UPPSALA HEALTH SUMMIT POST-CONFERENCE BRIEF

Healthy Lives from Sustainable Food Systems
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The Diet-Environment-Health Nexus

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Background

In many countries of the Global North, the dietary habits of large proportions of the population are detrimental to human health, the environment, or both. As such, a population-level transition to healthy and sustainable diets is undoubtedly required. A healthy and sustainable diet is characterized by an abundance and variety of vegetables and fruits, legumes, nuts, and whole grains, while also including moderate amounts of low-fat dairy, fish, and vegetable fats. In an ideal scenario, such a diet would not only promote health with a minimal effect on the environment, but also consider social and economic factors, such as culture, livelihood, cost, and accessibility.

Despite fairly good evidence showing what a healthy and sustainable diet could look like in a Western context, there is a large gap between this and current dietary habits. For instance, results from national surveys in Sweden illustrate the disparity between dietary recommendations (primarily focussed on health, but also considering some aspects of sustainability) and population-level consumption in reality. Furthermore, such studies confirm that an additional gap exists, in the form of inequalities in diet composition across gender, age groups, and education levels. Bridging both gaps involves large-scale change in the food environment as well as in our behavioural patterns. However, at present, we lack sufficient evidence on how to effectively generate such changes, and crucially for this workshop, how to influence large-scale and long-lasting behavioural change.

Transforming current dietary patterns can be seen as a 'wicked' problem, which is inherently complex by nature, comprising multiple actors, and for which there is no single, simple solution. Furthermore, in finding evidence-based solutions, we must also consider the dynamic interaction between science, policy, industry, and reality. Therefore, we gathered as a group of about 40 stakeholders from academia, organizations, governments, and industry to discuss and address questions concerning how to best generate, communicate, and implement evidenced-based behaviour change interventions, from the micro-level (individual) to macro-level environments.

Approach

The workshop began by individually envisioning our ideal future of sustainable and healthy diets. Together, we recognized accessibility, affordability (financial feasibility for both industry and consumers), and (cultural) acceptability as important parts of the future we wish to see, in addition to collaboration between communities as well as between policymakers, researchers, and industry. Sustainable and healthy food becoming a social norm was additionally put forward as an ideal scenario. Once we had established where we would like to be, the next step was to discuss how we can get there.

To this end, in eight groups of approx. five people, we discussed what drives/influences current dietary patterns. As expected, drivers could be either positive or negative influences, and they spanned from political and economic drivers (e.g., [lack of] fiscal measures or bold action), to social norms (e.g., portion sizes) and global shocks. In essence, a wide variety of factors were identified that both directly and indirectly contribute to dietary choices that individuals can/do make every day.

Continuing in these groups, we considered possible solutions that could contribute to creating our envisioned ideal future (discussed further below). To complete the group work, iscussions then turned to which solutions or interventions we considered most effective and realistic. As a final task in the whole workshop group, examples, ideas, and proposed actions were shared, and everyone was given an opportunity to show support for their three preferred solutions.

Findings from the workshop

After collecting and reviewing the proposed solutions, two core elements could be identified: first, proposals on what needs to change and, second, how such changes should/could occur.

When considering what needs to change if we are to achieve population-level healthy and sustainable dietary habits, a clear link emerged between micro- and macro-level changes. Such changes are interconnected and can occur bi-directionally, such that a change at one level impacts another level. Therefore, multiple solutions at all levels of the socio-ecological model were generated – from individual actions (micro-level) to policies (macro-level). Reflecting this, the key policy recommendations from our workshop also have important implications at the individual level. Overall, our policy recommendations for generating healthy and sustainable diets predominantly point towards improving the choice architecture and ensuring that the "right choice" is the default choice.

Recommendations

The findings from our workshop on what needs to change can be summarized in five specific policy recommendations:

1. Regulation of the food industry: Introduction of more stringent food content regulations; labelling and portion sizes that encourage healthy and sustainable eating; reform of marketing regulations; and reduced industry influence through lobbying.
2. Fiscal measures: Improved pricing incentives for both industry and consumers to focus on healthy and sustainable foods, including financial support for individuals and financial feasibility for industry; and introduction of taxes and subsidies.
3. Invest in education: Arm individuals with knowledge by introducing nutrition education across all levels of society and types of institutions (e.g., schools, workplaces, healthcare settings, social work organizations, sports associations, etc.).
4. Empower communities: Support local-level initiatives to promote healthy and sustainable eating (e.g., in schools, hospitals, workplaces), to empower communities and to contribute to changing social norms.
5. Utilize research and Big Data: Consider the wealth of data collected through both industry and research institutes and the potential application of these data to improving consumer choice. Create avenues through which research findings can be maximized.

But how can policymakers best translate our recommendations into policies? What systems need to be in place for such recommendations to take effect? How can we turn evidence into policy action?

When trying to understand the problem of how to transform current dietary patterns, we must acknowledge the nature of wicked problems, for which no 'silver bullet' solutions exist. Furthermore, there is no clear endpoint to establish when our goal has been achieved. Instead, we must work collectively to find corrective and evidence-based actions that shift away from 'worse' and move towards 'better'. Therefore, in our Call to Action, we propose four steps as part of a cycle, where each step can positively influence the other. When carried out in unison, the overall goal is to support the building and sharing of evidence, and to highlight a mechanism by which knowledge can be turned into practice.

Call to Action: how to go from knowledge to practice?

1. Engage. Increase policymaker engagement with all stakeholders in the field: researchers, industry, communities, and individuals. Additionally, enable and support scientific lobbying, providing a permanent pipeline for research findings to be heard in the policy sphere. Building strong bridges and connections across institutions enables improved communication.
2. Communicate and educate. Use these bridges to enable a platform for evidence to be communicated across all levels of society and ensure that a bi-directional channel of communication between stakeholders can be set up and maintained. Create a space to share what is currently known and what still needs to be understood, thus enabling opportunities to collaborate.
3. Collaborate. Bridge gaps by working together within and across institutions to increase the synthesis of evidence, and support common goals by sharing findings, data, and results on food-related behaviour change. Furthermore, ensure policies that support continued government funding of scientific research.
4. Build evidence and monitor. With increased funding, researchers can continue to build evidence concerning best practices for generating behaviour change in specific contexts as well as monitor changes and impacts. Use this evidence to generate concrete solutions for moving forwards, supported by improved engagement and communication among stakeholders.

Acknowledgement

This brief is one in a series of nine policy briefs produced as an outcome of the 2022 Uppsala Health Summit "Healthy Lives from Sustainable Food Systems." Uppsala Health Summit is an international arena for dialogue, exploring possibilities and implementation challenges associated with advancement in medicine and public health. You can find the entire series of briefs and more information about Uppsala Health Summit at www.uppsalahealthsummit.se.

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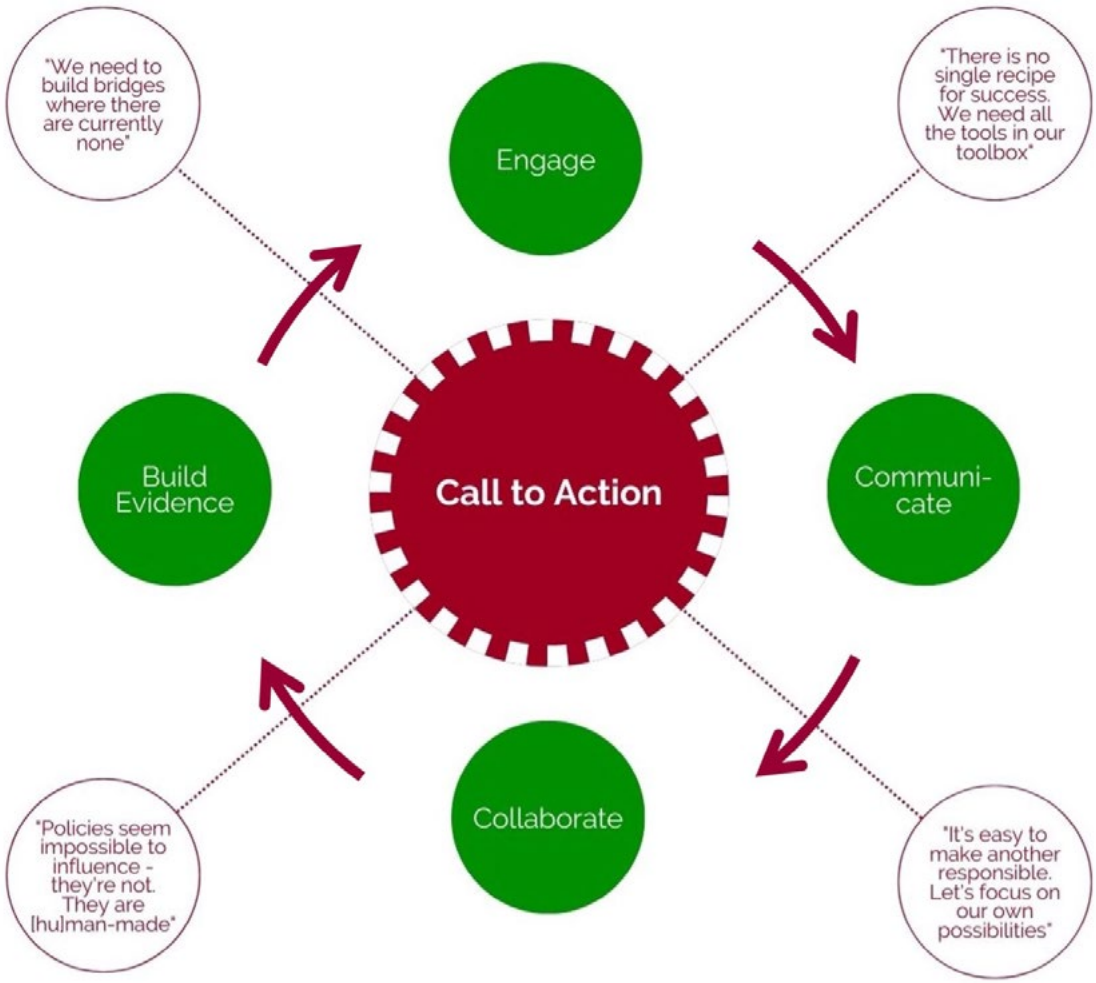

FIGURE: OUR CALL TO ACTION, ALONG WITH QUOTES FROM THE WORKSHOP

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