

# MEETING PRESENTATION 1

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## **Building consumer confidence in the current, and the future food system we desire**

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Invited Speaker. Building consumer confidence in the current, and the future food system we desire. “*Bites of Transfoodmatation Summit*”. An event organized the Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations Agencies in Rome, Italy. October 2020

### **Introduction**

Malnutrition in all its forms is the longest raging pandemic in human history. While the causes of the current pandemic (of malnutrition) are complex, unhealthy diets remain one of the key contributors. In 2014, the United Nations agencies of FAO, WHO, and others – at the ICN 2 (FAO, 2014) made it clear that the increased prevalence of malnutrition is the result of failed food systems.

Given what we know about the global food system, a food system failure is a market failure. But it’s also a government failure – our collective failure. Such a failure is not only tragic but a grave injustice - given that we have the resources, including the know-how to address it. If all stakeholders were committed to having a food system that not only feeds but nourishes, we would make a headway. Unfortunately, not all are. And this is in part due to the arrogance, and ignorance of humans.

As William Rees, Professor Emeritus, Environment and Resource Planning, University of British Columbia noted: “*Homo sapiens is an enigmatic species. Humans have evolved high intelligence, making us uniquely capable of reason and logical analysis; man is able to use available evidence to shape its own future. But there is a problem; man is inherently short-sighted. Most people favour the here and now over future possibilities*”. We should take a cue from an African proverb: “*the unborn generation is not inheriting the future from us, we have just borrowed the present from them...*”.

Thankfully, a good number of us now recognize this, and agree that the current and future food system must move towards the path of sustainability. And we can only do this by designing or re-designing the current food system. Note that our current food systems are man-made, they were designed by us, we have the ability to redesign them. However, for such a change to happen, global and local commitments are needed. These commitments are not expected from governments only but also from all relevant actors in the food system including academia, the private sector, civil society, consumers (Fanzo, 2020), but **above all young people**.

It is in recognition of the role that young people can play in transforming the food system that the organizers of this event have convened you thinkers, and innovators. And I am confident that it will make you unleash the innovative, practical and feasible ideas that the world needs to overcome one of the most pressing challenges of humankind – malnutrition in all its forms.

And this is taking place on the heels of related events e.g. the FAO Future of Food Symposium in June 2019 – in Rome. At the meeting, participants agreed that “*ending hunger and malnutrition will not be accomplished without transforming the global food system, and that doing so may require transformational change within multiple other systems that relate to or support the food system*”. Success will require having usual suspects like agricultural and nutritional sectors, as well as new sectors such as climate change and natural resources, health, subnational governments, and technology, but also unusual stakeholders as young people contributing. I was a participant, and I am young, but I did not represent young people at the event, I represented academia. Often, young people are not given the opportunity to fix the problems that adults have either created, or unable to fix, or unwilling to fix. Although regrettable, this is not a surprise. A very popular African commentator, Professor Patrick Otieno Lumumba once said: “*Young people everywhere are bubbling with ideas, but do not have the opportunity or power to implement them. He noted that those with power do not have ideas, and those with ideas do not have power*”. Thanks to the organizers of this event, you here gathered have the ideas, and you have been given the opportunity to implement them.

And this is a good reason for optimism. Indeed, I believe based on my years of mentoring at the university and at a mentoring Think Tank, House of Mentoring and Research Resources ([hm2r](#)), that young people can play a critical role in helping us fix this problem. And so, the question of “who needs to shape that transformation of the current ailing food system, into the one that we want, has been answered – **it’s you.**

Some have argued that we leave it to the consumer. A demand and supply economics will fix it. Unfortunately, the today’s consumer is confused or has been deliberately made confused. The “Conditioned Overeating Theory” by David Kessler (2010) provide elucidation – in relation to this. We cannot leave it to consumers’ willpower alone. We cannot leave it to the industry either, at least for now. Some in the food industry are acting and doing important work towards sustainability but their efforts alone are not enough (Fanzo 2020).

There is no doubt that consumers have lost confidence in the food system (Smith et al 2004; Wilson et al 2014). It’s important to build consumer confidence in the current food system or the one that you are here to design. But how do we do that? I would like to use this opportunity to share with you how we – through the “*International Network for Food and Obesity/NCDs Research Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS)*”, and the “*Measurement, Evaluation, Accountability, and Leadership Support for NCDs (MEALS4NCDs)*” project – are contributing to addressing the problem.

Professor Boyd Swinburn and colleagues at INFORMAS define FE as the “*collective physical, economic, policy and sociocultural surroundings, opportunities and conditions that influence people’s food and beverage choices and nutritional status*” (Swinburn et al 2013)

There are many food environment policies that could influence the food system to make healthy foods more available, accessible, affordable and desirable for the consumer. I highlight here some examples (Laar et al 2020; Laar 2020). Food environment, as you know, is a core component of the food system and is sometimes described as “the interface or link between food systems and diets” (Lartey et al 2016) or where the consumer meets the food system (Turner et al 2018).

### ***1. Food Marketing Policies***

These policies aim to ensure that: “...*there is a comprehensive action by governments to reduce the impact of promotion of unhealthy foods especially to or for children across all media*” (Swinburn et al. 2013). To clarify how implementation of this, or the other policies can engender consumer confidence in the food system, I illustrate using our recent realist synthesis work - focusing on facilitating healthy food consumption in lower-middle income African countries (Booth et al 2020; Laar, 2020), we generated an **IF, THEN, THEREFORE** “Context, Mechanism, and Outcome” (CMO) configuration:

***IF*** Governments introduce policy measures that serve to restrict the promotion of unhealthy foods (e.g. foods high in added sugars/sugar sweetened beverages, salt, saturated fats, trans fatty acids) to consumers/children;

***THEN*** The production, processing, importation, marketing, or promotion of these unhealthy foods will be reduced (and such unhealthy foods will be less available);

***THEREFORE***, leading to confidence in what is being marketed, sold, bought and consumed (if consumers believe that marketing/promotion/advertising is not deceitful or misleading; they would have confidence in what is being marketed, sold, bought, and consumed).

And so, globally countries are responding to this call

- **Chile** -No advertising of unhealthy foods directed to children under 14 (or when audience share is >20% children)
- **Restrict marketing of breast milk substitutes:** Various countries

## 2. *Food Composition Policies*

The goal of this policy is that: “*There are government systems implemented to ensure that, where possible, processed foods minimise the energy density and the nutrients of concern (salt, fat, saturated fat, trans fat, added sugar)*”. Reformulation is a prominent feature of this policy (Swinburn et al. 2013).

- **Argentina** Mandatory maximum levels of sodium in various food products.
- **Various countries** - Ban on trans fats

## 3. *Food Labelling Policies*

The focus of the labelling policy is that: “*Governments have a regulatory system implemented for consumer-oriented labelling on food packaging and menu boards in food outlets to enable consumers to easily make informed food choices and to prevent misleading claims*” (Swinburn et al. 2013). *Current efforts in this direction include:*

- **Front-of pack labelling system -Ecuador** Mandatory traffic light labelling indicating healthiness of food products.
- **Chile** Warning labels for products high in calories, saturated fat, sugar or sodium.

## 4. *Food in Retail Policies*

Food in retail policies seek to ensure that “*...government implement policies and programs to support the availability of healthy foods and limit the availability of unhealthy foods in communities (outlet density and locations) and in-store (product placement)*” (Swinburn et al. 2013).

- **Zoning laws -South Korea** ‘Green Food Zones’ (<200m) around schools ban the sale of foods (fast food, soda) deemed ‘unhealthy’ by FDA

## 5. *Fiscal Policies/Food Pricing Policies*

Such policies as taxes and subsidies align with health outcomes by helping to make healthy eating choices easier and cheaper (Swinburn et al. 2013):

- **Reduce taxes on healthy foods; -Fiji** Removed excise duty on imported fruits, vegetables and legumes
- **Increase taxes on unhealthy foods -Mexico** 10% tax on sugary-drinks, 8% tax on unhealthy snack foods;
- **South Africa 20%** or 2.29 cents per gram of sugar, the first African country to implement the tax. [Mention Morocco]

To conclude, it is highly plausible that if effectively implemented/enforced, these food environment policies can engender consumer confidence in the current ailing food system, or the food system that you are here designing. The question, however, is whether or not we have the courage to implement them. As C.S. Lewis put it, “*courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.*” I would argue that a young innovator without courage, cannot promote virtue, something that the food system needs.

Yes, if the food systems that you are designing are to inspire public confidence, they must prevent undernutrition, they must prevent overweight, obesity, nutrition-related non-communicable diseases, and they must protect the environment. The 2019 EAT-LANCET Report argued same (Willett *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, a desirable food system, should be built around 3Ps and possibly a 4<sup>th</sup> p.

- **PEOPLE:** • **PLANET:** • **PROSPERITY** & then • **profits.**

Thank you.

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