

Can Fixing Dinner Fix the Planet?

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Jess Fanzo is a professor at Johns Hopkins University, working on food policy issues. She has drawn on more than 20 years experience in low income countries to write a book: *Can fixing dinner fix the planet?*

The book takes a close look at food systems around the world. What are food systems? Jess Fanzo says they are “everything involving food, from farm to fork”. That works, as long as we agree that farm means any place food comes from, and that forks are optional.

I wondered, why now?

Jess Fanzo: I think it's just a great time to be thinking about all of these issues around our food system, climate change, impacts on the environment. The time is right, there's a lot of attention now on climate, a lot of attention on the impacts of what we eat, on human health and the planet. After 20 plus years of working and lots of grey hairs, I just felt it would be fun to put my thoughts down on paper, but I've never been a comfortable writer. It was a little bit painful, and you don't really want to write about yourself or your experiences or what you've witnessed, but it definitely makes for a more interesting book when you can.

Jeremy: I love the title because, of course, Fixing Dinner is nicely ambiguous, you can fix dinner in the sense of making it and you can fix it in the sense of making it better. How much does the planet actually need fixing?

Jess Fanzo: Pretty significantly. When we think of food, food is contributing about 30% of total greenhouse gas emissions, which is huge. A contributor that is largely ignored at the Paris Agreement, and COP, and other climate talks. Everyone focuses on energy and transportation but food is not really emphasised, but it is emitting a significant amount of greenhouse gases because of the way we grow our food, and moving food around the world and the kinds of foods we grow and harvest and raise. Of course, we're seeing significant

impacts on natural resources that are finite, significant deforestation in biodiverse hotspots. Our oceans are in peril. It's not a great picture, Jeremy, when you start to read the stats, it's downright scary.

Jeremy: Are these really planetary global problems?

Jess Fanzo: Definitely. Everyone is and will continue to be affected if we don't do anything about it. This idea that the poor will suffer disproportionately is true, but there will be points where we will all feel the effects of climate change and we already are starting to see that.

Jeremy: It's interesting because you draw a comparison between Timor Leste in Southeast Asia and Baltimore, Maryland, two places I know you know well. In what ways are they really similar?

Jess Fanzo: Similar in issues around continued poverty, conflict, conflict but from different ways, marginalised populations, populations that have been undervalued and disadvantaged in the system. Of course, that has impacts on people's ability to access healthy diets, people's ability to participate in food systems and every other system, health, education system. While in very different starting points and in very different places in the world, some of those rooted issues around poverty, marginalisation, conflict, hold true in both places, there's some really interesting parallels. As Timor gets more urban, and it will, and it is, they're going to experience some of the same things some of the cities in the United States have dealt with, pockets of poverty.

Jeremy: You do say very clearly, in the book, you say, "Food is not a cause of inequities. Rather, food inequities are a symptom of larger systemic issues." Does that mean that the solutions will be the same everywhere? Or will the solutions for Timor and Baltimore be very different?

Jess Fanzo: That's a really good question. I think, at the root of it, we need to fix a lot of the injustices in the system. Now, depending on who you are, the colour of your skin, your ethnicity, your caste, in every society, there are those who are being left behind, sometimes purposefully. Those are the issues that resonate wherever you go. But layered on top of that, the localised context of food systems will be shaped and changed depending on where you are because food

systems are so different around the world. They're connected, but they're different.

To me, some of the systemic issues that we need to deal with are quite similar. We all have that in common, in a sense, these injustices that we see around the world. The solutions across food systems and health systems could vary depending on where you are. There are some things, Jeremy, like access to a healthy diet. That's the same problem everywhere. Now, what is the composition of that healthy diet and what's the terrain to get healthy diets to different people? [That] could change. There are some similar underlying issues with food systems, but what it looks like the actions and solutions that need to be taken will be very context-dependent.

Jeremy: The book is actually chock a block with interesting examples of the way diet is changing. One that struck me is, you talk about Nepal, where instant noodles are replacing a more traditional rice and lentil soup. Instant noodles are great, they save time for women, the kids love them, what's wrong with that?

Jess Fanzo: [chuckles] Well, they're not a healthy option. Instant noodles are a deep-fried, highly processed packaged food. The little salt packets, which is what everybody loves, are really high in sodium, beyond your quota of sodium that you need every day, and they're not really rich in nutrients. Now, one could argue, "Well, why not just add some veggies and an egg to those around, they're pretty good, right?" I mean, I like ramen noodles too, Jeremy, and they are really convenient and easy, but we don't want the world to just be eating ramen noodles, we want to see the diversity of the food basket, we want people to hang on to those traditions as much as they can.

The Nepalese eat the rice and lentils, the Dal Bhat, and it's so healthy, it's got a lot of fibre, it's got a lot of iron. They're missing that, but there is a trade-off there. Dal Bhat takes a long time to cook. For many women that are cooking Dal Bhat every day, that is incredibly time-consuming. We're really dealing with trade-off issues around taste, and convenience, and replacing some of those traditional foods.

How can we have foods that are tasty, convenient, and healthy? That's the question. Maybe Dal Bhat will go away in Nepal, but replacing it with junk food? You put your head in your hands because we've seen that happen in the United States in over a century. You just don't want Nepal to fall into the same trap as what happened in the United

States where a significant proportion of our diet is made up of these highly processed foods that are quite detrimental for health.

Jeremy: That raises the question of the role of government in food policy, and as you say, rich countries don't seem to be much better at it than poor countries. In fact, they may be worse because the influences on government in rich countries is probably greater than the influence in poor countries. I don't know about that, but what is the role of government in setting food policy? What are the sorts of things they can do that are liable to work?

Jess Fanzo: To me, the first thing is that governments need to have a role [laughs]. They're too laissez-faire about the food system. They're not governing and shepherding their food systems at all. If you go to the United States, multinationals are feeding us, multinational companies, and that can be a good thing, but it can also be a bad thing. When we look at the public health that we have now, multinationals have really prioritised profit over public health and environmental goals. That's problematic. Leaving the private sector to do what they want without public health goals in mind is not a good situation. Governments need to step up.

One of the first things they can do is have an actual food systems policy. No country, Jeremy, has a holistic food systems policy. Now, they'll have an ag subsidy policy. They've got dietary guidelines that no one reads. But no one brings it all together into a holistic policy. Then from there, if you've got a strong policy, you can then govern the actors in the food system. Regulation, if you need to at times, but it's a place to hold actors accountable and governments, they don't either have the opportunity, the resources, the capacity to do that.

Jeremy: I'll come back in a bit to how governments might move forward, but can we talk about meat and animal source products for a bit? Because you were part of the EAT-Lancet Commission, which came down pretty heavily against meat and livestock, because they are so damaging to the environment. A lot of people pointed out the pushback that for the very poorest people, a little bit of meat, some milk, maybe some eggs can make a huge difference to their health. It wasn't that sensitive of the EAT-Lancet Commission to say, "People should give up meat" when so many people don't actually get much in the way of meat. What's your position on that now?

Jess Fanzo: The EAT-Lancet Commission, as you had said, the planetary reference diet was very low in animal sources across the board. That's not only cows, red meat, but eggs, dairy, everything. When I sat on that EAT-Lancet Commission, you have to make concessions and you sit on these. ... At the end of the day, I put my name to that Commission. Do I regret it now? I don't know if I regret it, but I do think there's nuance in that meat conversation. The devil's in the details and there's some populations that can really come down in their meat consumption. Whether or not they're willing to is a whole 'nother conversation.

In the United States, in Brazil, do we need to eat meat at every meal? Maybe not. Whereas in other countries, like you said, they just can't get access to it, it's completely unaffordable. A lot of these foods are perishable, they're not traded. Not only are they not available, but they're not affordable. To me, some countries need to make bigger steps than others. When you look at the details of the EAT-Lancet, places like Sub-Saharan Africa, they're under the amount recommended for animal source foods, whereas in the United States we're consuming six times more red meat than we need to.

When you really start to look at some of the details of the EAT-Lancet, you see these inequities and who gets access to what. I would love to do like a part two of the EAT-Lancet where we look much more deeply at the low-income context and what it would mean. Should Ethiopia increase their livestock sector? They're aiming to do it. If so, how do they do it? Stay somewhat environmentally sensitive, increase animal source foods to the populations that need. At the same time, how would high-income countries start to come down?

Jeremy: You're saying, in the book, you say you got the stats that the average Bangladeshi eats three kilograms of meat per person per year. The average person in the United States eats 124 kilograms.

Jess Fanzo: Isn't that incredible?

Jeremy: Isn't that incredible? And yet, certain tribes, I want to call them, in the US are screaming blue murder because they can't eat bloody red steaks morning, night, noon. The whole thing has become such an element of identity politics and "Freedom". You're not dealing with nutrition anymore. You're not dealing with health anymore. How do you even begin to tackle that attitude?

Jess Fanzo: When you start to get into telling people what they potentially should restrict in their diets, or taxing certain foods, you quickly get into people's self liberties, "Don't tell me what to eat. Don't govern my food." It's almost taking the right to food to the next degree. This is what makes food and working in it so interesting, just because everyone starts to take it incredibly personally.

We don't have such a different category when you start to govern food, but if you don't at least provide some regulation and more guidance, and for governments to do that, it leaves people having to shoulder decisions in a very perverse environment. Food environments, the places where you and I go to shop and order food, they're tricky places to make decisions.

They're very perverse. Where food is placed, to the price, what's on sale, the branding, the advertising. A lot of it's subliminal. These are really tough things to navigate.

A lot of it gets very politicised if you start to regulate that space, like taxing foods. It's the state we're in, and I think it's at least providing consumers with as much transparent information as you can give them. I think when you talk about health of food, that resonates a lot more than environment. At least to a lot of Americans, because people care about their health. They care about dying, dying scares the hell out of people. Are there ways to promote healthy foods, but that have win-wins for the environment that consumers justice in the background. I just don't know as much about.

Jeremy: It's interesting because your first chapter is called, Are we what we eat? Or what we're fed?. I think a lot of people don't realise the extent to which what they eat is what they're fed. If you see what I mean.

Jess Fanzo: No, absolutely. I was discussing this with my husband. Some of the jingles that run through your head are from food advertisements when we were young, Jeremy, these things stick in your head. It's incredible. I just think about some of these like commercials that we had. It's incredible how deep the marketing runs and how influential it is on your life. Here I am almost 50 years old and I still remember McDonald's jingles from when I was 10. Why is that? What happened? Talk about being programmed [laughs].

Jeremy: You said earlier that the business of food corporations is to make a profit. They're willing to invest huge amounts of money into improving their profits. That goes for engineering the food itself, as well as persuading you, worming their way into your brain.

Jess Fanzo: I think, is there a way for the private sector to use all their tools, all their skills, which they have a lot of, and all the information — and they know what drives consumer decision-making — to make healthy, tasty, convenient food? That's their challenge. In many of the private sector actors, which is a big group of people from very multinational to smallholder woman farmers, a lot of the private sector is incredibly concerned about the environment and climate change. They see it's going to affect their bottom line, their ability to produce raw goods, their ability to move food around the world. They are deeply worried about that. I want them to be just as worried about the health of their future consumer. Where can they have that sweet spot, that win-win where they're making profit, they're being environmentally sustainable and they're producing healthy tasty foods that the world wants? That's their challenge. They've got the technology to probably do that.

There's companies that are starting to do that, but they're trying to reformulate their foods, which is difficult to do. Removing salt and sugar from food is hard. It's tough to reformulate foods. How can they move in that direction more? We have to figure out ways for the governments to incentivise them to do that.

Jeremy: Whose responsibility is it to fix dinner? Is that different from who needs to fix the planet?

Jess Fanzo: Same. It's everybody. Of course, we need governments, we need private sector to come in, provide us healthy foods, ensure that they're treading lightly on the planet and be thinking about protecting the planet for future generations. But we as individuals also can play a role every day and it can be small changes. The individuals can do lots of little things like wasting less food, like making better dietary choices, like supporting local farmers.

So many everyday things, you as the individual can do that fit within your lifestyle, but can help your own health, help your family's health, help the planet. There's so many different resources out there to help guide you do that.

Jeremy: One final point. Coming up soon in a couple of months is going to be this UN summit on food systems. I'm generally very pessimistic and very cynical about global summits of this, that, and the other. You're less so, I think. What should I be looking forward to in the food system summit? What's the good it could be doing?

Jess Fanzo: The reason why I'm excited about it is because it's really the first time the UN and the Secretary-General has called attention to food, which for those of us who've worked in food, it's very exciting to actually have food in the spotlight at such a grand scale. Saying that, I think there's a lot of really great stuff going on leading up to the summit. There's a science group. There are these action tracks where they're coming up with potential solutions that governments can take up. It's a lot of dialogue. It's a great moment to be working in food. It's almost a little bit too much. That said, I'm a bit worried, Jeremy, of a couple of things. Number one is what comes after, and I think that's what you're getting at.

All the governments meet in New York to discuss food. What's going to come out of that? Is it going to be like COP? Like the Paris Agreement where they've all agreed to this global goal? No, it doesn't have the stature of that. Will everyone come together and sing kumbaya and say, "This is great, food's important", and everyone goes home and then nothing happens? I don't know. To me, the summit hasn't been so clear on the after. I've heard even things like, "What matters is the before and everything that's happening." No, it doesn't.

We can dialogue and talk to each other and have webinars. Yes, sure. That's great. We make great connections with each other, but that's not what's going to change the food system overall. To me, is there an accountability mechanism to track any commitments made at the summit? How do we hold them to account? Or are we just going to fall back on the SDGs, which have no accountability mechanism to them? Like the MDGs. "We didn't achieve all the MDGs? Okay, well, let's start a whole new set of global goals and double them." That's what I worry about.

The other thing I worry about is the inclusivity. I'm sure you've been reading, there's a lot of different groups who are just disengaging with the summit because of lack of inclusion. Because there's not a human rights lens emphasised in the summit. We're seeing a lot of civil society completely backing away from the summit. That is unfortunate.

That people are worried about the private sector engagement of the summit because there's a lot of power asymmetries.

If we don't have civil society sitting at that table, the people who engage with communities, farmers, indigenous peoples, that is incredibly problematic to me because that's what matters. That's what we care about. We care about people and their relationship with nature. It's not the Secretary-General who is producing our food. How do we engage those populations in the summit? If they're not there, it's going to be really difficult to get any momentum in communities around the world to advocate for a better food system. That's my worry.

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