



GOOD FOOD MAKES EVERYTHING BETTER

HEALTH

GOOD HEALTH is something we all aspire to, and something that should be possible in a world where food supplies are plentiful. Yet, throughout the world, even in countries with access to good food and adequate healthcare, rates of non-communicable diseases are rising alarmingly.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are not spread from person to person by viruses or bacteria.

NCDs, most of which fall into four main categories – cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes – are caused by a combination of lifestyle choices and environment.

They kill 38 million people each year and 16 million (42%) of these deaths are premature and avoidable. Over the next 20 years, treating these NCDs could cost more than US\$ 30 trillion and push millions of people below the poverty line.

A number of things contribute to NCDs including tobacco use, physical inactivity, excessive alcohol intake and unhealthy diet. But a common thread running through all these problems is the food we eat – both its quantity and quality. This in turn is dictated, from farm to fork, by our global food system.

This system, emerged after the Second World War, and is a product of the politics, beliefs and practices of that time. Its main goal was to increase yields for a limited number of key crops (e.g. wheat, corn and soybeans) as well as increasing access to animal foods in order to provide more calories and protein for the world population.

ABUNDANCE AT A PRICE

Our food system is responsible for unprecedented abundance. It currently produces enough calories each year to feed 14 billion people – twice the global

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population. But as time has passed it is clear that this abundance has come at huge cost.

The world has changed dramatically in the last 70 years. The public health and environmental challenges we face have also changed. But our food system – which has grown in scope and power – has largely failed to respond to these needs.

Increasing trade liberalisation and the establishment of long food chains, has turned local food economies into global ones. This has led to more food products which are highly processed and can be stored for long periods and shipped around the world.

The marketing and sale of these products now takes priority over the promotion of fresh foods and our concept of food has also changed from being a basic human right to being a tradeable commodity.

This is why, in the midst of such abundance, so many are suffering from hunger, malnutrition and increasing disease.

DIETARY MONOCULTURES

The global food system demands large monocultures of just a few crops as well as factory farmed animals – the kind of farming that is no longer desirable or sustainable because of the damage it causes to environment, human health, and animal welfare.

This dietary monoculture is accelerating the global rise in obesity, heart disease and diabetes because we are all consuming more ready-made food products high in calories, protein, sugar and fat. We are also relying on an increasingly limited range of food crops, such as wheat, maize and soya, along with meat and dairy, for most of our dietary needs.

Studies show that over the last five decades, human diets around the world have grown ever more similar, with consequences for human nutrition and global food security.

TOO BIG TO FAIL?

The reach of the food system is now so great that in parts of the world where you'd be hard pressed to find a doctor, you are likely to find a can of soda or bag of crisps.

Many people believe that the global food system has grown too big and that, like the global banking system, it is headed for inevitable and catastrophic collapse.

Small changes are unlikely to avert this collapse; but if we are prepared to make big changes now we could rebuild our food system to put human health at its centre.

The dominant economic doctrines of recent decades have promoted the notion that market forces alone can regulate national and international access to food and ensure that the abundance of the food system trickles down to those who need it.

In fact, the global food market leaves those most in need malnourished and bearing the burden of ill health; an increasing proportion of NCDs, as many as 80%, now occur in low- and moderate-income countries.

MARKET SOLUTIONS

Many radical solutions have been proposed including taxes on unhealthy products, like sodas; stricter regulation of 'junk' or processed foods that are high in saturated fats, salt and sugar; a global crackdown on the marketing of junk foods to both adults and children; and an overhaul of the subsidy regimes in the EU and US that make the commodity crops, which form the basis our dietary monoculture, cheap while making healthier foods like fruit and vegetables seem comparatively expensive.

Cutting the system down to size may also help and many believe effort should be

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directed into supporting to local food production that allows farmers everywhere to earn a decent living and provides consumers with affordable, nutritious food.

Likewise, few governments have instituted sustainable food policies which focus on more than simplistic metrics of yield.

AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

There are also those who believe that food should re-envisioned as a commons (owned by all) not a commodity (owned by a privileged few). The corporations that control the food system, however, disagree.

We can tackle the global burden of NCDs but our governments must ensure better regulation and multinational corporations must exercise more responsibility for the kinds of foods they produce.

Public health can be both harmed and healed by the food system. Insuring public health and well-being is an investment in the future that every nation must make.



This leaflet is part of a series on sustainable food issues, produced by Beyond GM. References available online:

beyond-gm.org/good-food