

The Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition and Climate Change

What's in the latest Lancet Commission report?

It's not even February, and we've already had two of the three promised Lancet Commissions on nutrition. On 19 January the EAT-Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets for Sustainable Food Systems was released. This was followed on 27 January by the Commission on the Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition and Climate Change, led by Boyd Swinburn.

The syndemic commission has delivered a powerful, incisive analysis of the drivers of three overlapping pandemics with some long-overdue and hard-hitting recommendations. The start point is a recognition that malnutrition in all its forms is by far the biggest cause of ill-health globally, and that this is because we are in the midst of a "global syndemic".

Obesity, undernutrition and climate change in themselves represent massive global challenges. But their co-occurrence in time and place, and the fact they interact with each other, and share common underlying drivers means they collectively represent a syndemic.

Patchy progress in addressing this syndemic is largely due to policy inertia caused by inadequate political leadership and governance to enact policies, strong opposition to policies by powerful commercial interests, and a lack of demand for policy action by the public.

The report systematically unpacks these drivers, before arriving at a set of principles, recommendations and priority actions.

In terms of governance, challenges relate to the need for coherent, cross-sectoral action at all levels, backed by strong stakeholder commitment, capacity and financing, and the attenuation of systematic power imbalances within food systems. Agri-food systems, as currently configured, are contributing to the syndemic by prioritizing energy-rich staple production, with little attention to nutrient-rich foods. Healthy diets are often expensive or inaccessible, while ultra-processed foods flood markets. The food system also contributes nearly one third of all anthropogenic greenhouse-gas emissions, causing rapid deforestation, soil degradation, and massive biodiversity loss.

The Commission brings a particularly sharp focus on the private sector which obviously has a major role to play in any comprehensive set of responses. This will require some major changes. Although most food businesses are small/medium-sized enterprises, large food corporations are explicitly driven by a fiduciary duty to prioritise financial returns to investors. Ultra-processing involves adding steps to any "value" chain, which enhances profit margins. Large-scale, ultra-processed products, marketed globally, thus bring the greatest returns. Added to this, Big Food uses multiple strategies to obstruct obesity prevention – including "adopting self-regulation to pre-empt and delay state regulation, public relations to portray industry as socially responsible, undermining and contesting the strength of scientific evidence, direct lobbying of government decision makers, and framing nutrition as a matter of individual responsibility".

Self-regulation does not work because it lacks legislative clout and accountability, and it preserves business as usual -- commercial success (wealthy corporations) co-existing with market failure (negative health and environmental outcomes).

To strengthen the ability of nations to reduce power asymmetries created by Big Food, and ensure comprehensive action in line with the double-duty or triple-duty actions needed to address the global syndemic, the Commission calls for a Framework Convention on Food Systems (FCFS). A new business model is needed that works for people and planet as well as profit -- with a key role for the World Economic Forum and the World Bank in convening key actors to this end.

But policy inertia stems from other causes too. The Commission argues there is a major role for civil society and grassroots social movements in coalescing bottom-up pressure and consumer demand for healthy diets, as well as being prominent in monitoring and benchmarking, to strengthen accountability. There is a fascinating discussion of the Iroquois concept of seven generation stewardship, leading to a proposal for a Seven Generation Fund for Traditional People's Science.

Other sections focus on monitoring, funding and research. The INFORMAS network is cited as a shining example of food environment assessment and monitoring, along with the World Cancer Research Fund's NOURISHING database of nutrition policies. With regard to funding, it's shocking to see that only 2% health-related aid goes to the prevention and control of NCDs, despite their being responsible for two-thirds of LMIC deaths. The Commission recommends \$1 billion being channeled to support civil society alliances (following the soda tax success in Mexico) to advocate for relevant policy action.

So, what research is needed in the face of this challenge? Three areas are highlighted – application of systems science to the syndemic, research on sociocultural barriers and enablers of action, and policy research to understand the prevalent inertia and lack of traction. A4NH's new *Stories of Challenge* initiative, aligns well with the latter, and can help respond to the Commission's call for more stories of change.

The report concludes with six principles and nine recommendations to maximise impact on the global syndemic. In sum – think syndemically, join thinking with action, strengthen governance (global, national, municipal), support civil society engagement, reduce commercial influence on policy, strengthen accountability, focus research on drivers and actions, and build business models that are fit for the 21st century.

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