

Human and Planetary Health: The Power of Plant Based Eating

ENSA Scientific Advisory Committee Position Paper

The Challenge

Our food system is at the centre of many of the critical environmental, health, social and economic challenges we confront in the 21st century. Food sustainability, food security and feeding the 815 million who are hungry are central issues which now exercise the minds of businesses, governments and civil society as never before. Put this in the context of a population that will grow from 7.3 billion in 2015 and reach 9.7 billion by 2050 (with two thirds of these living in cities), and changing dietary patterns, with dairy and meat production expected to increase by 65% and 76%, respectively, then the challenge becomes even more daunting. According to the United Nations, food production will need to increase by 60% by 2050, while many others predict a doubling, based on business as usual scenarios.

Today the world bears witness to a dramatic nutrition transition to more western style diets. Wealth, rapid urbanization and the industrialization of our food systems are driving a surge in resource intensive meat and dairy products and consumption of products containing high amounts of sugars and fat (i.e. energy), the main causes of an exponential rise in obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Latest forecasts suggest that over 50% of the European population is overweight and more than 20% are obese. Unhealthy diets are the leading factor for all healthy life years lost in Europe. Chronic diseases account for 70%-80% of healthcare costs, corresponding to an estimated €700 billion per year in the EU - a figure likely to grow. Worldwide, in 2016, more than 2 billion adults, 18 years and older, were overweight. Of these over 650 million were obese. The World Health Organization has estimated the direct costs of diabetes alone at more than US\$827 billion per year globally.

The Opportunity

The UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016 – 2025), the global commitments on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change all offer an unprecedented opportunity for transformational change in food systems. The need to reduce meat consumption and encourage the consumptions of more plant-based eating patterns, will be crucial to the success of these.

In Europe and in other parts of the world, we are in the midst of a plant-based foods revolution and are witnessing a rapid rise in veganism, vegetarianism and flexitarians (those wanting to increase their intake of plant-based meals without completely eliminating meat). This is being driven by citizen concerns around health, sustainability and animal welfare which will continue to have a significant impact on our plates, palate & planet in the years to come.



Governments, investors and businesses policies and practices that support the production and consumption of more plant-based diets are key if we are to accelerate a transition to more plant-based diets. This requires urgent and coordinated actions from all stakeholders, including governments, businesses, civil society organisations, as well as individual consumers.

The Need for Action

1. Governments

Government action is key to enabling plant-based eating behaviours. To achieve this there is a need for fully integrated food and farming strategies, with a focus on interventions which support more plant-based eating, at their heart. This will also ensure that more systemic interventions are identified and will break down the siloed approach to policy making which have hindered the national and EU approach to policy making to date. Within this context, there are a number of specific actions, required from governments, that can support more plant-based eating:

i) Nutritional Guidelines – Evidence indicates that eating according to national dietary guidelines is healthier and more sustainable than current dietary habits. An important contribution towards more healthy sustainable diets is for governments to implement green public procurement standards. (GPGs)). Due to their voluntary nature, the uptake of the GPGs (Green Public Procurement Guidelines) has been low and still fail to reflect the need to significantly increase the proportion of plant-based eating in diets. GPGs and many national procurement guidelines should encourage more plant-based eating patterns.

Where they have not done so already, governments should reflect sustainability in their nutrition guidelines with specific recommendations for increasing the proportion of plant-based proteins within diets. Guidelines also need to address Western over-consumption of protein. In Europe, on average, consumers consume 70% more protein than needed.

ii) Fiscal Measures & True Cost Accounting

There will be a need for a wide range of financial incentives and disincentives to influence both production and demand drivers, if more significant changes in behaviours towards more plant-based dietary patterns are to occur. Over the next few years there will be a renewed focus and more research around the ‘True Cost of Food’ (and protein). This will continue to drive the debate around the use of various forms of fiscal incentives. Diets optimised for health plus sustainability are already cheaper than current diets but could be promoted, for example, by removing agricultural subsidies from the livestock sector and using them to support more protein-based plant crops whilst encouraging more fruit and vegetable consumption. There is also an opportunity to look at the role of taxation and the VAT system within Europe in supporting plant-based eating.

2. Businesses

Retailers and food manufacturers have an important role to play within the plant-based eating agenda. These include

- i) Reformulation of ready meals – Opportunities exist to replace a proportion of meat in ready meal products with plant-based protein alternatives
- ii) Placing a larger variety of plant-based products in a more prominent position on the shelf/online
- iii) Better information and education of the consumers to be able to make informed decisions,
- iv) Opportunities to work with other organisations (businesses, civil society) on consumer behaviour change campaigns which promote the benefits of plant-based eating.

3. Cross-Sector collaboration

Above all, cross sector collaboration between civil society, NGOs, governments, businesses and the academic community will be required. Whilst there have been an increasing number of collaborative partnerships, which focus on scaling up plant-based eating behaviours, there is a need for greater information and coordination between efforts. There is a real need and opportunity for businesses, citizens groups, NGO's and academics to work more closely together to influence government policy. Only an all out effort will really help transform the food system towards more healthy and sustainable diets.

References available upon request from the Secretariat.

About ENSA

ENSA was established in January 2003 as the voice of natural soyfoods producers in Europe. As the plant-based food category has grown in size but also in diversity, ENSA too has followed the market evolution to become the plant-based foods association. Our members produce plant-based alternatives to dairy and meat, including drinks (based on soy, rice, oats, almond, coconut etc), alternatives to other dairy products (alternatives to yogurt, desserts, creams, ice creams, margarine, cheese) and meat alternatives (tofu, tempeh, seitan, burgers, ready meals etc).

ENSA is an association of internationally operating companies, ranging from large corporations to small, family-owned businesses with an annual turnover close to €1 billion. Since its establishment, ENSA has been raising awareness about the role of soy and a plant-based diet in moving towards more sustainable food production and consumption patterns.

For more information about ENSA, please visit www.ensa-eu.org or contact the Secretariat.

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