

New agreements needed now to improve food systems

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In 2020, between 720 and 811 million people suffered from hunger, and

almost as many (768 million) were malnourished. Two billion people did not get enough essential nutrients and vitamins due to unbalanced diets or a lack of fresh food. At the same time, the number of overweight (1.9 billion) and obese (650 million) people is increasing worldwide. This gross contradiction makes it all the more urgent to change the food system. Poor people in particular are eating more and more unhealthily. According to the UNFSS Scientific Group, a wide variety of measures are needed to overcome this food crisis, end hunger and protect the future of the planet.

The measures are divided into seven priorities:

- end hunger and improve diets
- help farmers become more resilient
- create a level playing field
- encourage biotechnology
- protect natural resources such as soil and water
- obtain [sustainable food](#) from the sea
- develop digital technologies

"To meet these challenges, the [scientific community](#), government, industry and civil society organizations need a structured platform in which they can meet," says Louise O. Fresco, chair of UNFSS's Scientific Group and of the Executive Board of Wageningen University & Research.

Food-related health problems

Food-related health problems are increasing rapidly worldwide. Billions of people are faced with hunger or malnutrition due to insufficient food, or—at the other end of the scale—obesity due to too much food.

Nutrition scientist Inge Brouwer of WUR argues for a more consistent

approach to this problem. "For example a diet-based approach," she suggests. "Lower the salt or [sugar content](#) in food while at the same time motivating people to embrace a healthier lifestyle. These goals are still dealt with separately today. We need to start promoting healthy food from various angles simultaneously. For consumers, fair access to food markets, better knowledge of healthy food and the creation of a healthy living environment need to be achieved together."

Level playing field for farmers

The current food systems no longer meet the demands of society and are vulnerable to the effects of climate change, population growth and conflicts. A change in international agricultural policy is needed to create a level playing field for farmers and other producers in low and middle-income countries.

"More and more farmers cannot make a living out of food production alone, but also need to find employment in other parts of the [food system](#), such as in food processing or logistics," says Ken Giller, Professor of Plant Production Systems at WUR. In the coming decades, the world's population will grow to nearly 10 billion, with most growth in Africa and Asia. "Small farmers in Africa and Asia in particular will have to meet the increasing demand for food that this growth entails, but can only do so if they can obtain a viable income from agriculture," says Giller. "Additional employment opportunities in the wider food system and good social services will be crucial for them."

Biotechnology

The ultimate goal of plant breeding has always been to make plants more resistant to drought and disease. If this can be achieved it could help eradicate hunger from the world. CRISPR-Cas technology is making the

process faster and more accurate. This technology is used to modify genetic material more easily, efficiently and with higher precision. Some 3000 CRISPR-Cas patents have already been granted worldwide, of which a few belong to WUR. The University recently decided to allow free use of five of its patents. Making these licenses available for public use will help accelerate the search for solutions for the growing demand for food and mitigate the effects of climate change and pathogens.

National food agendas

Food systems are not only under pressure in low and middle-income countries; in many Western countries, too, [health costs](#) are soaring and intensive agriculture, climate change and loss of biodiversity are leading to rising costs for society as a whole. "A complex set of factors influences our food supply," says Ruerd Ruben, Emeritus Professor of Food Security. "That is why it is so important to focus on transparent governance and an open dialog about fair agreements. We need to develop national food agendas and food platforms that embrace all the involved actors so that the solutions will find broad support."

Scientific foundation

Alongside the government and the industry, these actors include the public and the scientific community. Just talking about it will not be enough, says Ruben. "Joint agendas, coherent food policies and clear means of measuring the results will be necessary to guide the transformation towards common goals." A good example is the recent European Green Deal, in which CO₂ emissions from both domestic and imported products are priced in order to meet climate ambitions. Governments play an important role in this by, for example, implementing price measures (taxes or subsidies) that encourage the production and consumption of more local food, so that transport

distances are reduced and hence also emissions.

"The time is ripe for transforming [food](#) systems and making new global agreements," says Louise O. Fresco. "This requires a solid scientific foundation with agreements that can be laid down in an international treaty, as was done for climate change. The costs of inaction and of waiting will be many times higher than the costs of acting and investing now, both internationally and regionally."

Provided by Wageningen University

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