



THE FUTURE OF FOOD SAFETY



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Sharing responsibility for consumer empowerment

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1. The current state of food affairs: A Global Syndemic

Malnutrition in all its forms—undernutrition, obesity, and other dietary risks for non-communicable diseases—is the largest cause of ill-health and premature death globally with over 2 billion people worldwide living with overweight/obesity and 2 billion suffering from micronutrient deficiencies, while 815 million people are chronically undernourished. Food systems are driving these pandemics and generating 25-30% of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), half of these from cattle production. Future costs of climate change are estimated at 5-10% of the world's GDP. This grave reality is now characterized as a global syndemic, in which coexisting, interacting pandemics of obesity, undernutrition and climate change negatively impact one another, with common economic, societal and/or environmental drivers in our forms of production, consumption and waste, posing the greatest threat to human and planetary health. This holistic, systemic, syndemic vision is a key to human understanding for forging resistance and multi-actor commitments to double- and triple-duty action that can influence multiple factors simultaneously to address a growing, world-wide crisis in a context of unprecedented economic inequality, unchallenged commercial interests and GDP-led economic growth, weak governance, and engineered overconsumption driven by commercial interests and practices. (The Lancet, 2019)

2. Consumers and their rights

As this Global Syndemic affects the majority of the global population and the world's consumers across all regions and countries, it disproportionately affects poor people, low-income countries, and children, who subsist in unhealthy food environments: in 2017, 155 million children were stunted and 52 million were wasted. Many countries share the reality seen in Mexico where one in three children are overweight or obese, one in every two are expected to develop diabetes in their lifetime, and where traditional healthier food systems are hard-pressed to survive and be revalued. Sharing responsibility for consumer empowerment implies recognizing that the people bearing the greatest health and economic burden live imbalances in education levels, as well as purchasing and bargaining power. Poor and uneducated consumers, particularly from vulnerable, discriminated populations, are unknowingly targeted by unchecked marketing practices and for colonialist redesign of their land use, food cultures and food systems.

This Global Syndemic poses special challenges for all stakeholders to engage in empowering consumers to become more active agents in the creation of healthier food environments and systems. To know and exercise their rights and consume more responsibly, consumers have the need:

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- to know their rights and to be afforded protections under the law
- to be informed about and protected from hazards to their health and safety
- to be treated safely, fairly and honestly, and
- to be provided with better choices at lower prices, among others.

3. Recommendations for strategic, common solutions

3.1 Consumer information, mobilization and protection as drivers of change

Opportunities for empowering consumers to make safer and healthier decisions for their person, family, community and the planet must start with access to clear, understandable, reliable information regarding individual and collective health and environmental benefits and risks of purchasing decisions. As in the case of tobacco control, hard-hitting model awareness-raising campaigns and anti-commercials that clearly warn of risk of consumption (of sugary drinks and ultra-processed foods), using graphic images, providing new information and evoking emotion, are demonstrating effectiveness at modifying attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, including support for policy change. Similarly, positive messaging campaigns and value-based efforts, such as meat, food and climate change atlases and rights-based campaigns, are slowly heightening consumer awareness. But these efforts must be improved upon and expanded appropriately, concerted and exponentially, across all media channels, by consumer organizations and civil society at large, as well as by private and public actors, especially in low-and middle-income countries.

Experts also call for continued action by and funding for grassroots, consumer rights and civil society organizations to empower and defend consumers, serve as watchdogs in the face of corporate wrongdoing, and promote public interest policy, in order to break with decades of political inertia and the policy deadlock.

3.2 Governance for the public good: State-led policy and regulations

Courageous action is required at the national level to remove obstacles that are impeding healthy eating and food systems, and to harness political will and sufficient resources towards national actions. Exemplary action that can immediately come to bear on consumer empowerment includes full implementation of human rights obligations, particularly for disadvantaged populations, children and women, as well as incorporation of rights recognized under international law (i.e. health, food, rights of the child, healthy environment) to national legal frameworks, as well as adoption of consumer protection guidelines including redress, fair trade and competition. Regulatory measures such as transparent health and environment labeling—nutrition labeling and sustainability indicators—enable informed consumer choices and spur demand-driven market shifts for healthier products and transport. Healthy school policy, municipal action on air pollution and mobility also directly modify consumer habits, whereas taxes on unhealthy foods and beverages and redirecting government subsidies, for beef, dairy, sugar and others, also immediately benefit consumer economies.

3.3 Safeguards against conflict of interest and industry interference

A fundamental, irreconcilable conflict exists between the interests of certain food, beverage, energy and agricultural corporations, and the interests of public health and the environment. Demonstrated cases of conflict of interest in public-private interactions and policymaking to improve nutrition, address obesity and face climate change offer examples of industry practices of influencing “evidence,” staging opposition, and sitting at the policy table, bringing to light the governance and ethical issues to be addressed. (UK Health Forum, 2018; E Donaldson, 2015) Measures, such as The World Health Organization’s “Tools to safeguard against possible conflicts of interest,” to safeguard public health and environmental policy from vested interests and

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corruption using ethics, transparency and accountability principles are universally necessary. And industries that contribute to public harm must not be allowed to reap market advantages or fiscal incentives.

3.4 Global governance for the transformation of the global food system

Inspired by the success of the global Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) as well as the UN Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) at creating global visions, standards and actions for addressing negative impacts on health and the environment, a Framework Convention on Food Systems (FCFS) should be forged as a binding global legal instrument, as recommended by The Lancet Commission on Obesity, for national ratification and implementation. Said convention, by working from a systemic approach to the global syndemic, would aim “to collectively create food systems that promote health, equity, environmental sustainability, and economic prosperity” and explicitly limit the influence of commercial and other vested interests.

4. Conclusion

Recognition of this Global Syndemic necessarily increases societal responsibility to planetary health, human health and consumers. To empower consumers to help create healthy environments and food systems, concerted action must be taken to protect, inform, organize and involve them in a new social movement that calls for radical rethinking and synergistic, concerted and coordinated action in the public interest.

Keywords:

conflict of interest, consumer rights, food policy, food systems, framework agreements, Global Syndemic

Reference documents:

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