



GLOBAL
ALLIANCE
FOR THE
FUTURE
OF FOOD

FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Promoting Human, Ecological, & Animal Health & Well-being
A Shared Vision & Narrative

GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF FOOD

2020

This document outlines a shared vision and narrative for our global food systems that promote human, ecological, and animal health and well-being. It is the result of a stakeholder-led engagement process that gathered insights and feedback from a diverse array of individuals and organizations who work across the food-health nexus, within and across many contexts, scales, cultures, and geographies. It aims to foster more dialogue on the opportunities to accelerate the transformation of our food systems—how to improve the ways food is produced, harvested, processed, distributed, eaten, and disposed of—so that all food systems actors can achieve health and sustainability goals through policy, practice, and new business models. Transformational change will not occur without a shift of narrative and mindsets, an inspirational vision of what is possible, and a recognition that ecological and animal health are integral to human health, well-being, and happiness.



Promoting Human, Ecological, & Animal Health & Well-being: A Shared Vision & Narrative was commissioned from Tasting the Future by the Global Alliance for the Future of Food. Tasting the Future is a purpose-driven consultancy that aims to transform food systems so they are sustainable, healthy, equitable, and fair.

INTRODUCTION



We know that a healthy planet provides the foundation for diverse and resilient ecosystems, which in turn are the bedrock for human health and well-being.¹ Over the last several decades, however, profound changes in the way food is grown, processed, distributed, consumed, and wasted have resulted in the creation of food systems that increasingly push climate change, biodiversity loss, shifts in nutrient cycles (nitrogen and phosphorus), and land use beyond planetary boundaries.²

The ongoing planetary emergency and COVID-19 pandemic have exposed the fragility of our global food systems, in particular their inherent inequalities, injustices, and interlinked nature. We are reminded of just how fundamental ecological and animal health are to human health.³ In addition, malnutrition (hunger, obesity, overweight, micronutrient deficiencies) and the associated rise of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer), antibiotic resistance, environmental contamination,

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occupational hazards, and contaminated foods continue to impact human health and place enormous financial pressures on our health systems. Obesity, malnutrition, and NCDs are estimated to cost the global economy US\$760 billion, US\$3.5 trillion, and US\$7 trillion, respectively.⁴

The pioneering American environmental scientist, teacher, and writer Donella Meadows writes:

*Vision is the most vital step in the policy process. If we don't know where we want to go, it makes little difference that we make great progress. Yet vision is not only missing almost entirely from policy discussions; it is missing from our whole culture.*⁵

This holds true for the many policy discussions and decisions that shape the future of our food systems and, in turn, human and ecological health. We hope that the vision and narrative detailed in this document will help diverse actors identify and prioritize the policies, practices, and business models that align human, ecological, and animal health outcomes.

OUR HEALTH-FOCUSED FOOD SYSTEM VISION

The way food is produced, harvested, processed, distributed, marketed, eaten, and disposed of promotes human, ecological, and animal health and well-being. All actors actively shape and contribute to healthy, equitable, renewable, resilient, just, inclusive, and culturally diverse food systems.

We recognize the need for multiple visions and narratives that reflect cultural diversity and different priorities at different scales and within different geographies. To realize this diversity, we must transform food systems and counter the prevailing powerful narratives that often guide research, investment, policy priorities, and practices.

CHANGING THE PREVAILING NARRATIVE

PRIORITIZES YIELD & CALORIES/
TREATS ILL HEALTH

TO A NEW NARRATIVE

PRIORITIZES HUMAN, ECOLOGICAL,
& ANIMAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

The prevailing narrative is one many people call a “feed the world” or “productivist” narrative, which focuses on the quantity of food and calories produced. It is based on assumptions that we need to “double food production by 2050,”⁶ maximize yields, and base our food production on export-oriented models from the Global North. Efforts to minimize the social, health, or ecological costs are considered but seen as less important than the goal of increasing food production to “feed the world.”

The new narrative is to nourish a growing global population well while ensuring human, ecological, and animal health and well-being. The new narrative focuses on the quality of food produced so that it contributes toward healthy, equitable, renewable, resilient, just, inclusive, and culturally diverse food systems. Regenerating ecological health, operating within environmental limits, and addressing a range of social, cultural, and economic determinants of good health are critical to promoting good human health: physical and mental health, healthy growth, and enabling people to adapt and manage their own health. This approach facilitates the delivery of global commitments such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Climate Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the UN Decade for Action for Nutrition.

The prevailing narrative has resulted in unsustainable food systems that harm human, ecological, and animal health. It has encouraged the industrialization of food production—power and influence consolidated in the hands of a few, and a focus on a limited number of globally traded crops. These crops are often transformed into animal feed or ultra-processed food and drink products. The predominant industrial food system is too dependent on fossil fuels and non-renewable inputs, resulting in pollution and environmental damage.

The industrial food system is often at the root of eroding livelihoods and important social, cultural, and spiritual traditions, and it promotes an economic system that results in liabilities due to hidden costs, global trade vulnerabilities, declining rural economies, and increased inequality.

Fully embracing the new narrative to prioritize human, ecological, and animal health and well-being will mean challenging prevailing mainstream narratives and mindsets, and transforming the physical, socioeconomic, and political contexts that shape food systems.

Key decision-makers and thought-leaders (governments, investors, business, civil society, community leaders, health practitioners, farmers, Indigenous Peoples, etc.) will need to adopt and adapt new health-focused visions and prioritize policies, practices, and business models that align human, ecological, and animal health. This will be critical to addressing the barriers that prevent us from replicating, scaling up and out, and supporting the many positive health initiatives already taking place on the ground across food systems (e.g., at community, local, city, and regional levels).

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KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE “FEED THE WORLD” NARRATIVE VERSUS “COLLECTIVE HUMAN, ECOLOGICAL, & ANIMAL HEALTH” NARRATIVES

TABLE 1. Key narrative characteristics focusing on the structural changes required for food systems transformation (the “how”)

EXISTING THINKING	NEW THINKING
PROMOTES “YIELD-FIRST,” PRODUCTIVITY-CENTRIC, & SYMPTOM-DRIVEN (RATHER THAN PREVENTATIVE HEALTH) NARRATIVES	PROMOTES TRANSFORMATIONAL NARRATIVES THAT PRIORITIZE HUMAN, ECOLOGICAL, & ANIMAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING
POWER, OWNERSHIP, & ACCOUNTABILITY	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “We” feed the world, often driven by the Global North.• Food is seen as a commodity.• Profits are maximized.• Decision-making is done by the few with money, power, and influence. Citizens are disconnected from decision-making.• Transparency and accountability are not always clear.• Responsibility falls on the individual, with little focus on addressing food environments⁷ and underlying determinants of health.• Emphasis is on a global search for single solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The world feeds itself: citizens and communities grow their own foods with dignity, retaining rights to their products and access to markets.• Healthy and sustainable diets are seen as a public good (commons) with farmers/producers/citizens/health-care professionals supported and incentivized to promote health in the public interest. Local and regional food systems resilience is prioritized.• Values are maximized.• Citizens participate in, create, and shape food systems directly, and call for effective, democratically accountable institutions.• Full transparency and accountability.• Focus is on healthy and sustainable diets as a public good, healthy food environments, and underlying determinants of health (ecological, social, cultural, economic).• A diversity of contexts requiring a diversity of solutions.
ATTITUDE TOWARD RISK	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus is on short-term risk to profits.• Frequent disregard for the high level of uncertainty around the risk of unintended health impacts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus is on long-term value creation.• Weight is given to the collective evidence on risk factors, exercising caution to avoid unintended health impacts.
POLICY & PRACTICE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Siloed strategies treat human, ecological, and animal health issues separately, resulting in unintended negative consequences.• Addresses hunger in isolation.• Population-/society-wide policies are disconnected from local-/community-/citizen-level participation.• Clear disconnection between international/national initiatives and local-/population-level action.• Polluter often does not pay.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Integrated strategies within and across organizations and departments align to create positive human, ecological, and animal health outcomes.• Addresses malnutrition in all its forms (hunger, obesity, micronutrient deficiencies).• Population-/society-wide policies and local-/community-/citizen-led processes are mutually reinforcing.• International frameworks engender and resource more context-specific approaches at a local/population level.• Polluter pays.
MEASURES OF SUCCESS/METRICS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Costs to society are externalized.• Health impacts are not always tracked well; indicators focus on the reduction of negative health impacts (e.g., reducing NCDs, obesity) and often do not use a mix of quantifiable and qualitative data sets.• Success is measured on impacts achieved in the short term, e.g., within 3 to 5 years.• Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the main measure of societal progress.• Research resources are invested primarily for commercial benefit and defense of existing narrative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• True Cost Accounting is used to assess and internalize full costs and values to society.• Health indicators are framed around positive health impacts, use diverse evidence (i.e., both quantifiable and qualitative data [lived experiences, Indigenous knowledge]) and align with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).• Medium- to longer-term impacts are assessed and include systemic impact.• Health and well-being are incorporated within measures for societal progress.• Research resources are invested for public good in support of transition to health-promoting food systems.

TABLE 2. Key narrative characteristics focusing on the prevailing elements of food systems that must change—the on-the-ground differences that deliver positive health impacts (the “what”)



FOOD PRODUCTION & PROCESSING

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrow focus on high-yield crops and animals as globally traded commodities. • Practices that deliver efficiency (defined as greater quantities at low cost) take priority (e.g., homogenization and monocultures; agrochemical use; low-wage, unsafe work). • An ad-hoc approach to land-use planning resulting in continued erosion and degradation of ecosystems from food production. • A belief that environmental contamination (of soils, air, water, etc.) can be contained and is necessary to achieve yields. • Trading models are not resilient to external shocks and are dominated by global models of trade. • A focus on extracting constituents of whole foods (starches, sugars, proteins, oils) and assembling them with additives into ultra-processed food and drink products. • Waste as a by-product of a linear process. • Hunger, obesity, and malnutrition impact food workers (full-/part-time and migrant workers) across the value chain. • Human rights issues exist (child/forced labour, poor living conditions). • Poor animal welfare conditions; animals treated as commodities; significant use of antibiotics. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad focus on diversity of culturally appropriate, nutrient-rich foods (mostly, but not exclusively, from plants). • Regenerative, agroecological, circular/closed-loop approaches with zero waste that enhance agricultural biodiversity and enable decent livelihoods. • An integrated approach to land-use planning where food and farming work in harmony with nature, protecting and restoring key ecosystems. • No environmental contamination results from food systems, and the use of agricultural inputs is based on the precautionary principle. • A focus on resilient trading models, including more localized forms of production and processing (adds value locally). • A focus on the consumption of whole foods and balanced diets; food processing methods aim to increase the duration of whole foods and make their preparation easier. • Makes use of closed-loop nutrient systems. • All food workers have access to healthy, nutritious, culturally appropriate, and affordable foods with a living wage. • All human rights as set out under the <i>Universal Declaration on Human Rights</i>⁸ are respected. • Higher welfare standards for animals to improve health; animals treated as sentient beings; antibiotics used only when necessary to reduce anti-biotic resistance in humans. |
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EATING & CITIZENS

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food insecurity exists (lack of access resulting in hunger, malnutrition, and obesity). • Health and ecosystem impacts of food are often externalized with increased costs for healthy, sustainable foods. • Unhealthy, unsustainable, culturally inappropriate food choices are an unavoidable by-product of prevailing food environments. • Nutritional value of foods lost due to avoidable wastage, with nutrients lost to the food systems. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to healthy, affordable, sustainable food is an inalienable right (e.g., access via income/safety nets and other socioeconomic initiatives). • True Cost Accounting supports policies and practices that ensure healthy foods are affordable to all while still being profitable for producers and suppliers. • Food environments enable and motivate people to eat a diversity of foods in healthy, sustainable, and culturally respectful ways. • Nutritional value of foods is utilized, fully prioritizing human nutrition, then animal nutrition, then nutrient recycling for food production. |
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PROVISION OF HEALTH SERVICES

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems and practices treat ill-health and take a curative approach to health-care provisions. • Individuals are responsible for their own good health. • Public health and health care are often siloed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conditions promote good health and a preventative approach to health-care provisions. • Population-level public health policies/approaches address the social/commercial/environmental/cultural determinants of health and well-being. • Public health and health care are holistic in approach and coordination. |
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TURNING NARRATIVES INTO ACTION

This narrative, which is by design macro (global) in nature, will need to be adapted and refined according to the needs of different places and decision-makers. A stakeholder-led and regionally focused engagement process is needed to identify key stakeholders/actors/decision-makers (citizens, communities, organizations, private sector, and government) who can then propose and implement culturally relevant and locally owned visions, policies, and practices that create the most significant contribution to restoring good health. We recognize that regional narratives need to be tied together to motivate national and multinational action, policy, and practice.

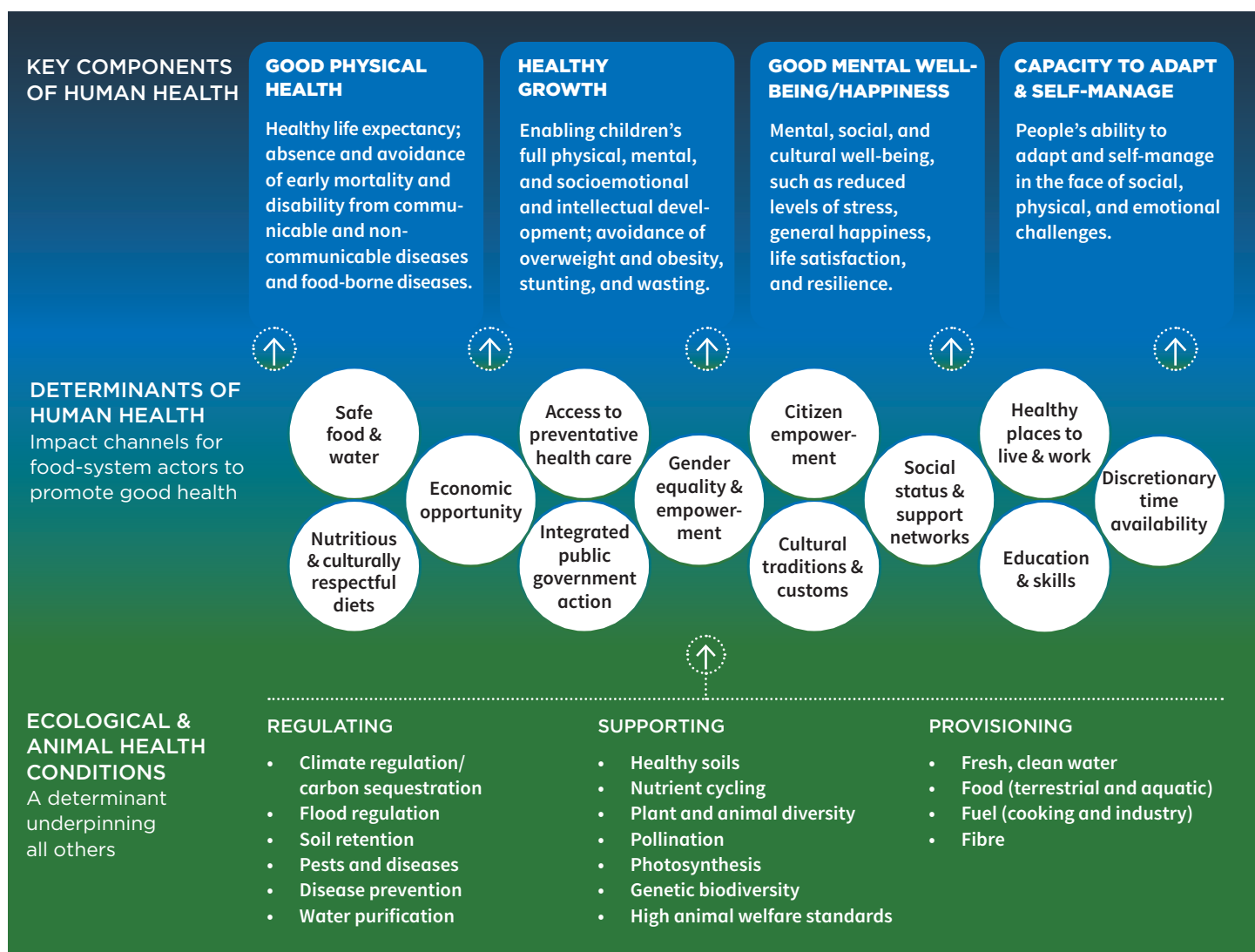


FIGURE 1. Human, ecological, & animal health determinants underpin human health outcomes

POLICY & PRACTICE: ADDRESSING THE DETERMINANTS OF GOOD HEALTH

New strategies, policies, practices, and business models need to be culturally sensitive and systematically designed to address multiple determinants of good human, ecological, and animal health. The determinants of human health consist of a range of factors that influence the health status of individuals or populations at every stage of life. This includes enough nutritious, safe food; healthy places to live and work (including healthy food environments); economic opportunity; and vibrant social and cultural connections, among others. These determinants are underpinned by healthy ecosystems, which include ecological services such as healthy soils, plant diversity and pollination, and the health and diversity of animal populations (see Figure 1). Successful initiatives that already support positive human, ecological, and animal health outcomes need sustained support—success stories and lessons need to be communicated widely to key decision-makers (including citizens).

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FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information, please contact Patty Fong at patty@futureoffood.org.

The Global Alliance for the Future of Food, supported by Tasting the Future, is developing several assets to work in tandem with this narrative. These include:

- i) *A Guide to Government Action for Healthy & Sustainable Food Systems.*
- ii) A set of case studies that demonstrate approaches to resilient and healthy food systems in policy and practice.
- iii) A policy framework toolkit for use by the health sector.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 We have used the term “ecological health” as it resonates more with key actors at a local/community level than the term “planetary health.” We recognize the need to promote good ecological health in the context of the planetary emergency and the need for Earth systems to stay within planetary boundaries.
- 2 From Stockholm Resilience Centre, “The Nine Planetary Boundaries.” Stockholm: Stockholm University, n.d. Available at <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>. Accessed June 2, 2020.
- 3 Most recent pandemics, including HIV/AIDS, Ebola, West Nile virus, SARS, and Lyme disease, are rooted in environmental change and ecosystem disturbances. They originate from animals, both wild and domesticated. Though evidence on the origins of the COVID-19 outbreak is still inconclusive, it is believed to have occurred through a combination of pathways, i.e., the amplification of wildlife diseases through intermediate hosts. See IPES Food, “COVID-19 and the Crisis in Food Systems: Symptoms, Causes, and Potential Solutions.” Available at http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/COVID-19_CommuniqueEN.pdf. Accessed May 1, 2020.
- 4 From IPES-Food, *Unravelling the Food-Health Nexus: Addressing Practices, Political Economy, and Power Relations to Build Healthier Food Systems*. n.p.: The Global Alliance for the Future of Food and IPES-Food, 2017.
- 5 From Donella Meadows, “Envisioning a Sustainable World,” in *Getting Down to Earth: Practical Applications of Ecological Economics*, edited by Robert Costanza, Olman Segura, and Juan Martinez-Alier. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996. Available at <http://donellameadows.org/archives/envisioning-a-sustainable-world/>. Accessed June 22, 2020.
- 6 From UN Sixty-fourth General Assembly, Second Committee, October 9, 2009. Available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2009/gaef3242.doc.htm>. Accessed June 22, 2020.
- 7 Food environments shape what food we buy and eat. They are the physical, economic, sociocultural, and policy factors that affect the availability, accessibility, affordability, and attractiveness of foods. From Boyd Swinburn, et al., “Strengthening of Accountability Systems to Create Healthy Food Environments and Reduce Global Obesity.” *The Lancet*, February 18, 2015. Available at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(14\)61747-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(14)61747-5/fulltext). Accessed June 2, 2020.
- 8 From UN, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Available at <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>. Accessed June 2, 2020.

DISCLAIMER

This research was commissioned by the Global Alliance for the Future of Food for use by Global Alliance members and partners to stimulate discussion about critical issues related to food systems transformation and guide collective action. Any views expressed in this document do not necessarily represent the views of the Global Alliance or of any of our members.

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF FOOD



The Global Alliance for the Future of Food is a strategic alliance of philanthropic foundations working together and with others to transform global food systems now and for future generations. We believe in the urgency of transforming global food systems, and in the power of working together and with others to effect positive change. Food systems reform requires new and better solutions at all scales through a systems-level approach and deep collaboration among philanthropy, researchers, grassroots movements, the private sector, farmers and food systems workers, Indigenous Peoples, government, and policymakers.

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