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42 policies and actions to orient food systems towards healthier diets for all

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In January 2020, the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) and Johns Hopkins University began compiling recommendations made by major international reports on how to orient food systems for nutrition. This was the first step towards our ultimate goal of identifying a group of actions essential in every context to lay the foundations of a nutritious food system – the policies and programmes which any policymaker serious about improving diets and nutrition would enact at a minimum.

The context was the increasing number of international processes designed to provide guidance on food systems for nutrition, including the ongoing development of the *Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition* of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

As part of this process, a long-list of 42 policies and actions with the potential to orient the food system towards healthy diets was generated. Aligned with the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) report *Food Systems and Nutrition*, the list is made up of actions with the potential to effect change through food supply chains, food environments and consumers. Actions to change principles, governance and political processes, although critically important to frame and enable the delivery of these actions, were not the focus of the project.

While the actions are focused on healthy diets, the next phase will assess how they can synergise with and support efforts to advance environmental sustainability.

Introduction

This Brief sets out 42 policies and actions with potential to get food systems working for healthier diets for all. It includes actions which can directly shift food systems towards increasing the availability, affordability, appeal/acceptability of high quality, safe, nutritious foods in food environments, and away from nutrient-poor refined foods, products high in sugars, fats, and/or salt (e.g. fried foods sold by street vendors) and pre-packaged “ultra-processed” snacks.

Food systems’ role in improving nutrition

The 42 actions emerge from recent international reports on **the role of food systems** in reducing the global burden of malnutrition (wasting, stunting, micronutrient deficiencies, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases). These evidence-based reports show that **actions throughout food systems have the potential to improve nutrition.**

Large scope of action in food systems

The **scope of potential action in food systems is large.** Food systems include a huge amount of activity related to producing, processing, distributing, preparing and consuming food. The **42 actions here represent a wide scope of possible food system solutions** across production, supply chain, food environments and consumers. To set boundaries, and to emphasise how actions can have direct impact on healthy diets, actions were limited to those with a clear pathway to impact on availability, affordability, appeal/acceptability and safety. For this reason, actions on broader principles, governance

and political processes were out of scope

How the 42 actions were identified

The starting point for identifying the actions was a **review of major international evidence-based expert reports on food systems which include detailed recommendations on how to orient food systems towards healthier diets** (details on page 3). A set of inclusion criteria was rigorously applied to select these reports, leading to eight being included from an original list of 45 reports. A list of all the recommended actions from the reports was recorded in detail. A pathway-to-impact was formulated to assess if each action could plausibly have impact on the availability, affordability, appeal/acceptability of food. Actions were reworded where necessary so they clearly communicate the specific way they can lead to healthier diets. This led to a list of 42 specific actions with the potential to improve diets if fully implemented. The actions are shown on pages 4 to 8, along with the potential impact of each action on availability, affordability, appeal/acceptability of different types of foods for the relevant population.

Next steps of the project

The next stages of the project are to:

- a. Select a number of actions from the 42 that are essential in every context to laying the foundations of a nutritious food system for all – the policies and programmes which any policymaker who is serious about improving diets and nutrition would enact at a minimum.
- b. Integrate the 42 actions into the Food Systems Dashboard.
- c. Assess the synergies and trade-offs between the 42 actions with environmental sustainability and livelihoods to assess if and how they can be used to support these goals.

Method

Step 1. Identify evidence-based expert reports.

The first step was to identify evidence-based expert reports with clearly articulated recommendations for reorienting food systems towards healthier diets. An initial list of potential reports was prepared drawing on reports already known to the research team and an extensive review of additional compilations and searches on relevant websites. The result was a list of 45 potentially relevant reports, all published since 2013.

Each report was reviewed against four criteria for inclusion: (1) deals explicitly with how food systems can be reoriented towards healthier diets in at least part of the report (2) makes detailed recommendations of policies and actions on how to reorient food systems towards healthier diets (3) provides an evidence-informed review of the topic with references to research studies; and (4) indication of peer-review.

Recommendations had to be action-oriented and specific – broader perspectives that were not accompanied by specific actions were not included (e.g. “Align policies with health outcomes” or “Improve the science-policy interface”). Reports which referenced nutrition, but only included generic recommendations on food security (e.g. producing more food or increasing rural incomes) rather than specifically improving diets were excluded. Reports focused on food and the environment were largely excluded on the basis that recommendations were primarily related to either (1) changing consumer behaviours to improve environmental sustainability (e.g. shifting demand for meat to combat climate change) and/or (2) changing

agricultural production methods to improve the environment (e.g. different farming methods). From the original list of 45 reports, eight met all of the criteria. ⁽¹⁻⁸⁾

Step 2. Extract actions. The reports were reviewed in detail to identify recommended actions. Actions were included that aimed to increase the availability, affordability, appeal, nutritional quality or safety of nutritious foods and/or decrease the availability, affordability or appeal of foods, snacks and beverages high in energy, sugars, fat and/or salt. Recommendations with no clear pathway towards availability, affordability, etc. were not included. For example, a handful of reports made recommendations on decreasing the amount of antibiotics used in animals to combat anti-microbial resistance. While this is important for improving the overall health of the population, there was no clear pathway presented for how this would specifically improve the availability, affordability, etc. of nutritious foods. Similarly, actions that focused only on changing production methods with no clear pathway to impact were not included. Recommended actions were entered into a spreadsheet using near-verbatim language to how it was presented in the report.

Step 3. Combine and consolidate similar actions. Many reports recommended similar actions, but with different details on effective implementation. For example, one report recommended donating city land for urban farming, another report recommended providing training programmes and funding for women to farm urban land while another recommended building markets exclusively for urban-grown food. These various details were combined into a more comprehensive action on delivering urban agriculture through funding, training and provision of inputs. In

order to ensure that recommendations were combined in such a way that did not lose the original intent or detail from the report, each one was taken through a decision tree to determine if the original report intended the specific recommendation to be part of a more comprehensive approach. If it was, it was combined into a more comprehensive action; if not it was included as its own action. The effect of this process was to produce a list of actions that were both specific and broad enough to plausibly have impact. The final outcome of this process was the list of 42 Actions.

Step 4. Further clarify and refine actions according to their pathway to impact. Each of the 42 Actions were then sense-checked against a pathway to impact to ensure their impact on availability, affordability, etc. was clear. A pathway to impact was written for each action detailing how the action was expected to impact (1) the supply chain, (2) food environments, (3) consumer behaviour and (4) consumption. The wording of the actions was then further clarified and refined to ensure it clearly communicated the specific way in which the action could lead to healthier diets.

42 policies and actions to orient food systems towards healthier diets for all



Agricultural actions

	Action	What impact could the action have?
1	Deliver agricultural extension programmes, infrastructure and education to support farmers to grow and market nutritious foods	Increase availability and affordability of nutritious foods to <i>local populations</i>
2	(Re)design agricultural development programmes intended to increase food producers' income to also focus on producing, and accessing markets for, nutritious crops and providing nutrition education	Increase availability and affordability of nutritious foods to <i>local populations</i>
3	Provide women with agricultural assets, training and support to increase agriculture productivity and output, and access to markets to sell nutritious foods	Increase availability and affordability of nutritious foods to <i>local populations</i>
4	Provide low-income households, including women, with support for animal-husbandry and training for animal rearing, safety management and processing along with nutrition education	Increase availability, affordability and appeal of animal-source foods to <i>producer households</i>
5	Support the production and consumption of nutritious indigenous crops through agrobiodiverse cropping systems, agricultural extension, breeding programmes, subsidies, land tenure rights, regulatory protection, market development and public awareness	Increase availability and appeal of nutritious foods to <i>producer households and all other populations</i>
6	Deliver (peri-)urban agriculture programmes which provide land and other inputs, support local market development and deliver training and nutrition education	Increase availability, access, affordability and appeal of nutritious foods to <i>urban populations</i>
7	Provide inputs and training to develop and maintain home gardens along with nutrition education	Increase availability, access, affordability and appeal of nutritious foods to <i>populations with access to home gardens</i> (i.e., cultivated plots around or close to people's homes)



International trade actions

Action

What impact could the action have?

8

Design **trade policies to prioritise the supply of nutritious foods** over foods manufactured high in fats, sugars and salt and their ingredient, taking account of the benefits of local and international supply chains in different contexts, the protection smallholder farmers, and the availability of complementary policies

Increase availability and affordability of **nutritious foods** and reduce availability and affordability of **foods high in fats, sugars and salt and increase** to *all populations*



Research, processing and technology actions

Action

What impact could the action have?

9

Prioritise **high-nutrient density when breeding crops** in conventional crop breeding programmes and when selecting crops to grow

Increase availability of **micronutrients** in foods already available to *all populations*

10

Implement **biofortification programmes** including breeding, support for adoption and market development and public awareness campaigns

Increase availability of **micronutrients** in foods already available to *local populations*

11

Develop innovative **postharvest storage technologies, packaging and processing techniques** for nutritious foods to reduce nutrient losses, remove anti-nutrients, prevent contamination and reduce food losses

Increase availability, appeal and safety of **nutritious foods** throughout the year to *all populations*

12

Develop **new processed products** that extend the shelf life of nutritious foods, make them more convenient for consumers to prepare, and reduce food and nutrient losses

Increase availability, affordability and appeal of **nutritious foods** throughout the year to *all populations*

13

Implement mandatory **large-scale food fortification** programmes

Increase availability of **micronutrients** in staple foods already available to *all populations*

14

Reformulate processed food to reduce fats, sugars and salt

Reduce availability of **fats, sugars and salt** in foods already available to *all populations*

15

Research and develop **alternative proteins sources** and share the research in the public domain

Increase availability, affordability and appeal of **alternative micronutrient-rich protein sources** and reduce appeal of **red meat** to *high red-meat consumers*



Supply chain infrastructure actions

	Action	What impact could the action have?
16	Build and improve roads, transportation, storage, cold chain and logistical distribution infrastructure to enable the delivery of safe, perishable nutritious foods to urban and rural markets	Increase availability, affordability and safety of nutritious foods in markets serving <i>local populations</i>
17	Support the development of e-commerce platforms to help producers create markets for nutritious foods and improve access for populations with limited mobility or in underserved areas	Increase access to nutritious foods to <i>under-served populations</i>
18	Maintain and upgrade markets selling nutritious foods to low-income communities and ensure they have access to infrastructure to enhance food safety and reduce foods losses	Increase availability, affordability, access and safety of nutritious foods in markets serving <i>low-income populations</i>
19	Empower smallholder farmers and small farm businesses to access markets for nutritious foods by establishing farm associations, cooperatives and food hubs, developing mechanisms for collective bargaining and increasing access to price information	Increase availability of nutritious foods in markets serving <i>local populations</i>
20	Develop infrastructure to reduce loss and waste of nutritious foods and increase its redistribution	Increase availability nutritious foods to <i>low-income and all populations</i>
21	Mandate training programmes for food producers and retailers on storage, processing and packaging to reduce spoilage and contamination of nutritious foods	Increase availability and safety of nutritious foods to <i>all populations</i>



Financial actions

	Action	What impact could the action have?
22	Redirect agriculture subsidies from staple crops to increasing production of nutritious foods	Increase availability and affordability of nutritious foods and reduce availability and affordability of refined staples and ingredients used in manufactured foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>all populations</i>

23	Provide nutritious foods and meals at lower prices at point-of-purchase by subsidising public distribution programmes, state-managed stores, public restaurants, and other forms of subsidy programmes	Increase affordability and access to nutritious foods to <i>populations with access to the programmes</i>
24	Focus cash transfer, voucher and food delivery programmes on increasing the availability, affordability and appeal of nutritious foods and limiting the appeal of foods high in fats, sugars and salt	Increase availability, affordability and appeal of nutritious foods and reduce the affordability and appeal of foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>low-income populations with access to the programmes</i>
25	Implement taxes to decrease affordability and incentivise reformulation of sugary drinks and foods high in fats, sugars and salt food	Decrease affordability of sugary drinks and foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>all populations</i>



Public institution actions

	Action	What impact could the action have?
26	Implement comprehensive school food programmes , incorporating food and meals, nutrition standards, nutrition education, school gardens, food personnel training, food skills and literacy.	Increase availability, affordability and access of nutritious foods and reduce access to foods high in fats, sugars and salt to school-aged children
27	Adopt a public food procurement policy that applies nutritional guidelines to food procured for public institutions and prioritises purchasing from smallholders, local, family and/or sustainable food producers	Increase availability, affordability and access of nutritious foods and reduce access to foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>people served by public institutions</i>



Business incentives

	Action	What impact could the action have?
28	Provide investment funds and technical support for start-ups and small- and medium-sized food processing business to produce, market and promote nutritious foods targeted at low-income consumers	Increase availability, affordability and appeal of nutritious foods to <i>low-income populations</i>

29	Use financial incentives and planning regulations to drive the establishment of new supermarkets, fresh food markets, shops and street vendors in underserved communities	Increase availability and access to nutritious foods to <i>underserved populations</i>
30	Provide incentives to fast food outlets, street food vendors and food service trucks to place nutritious options more prominently or in place of foods high in fats, sugar, salt, reformulate their recipes and promote only nutritious foods	Increase availability and appeal of nutritious foods and reduce availability and appeal of foods high in fat, sugar and salt to <i>local populations</i>
31	Provide technical assistance, equipment, cost-sharing etc. to businesses to provide nutritious foods to their employees at lower prices	Increase availability, affordability and access to nutritious foods to <i>adults in workplaces</i>
32	Develop independent accountability mechanisms to monitor and publicly report on business progress towards increasing the availability, access, affordability and appeal of nutritious foods and decreasing it for foods high in fats, sugars and salt	Increase availability, access, affordability and appeal of nutritious foods and decrease for foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>all populations</i>

Regulations and laws

	Action	What impact could the action have?
33	Set mandatory limits on trans fats, sugar, salt/sodium and/or saturated fat in packaged foods	Reduce availability of foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>all populations</i>
34	Require nutrition labelling on packages/menus to indicate if foods are high in calories, fats, sugars and/or salt and/or in positive nutrients	Reduce appeal and availability of foods high in fat, sugar and salt and increases appeal of nutritious foods to <i>all populations</i>
35	Restrict all forms of marketing, advertising and in-store promotions of HFSS foods, particularly to children	Reduce appeal foods high in fat, sugar and salt to <i>children</i>
36	Use zoning laws to restrict numbers of “fast food” outlets and vendors in select geographic areas	Reduce availability and access of foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>local populations</i>
37	Establish and enforce safety regulations, surveillance mechanisms and protocols throughout the supply chain for nutritious foods, taking into consideration the importance of access to affordable nutritious foods among low-income populations through the informal sector	Increase safety of nutritious foods to <i>all populations</i>



Education and public awareness actions

	Action	What impact could the action have?
38	Deliver culturally-appropriate nutrition education, food literacy and skills training to children and adults through schools, health services, agricultural extension, social protection schemes and community settings	Increase appeal of nutritious foods and reduce appeal of foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>populations served by the education programmes</i>
39	Provide dietary counselling to women during antenatal care and pregnancy , including awareness of benefits of nutritious food and risks of foods high in fats, sugars and salt	Increase appeal of nutritious foods and reduce appeal of foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>pregnant women served by the counselling programmes</i>
40	Launch engaging and compelling mass media and behaviour change communication campaigns about foods and diets	Increase appeal of nutritious foods and reduce appeal of foods high in fats, sugars and salt to <i>all populations</i>
41	Promote traditional food cultures associated with good nutrition by supporting and protecting traditional foods, providing information about traditional dishes and public awareness campaigns	Increase appeal of nutritious foods to <i>all populations</i>



National guidelines

	Action	What impact could the action have?
42	Align all food systems policies and programmes with food-based dietary guidelines and widely communicate the guidelines to the general public	Increase availability, affordability and appeal of nutritious foods , and reduce availability, affordability and appeal of foods high in fat, sugar and salt to <i>all populations</i>

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About us

The Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London, is an interdisciplinary unit working to shape food systems that improve the health of people, society, the environment and the economy.

We engage with people across the food system to uncover how it really works in practice. We use these insights to educate, influence, and to inform effective, joined-up food policy.

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