural, food and health policies have to work in concert. Technological solutions are nice to have and will improve efficiency, but will not do enough to sustain the food system. Shadow costs linked to our food habits, like obesity and cardiovascular diseases, or antibiotic and pesticide resistance, will not fade. An agri-food transition could be achieved by mobilizing a set of public policies targeting producers and consumers.

First and foremost, it is time to strongly encourage disclosure of production practices and commitments of supply chains actors. Disclosure is key to benchmark and communicate transparently the social and environmental stewardship of production practices.

Disclosure benefits consumers, empowering them as food citizens to advocate for the agri-food system they desire, ultimately benefiting planetary health.

Disclosure benefits producers, as Canadian agriculture is actu-

ally one of the most sustainable worldwide, but it has to be turned into a competitive advantage. Canada is competing on an international market.

If agriculture prioritizes sustainability over competitiveness at all costs, it signifies that sustainability should become a competitive advantage.

Extra financial reporting will guide investors in their portfolio acquisition, and in the longer term could also be used in international trade negotiations. As an example, the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) already offers options for specific measures protecting human, animal and plant health.

Disclosure of practices is useless if practices do not change. Firming up on-farm technology adoption with incentives will help. But most importantly, subsidies and investments should focus on developing agricultural systems that are “diversity” centered.

Diversity in crop and pulse culture, diversity in articulating animal agriculture—a natural fertilizer provider—and cropping, diversity in outputs production—agriculture and energy nexus. Ecosystems services, such as carbon and water storage or pollinators preservation offered by highly virtuous agricultural

systems using parsimoniously synthetic inputs, such as regenerative agriculture, should be properly rewarded. Encouraging diversification will also have a positive effect on rural development.

The necessary shift towards more diverse agri-food systems will probably lead in a short term to a decrease in total production. This implies that producers and supply chain actors should be protected from unfair international competition, and citizens pay for the price of ecosystem services. This also means that we consumers need to align our diet with a new model. Education on what a sustainable plate is, as well as stringent policies to curb consumption of products with low nutritional values, most often ultra-processed with ingredients sourced on international markets have to be (re)inforced.

Studies show it is possible to maintain global food security if this condition is met. On the long term, health expenditures savings could be reinvested in more virtuous, localized agri-food systems.

Transitioning our food systems is a unique opportunity to implement cross sectorial public policies. As the industry and the public are now familiar with the energy transition, it is time to focus on the one which exhibits the potential to preserve and restore human, animal, plant and environmental health.

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