

Healthy Lives from Sustainable Food Systems October 2022

Foodscapes for the Future – Creating Local Support for Sustainable Human Health

Peter Bergsten, Anna-Karin Quetel, Maja Engsner, Banu Aydin, Ida Eriksson

Background

The term foodscape is a combination of the words “food” and “landscape.” It describes the milieu in which food is produced, exposed and consumed¹. Food exposure and advertisement have a major impact on what and how much we consume², and they constitute a primary risk factor for non-communicable disease. In particular, exposure and advertisement contribute to the malnutrition pandemic, which involves stunted children and children with obesity, as well as healthy life years lost. Overweight and obesity are increasing globally, not least among adolescents⁶. Because less healthy foods, such as energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods, tend to be more frequently found in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas^{2,3}, and food exposure also contributes to health inequality.

The pandemic resulting from malnutrition synergizes with the pandemic of climate change, contributing significantly to the ongoing human and environmental health crisis⁴. To move society toward solutions that promote sustainable health and a sustainable environment, a transformation of the foodscape and all its components is required⁵. However, mobilizing actors in the foodscape, particularly food retailers, to act in line with supporting sustainable human and environmental health is challenging.

Approach

The workshop had 30 participants from eight countries, representing Europe, Africa, North America, and Oceania. The participants represented local government (municipalities and regions), food retail companies, innovative food companies, public health authorities (VicHealth, Swedish Public Health Agency and Swedish Food Agency), policymaker advisors (the International Livestock Research Institute and the UN agency Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO), academia (working with nutritional biomarkers and epidemiology, sustainable food consumption, childhood obesity prevention and global

transformations for health), as well as healthcare representatives (nurses, medical doctors and dieticians).

The workshop focused on the question: What is needed to achieve foodscape change and move it towards contributing to sustainable adolescent health?

In the morning session of the workshop, the unhealthy foodscape took centerstage in the form of a real-life example from the Swedish Municipality of Säfte, as presented by Elin Bergström and Fredrik Eriksson. The municipality had conducted interviews with teenagers about their food habits surrounding the school day and their activities. The visualized results, a short video, were disturbing⁷. It showed a foodscape with a wide variety of low-quality snacks, sugar-sweetened beverages, and unhealthy food on offer everywhere. The conclusion was that it is not easy for teenagers to make healthy choices. The example was commented on by Paula Frösell, representing the Swedish food retailer ICA, and Anna-Karin Quetel, from the Swedish Food Agency, who discussed how their organizations can contribute to a healthier foodscape.

In smaller groups, participants were first asked to discuss underlying causes of the unsustainable foodscape for adolescents, building on the case study from Säfte.

Examples mentioned included social norms around food choice and peer pressure, aggressive marketing and social media targeting youth in the real world and digitally through, e.g., influencers, low prices or unhealthy food products, lack of time and money, convenience, long-lasting foods that are easy to take away and store, stress and disrupted circadian rhythm, and foods targeting the biological fast-reward system, to mention a few.



Five problems were chosen to be addressed:

1. Lack of policies to regulate the local foodscape
2. High demand for unsustainable foods driven by social norms
3. Poor knowledge about the cost of malnutrition among stakeholders
4. Low profit on healthy and sustainable foods
5. Young people are not actively involved in shaping their foodscape

The afternoon session started with a talk given by Dheepa Jeyapalan, from VicHealth, Australia. VicHealth is a non-governmental public-health-promoting organization funded by the state government of Victoria, Australia. They shared their experiences and gave examples of how they work on the foodscapes in communities⁸.

Subsequently, workshop participants were asked to address the five problems: first, to discuss which actor can act to tackle the problem and, second, to suggest a concrete first step toward solving the problem. In the final part of the workshop, a plenary discussion of the proposed solutions was held to further develop the recommendations.

Recommendations

Suggested actions to address the chosen problems were:

1. Lack of policies to regulate the local foodscape.
Action: Raising awareness among local stakeholders

about the cost of an unhealthy foodscape may encourage municipalities to adopt policies that promote a healthier foodscape. Showing municipalities their consumption patterns based on supply by using real-time data could support awareness. Thus, collaboration should be pursued with credible actors who can provide this information, e.g., innovative health-oriented companies.

Municipalities are central to the local setting, including the schools. In the Säfte case study, offering healthy food at school has been insufficient to promote overall healthy eating. Adolescents spend considerable time outside the school. There is an evident need for a whole-of-community approach to building a healthier food landscape. Data-driven action is proposed as an effective and feasible method, because it can ultimately involve both public and private actors in the municipality.

2. High demand for unsustainable foods is driven by social norms.

Action: Social norms are influenced by advertisement and the media. National governments should strengthen policies to regulate the marketing of food to children. It is important that such policies target all actors including small retailers and social media, actors who may be less responsive to public policies.

“Influencers” in social media should be involved and encouraged to change what is considered ‘cool’ and desirable to eat toward healthier alternatives. Healthy snacks rather than candy and sweetened beverages should be found in places associated with positive feelings such as



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sports centers or the cinema. Such measures may promote healthier social norms concerning food, thus increasing demand for a healthier food supply.

3. Poor knowledge about the cost of malnutrition among stakeholders.

Action: Build an advocacy tool to show politicians the costs of the present foodscape in relation to ill health and the costs to the healthcare economy. The advocacy tool may be used by policymakers on the municipal level, but also in a regional or national context, and promote a long-term perspective regarding interventions for a healthier foodscape.

By showing the current costs related to an unsustainable foodscape, the need for further action should be evident. One suggestion is to allocate national funds for future costs of human illness, as done by. VicHealth, to put the issue of direct and indirect health costs on the political agenda permanently.

4. Low profit on healthy and sustainable foods.
Action: Increase taxes on producers of unhealthy foods and simultaneously subsidize healthy foods through national government policies. Prioritize taxes on producers rather than on consumers to efficiently affect the supply of unhealthy foods. It is important to increase taxes on unhealthy foods in general and for all producers on the

market, rather than to target only a few foods or some producers, which may only lead to a shift from one unhealthy food to another.

Taxes on unhealthy foods could be used to subsidize healthier alternatives. In the long-run, this may not be feasible if the production of unhealthy foods is strongly reduced, but it could function as a catalyst for transforming the food supply. Furthermore, politicians need to see beyond election campaigns if they are to impose taxes that may not be popular at first. The advocacy tool mentioned in Action 3 could function as support.

5. Young people are not actively involved in shaping their foodscape.

Action: Listen to children and adolescents! Adults are responsible for the present foodscape. To implement changes that are efficient and sustainable, children and adolescents must be involved. This could promote engagement in health and society among adolescents, knowing their opinions matter to adults. One suggestion is to use schools as a platform to collect stories and ideas from school children and adolescents concerning the (un)sustainable foodscapes surrounding them, as initiated by the Municipality of Säfte. Knowledge about how student engagement can be achieved should then be shared among schools and municipalities to find successful concepts that work in different settings.

Summary

In summary, the need for a shift in the foodscape surrounding children and adolescents towards a more sustainable supply was illustrated by representatives of the Municipality of Säfte; it was further developed by retail and public health authorities and discussed amongst workshop participants. Both hard and soft policy measures were discussed. One main focus was on how to promote co-creation between different foodscape actors, e.g., politicians, retail and multiple local stakeholders, in order to move the foodscape in a given context to become healthier and more sustainable. The Municipality of Säfte served as a real-life example of a municipality that has recognized the problems in the current foodscape and that intends to change it for the better, possibly by building on some of the recommendations from this workshop.

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Authors and workshop organizers: Anna-Karin Quetel, sustainability strategist, Swedish Food Agency; Maja Engsner, graduate student, Uppsala University; Ida Eriksson, Research Assistant, Uppsala University; Banu Aydin, Research Assistant, Uppsala University; Peter Bergsten*, Professor, Uppsala University

*Corresponding author: peter.bergsten@mcb.uu.se

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