

Hello and welcome to Eat This Podcast with me, Jeremy Cherfas.

At the start of December there was a big conference here in Rome at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations FAO. The meeting was entitled the International Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition, which is, forgive me, quite a mouthful.

In a previous life I had to go to plenty of similar talking shops and I have to admit that they normally fill me with a potent mixture of cynicism and skepticism. So why on earth did I go voluntarily to yet another big meeting on food? Because this one did sound different, at least at the outset.

There's that title, Sustainable Food Systems, Healthy Diets, Improved Nutrition. This is not the standard fare at an FAO Gabfest and there was a slim chance that the distinguished delegates actually mean it. So I had to be there.

Now these big meetings are not easy to report because everyone's very busy and the place can be quite noisy. But I did catch up with a few people who seemed to agree that maybe, just maybe, the tide was changing from calories and single nutrients, which has always been the focus in the past, to diets and nutrition.

Absolutely. We've become abundantly clear that the inordinate focus on simply quantity of food while it's achieved major gains vis-a-vis improvements in war war supplies that an imperative need and an equal need is quality of food. And that's why the emphasis on food systems. How does one provide a wholesome diet, which for my point of view is safe and nutritious and that it must be hand-in-hand is like a marriage. You can't have a marriage without two people. It must be both quantity and quality.

Professor Eileen Kennedy is in the Friedman School of Nutrition at Tufts University in Boston.

Most of my research is on the effects of government policies and programs on health nutrition and food security.

So when Professor Kennedy says that policy needs to focus on quality of diet, I'm listening. I'm also listening because the day before the conference began, the journal Nature published a couple of commentaries, which are like opinion pieces with evidence, stressing the need to think more about diet and nutrition. And that was no coincidence because several of the authors were at the meeting in Rome, and one of them was the keynote speaker.

Patrick Webb, a colleague of Eileen Kennedy's at Tufts in Boston, put the frighteners on the meeting. Webb pointed out that bad diet is now the number one risk factor for ill health, beating out all those age-old favorites like sex and drugs and parasite infections.

The world still has far too many people who go to bed hungry, has far too many people who can't feed themselves because of natural disasters or conflict as in Syria crisis and so on. There's hundreds of millions of those. But today there are billions of people who are not affected by having insufficient to eat. What they're eating is essentially killing them. The most recent global calculations show that a set of dietary factors represent almost 10% of the global burden. That means it's higher even than things like high cholesterol or tobacco smoking or drinking alcohol, but malaria. Even malaria and HIV / AIDS, right?

Among the dietary risk factors are it's a cluster of things essentially not eating enough known good foods, generating adequate nutrients, fruits, vegetables, fiber, nuts, seeds and so on, and overeating too much of the bad stuff. So processed red meats, high fat sugar salt content.

There's something strange going on here. As Patrick Webb said, although there are still around 800 million people who don't have enough to eat, there are a couple of billion who are suffering from bad nutrition rather than too little. And the very thing that reduces real hunger, economic development, also seems to promote bad nutrition.

It works at the household level, you know, growing out of poverty and it works at the national level, growing out of poverty. What you see over time and across the world, a 10% increase in incomes, whether at the household or at the national level, is associated typically with a 6% reduction in under-nutrition, so children not growing appropriately, but also roughly around the same figure of increased child obesity, right? So given that obesity and overweight and related diet, related chronic diseases are the fastest growing nutrition problem globally, what we're seeing is that malnutrition in all its forms, far from declining with poverty, is actually increasing.

What seems to be happening is that people who've now got a bit more money are choosing to spend it on food that isn't very good for them.

People as they get richer, yes, you're right Jeremy, even if they're at the lowest rung on the ladder, as income rises, people want greater diversity, right? That's been shown throughout the world. At first, they want diversity among fresh produce that is around them, but as the world now is mainly urban, what is available to them in terms of diversity is actually quite constrained, and what we don't want to see is more diversity of ultra-processed packaged foods that are actually not delivering the kind of nutrients we want them to achieve.

The question then is why do people make what seem like bad choices? That's a question that's exercised Corina Hawkes, director of the Centre for Food Policy at City University in London. Professor Hawkes is one of the co-authors with Patrick Webb on that paper in Nature. She says, we need to consider that people make their choices based on social norms, on what's around them and on status.

Women and caregivers, parents, do want to give their children the best food, but there is actually a lot of cultural constraints around, which means they don't necessarily know what that is. And then, if you just say, if you get a bit more money, so you've got a child, you've been given your child a tin of porridge for food, and you get a bit more money, and then you go into the store and you see that these cheap, low-cost, small packages of foods, which are marketed for young children, with all

kinds of messages on them that imply that they're healthy. You think, wow, this is going to be healthy for my child, this is new, this is modern, this isn't just the porridge, it wouldn't be attracted by that. So there's just a lot of mixed messages. There's messages you're getting from your grandma, which could be healthy messages, but not necessarily. There's messages that you're getting from the market, and there's messages that you're getting from what it is to be a consumer in a modern society to want to have status.

All that's true, but as Corinna Hawkes says, we don't really know why people choose the diets they do.

The thing that we're not doing well enough at the moment is to really try to properly understand why people are making those choices. We tend to make assumptions. The public health community will say, well, people are just making those choices because the industry's forcing them to have it through marketing. Then communities focused on education will say, well, we need to educate them better, that's why. People who have a value system very much about that individual will is the most important thing. The personal responsibility will say, well, they're just making the wrong choices, they're stupid. So there's a lot of different perspectives, and what we're not doing is actually going to actually asking people in the right kind of way, why are you consuming and rather than just making assumptions.

Finding out what drives food choices is important, and Corinna Hawkes talks a lot about a key element being the food environment, which is what?

So really, it's just the food that's around us as we go about our everyday lives. That's as simple as that. And incredibly hard to get to grips with. The key thing is to make sure that the foods around people, how much they cost and how they're marketed is all going in the direction that dietary guidelines are pointing us in. I know there was some debates about the science of forgiveness, but we know enough more or less to

make that. So we need to be absolutely clear that the food environments around people, if we landscape around people, are pointing in the right direction.

And there are so many different elements of the food environment, each of which could be pointing in what Corinna Hawkes calls the right direction. Marketing breakfast cereals to children. The food available for school lunches and in works cafeterias. The relative prices of healthy and unhealthy choices, information about better choices, and on and on.

One of the interesting aspects of the meeting was a whole series of short presentations from people who tweaked one part of the food environment or another. Soda taxes, locally grown fruit and vegetables for school lunches and prisons and hospitals, labeling systems to make better and worse choices clearer, with reformulation by industry to meet the label requirements. Food banks to distribute perishable foods, boosting small scale businesses, media campaigns. And it seems the big food industry objected to every one of them.

Take traffic light labels, for example, which aim to show consumers graphically the healthiness of packaged foods with red, yellow and green labels. Whenever they were mentioned, Luigi Pio Sor d'Amalia, president of Federali Mentari, the Italian Food and Beverage Industry Association, gleefully pointed out that olive oil, which is supposed to be a healthy choice, carries a red traffic light label. And diet coke enjoys a green light. As I say, industry objects to almost every move designed to make it easier for us to choose a healthier diet. So what's the answer?

They just need to be banned. They just should be stopped. And you know, if that happened, all the industries would be in the same place. And they would say, okay, that's not what we do anymore. We'll have to find an alternative. People say, but that's the nanny state. To remove an unnecessary intrusion into someone's life is not the only state. I worry that a lot of the bad, I mean, I'm not against corporations per se, but I'm against bad corporate practices, that some of those bad corporate practices are big are our nanny food.

Nanny food. Is that the same as comfort food? Somehow, I don't think so. Eileen Kennedy of Tufts University agrees that we need a better understanding of consumer behavior.

Consumers have gotten what they've asked for, which is higher incomes, leading to more diversity in the diet, more animal source products, more leisure time, which has implications for levels of physical activity. And to ignore the consumer preferences is to really miss a large part of this equation. So I really think we need to dialogue with communities, national governments, to say what I call positive deviance. For those who are in the same environment, but are not overweight and they'll be, don't have chronic diseases, what is it about their lifestyle that's different? And hopefully, it's more than income.

Eileen Kennedy's focus is positive deviance among the consumers. Her colleague Patrick Webb, explains that along with that comes the bigger shift that food system advocates are pushing for.

Diets have been overlooked forever. Really, not nutrients, not individual foods, but meals, whole meals every day, including off celebration days and so on. Diets are such a crucial part of culture. They're such a crucial part of the economy. This is not a small activity. People produce, grow, share, cook, process, watch cooking shows on the TV. It's a big business. And yet, in terms of public health, it's been overlooked. It's been overlooked because it straddles agriculture and health. It straddles producer and consumer. It straddles national level dietary guidelines and consumer choice. And of course, price is always right there in the middle, the relative price of things. And what is it that makes someone pick something off one shelf rather than on the opposite shelf? The point is we've operated for decades now, the globe, trying to fix these kinds of problems piecemeal. One tweak at the margins in the ag sector, another one in the health sector, another one in education. And there's lots of rhetoric around these, these are all parts of the puzzle and they work together, but no, they don't. They're siloed actions. And to resolve this scale of a growing global planetary problem requires a fundamental rethink of the entire food system. Right? This is this is radical transformation that we're talking about.

Radical transformations don't come cheap. The World Bank recently estimated that it would take about \$7 billion a year to implement all the proven ideas about improving mostly undernutrition. \$7 billion a year. That sounds like a lot of money, \$7 billion. But put that in context of the almost \$700 billion a year spent by the world on agricultural subsidies and supporting the agricultural sector, again, focused primarily on a handful of staple crops, mainly the big cereals. And this, again, let me be clear, I'm not saying we shouldn't support the growth and promotion and productivity of staple foods. We're already spending almost hundreds of billions of dollars on supporting a few crops, even just a little of that, going to directly a resolve malnutrition would more than pay for itself.

And if we can't grow out of it, if we can't do it, what then? Right now, the best estimates are that one in three of the world's population is malnourished, in some form or another. Undernutrition, over-weight obese or severely deficient in certain vitamins and minerals, like anemia, being a big part of that vitamin A, zinc, and so on. So one in three, if we can't do anything, if we actually, I take that back, if we choose not to do anything moving forward, we project that the one in three number will rise to one in two by the year 2030. So half of the world's growing population will become malnourished. And that is catastrophic because of all the health, the early mortality, the disability that goes along with these forms of malnutrition. And at a time, when we've been making such huge progress in so many other dimensions, poverty reduction, improved education, improved access to clean water, improved girls, access to schooling, and so mortality reduction, we've been doing wonders in the last 20, 25 years, and yet malnutrition is growing. This to me is a wake-up call. It's something that has to be better understood, better known, and there has to be a demand globally for action and accountability. This, this can't go on.

But go on, it will. Unless the food world does find a way to move beyond calories and individual nutrients in order to provide the advertised sustainable food systems, the healthy diets, and improved nutrition. The cynic in me says that FAO Gabs will indeed shift their

attention. Instead of talking about calories and nutrients, they'll talk about diets and nourishment. And nothing else will change. The idealist in me? Well, the idealist is hoping the cynic will be proved wrong. But he isn't holding his breath.

That's it for another episode. Before I go, I'm quickly going to plug the idea that if you like the show, you should either recommend it directly to a friend or else give it a review on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. Word of mouth remains the best recommendation.

For now, though, from me, Jeremy Churfus, goodbye, and thanks for listening.