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Voices

Inclusive diets within planetary boundaries

Our food production system is unsustainable and threatening planetary boundaries. Yet, a quarter of the global population still lacks access to safe and nutritious food, while suboptimal diets account for 11 million adult deaths per year. This Voices asks: what critical barriers must be overcome to enable sustainable, healthy, accessible, and equitable diets for all?

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Gender is a hidden driver of inequality in diets

Inequality in diets is deeply associated with the structural problems of gender at all levels including global food systems, household resource allocation, food policies, and research priorities. For example, global food production and processing depend heavily on women's "cheap" labor characterized by low wage and precarious form of employment. Ironically, these women workers cannot afford healthy and sustainable diets for themselves. At the household level, women do not necessarily have decision-making power and the economic resources to invest in healthy diets for their children. This is also closely associated with the structural inequality persisting in their societies. Furthermore, in food policies and governance, gender is often addressed by merely inviting more women into the existing unequal food system rather than substantively introducing structural change. Gender is also sidelined in mainstream research on food systems and diets that focus more on how, rather than for whom, food was produced and distributed.

To address these underlying structural issues, I suggest three actions: (1) embracing pluralistic knowledge production in our understandings of food systems and diets by inviting other disciplines such as feminist approaches in political sciences, anthropology, and cultural studies; (2) analyzing policy-making processes to understand how and why the agenda on gender is marginalized and depoliticized; and (3) involving more women and early-career scientists from the Global South in food system research to incorporate their perspectives in food system theories, concepts, and practices. These are the first step to moving beyond providing technological solutions toward facilitating structural transformation in food systems and food system research.

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Neglected and underutilized crops for inclusive diets

While the existing food system has improved food security, this was achieved in an unsustainable way and has led to issues of obesity, environmental degradation, and exacerbated social inequalities, while hunger persists among many communities. Also, the focus on providing sufficient food calories over improved nutritional quality has left millions in Africa still lacking access to healthy diets. Many are calling for a transformation of Africa's food system, which is currently centered around a few major staple crops, by expanding the role of neglected and underutilized crop species (NUSs)—also known as orphan crops that were historically used by Indigenous communities. Successful production and consumption of NUSs could improve food systems' resilience to climate shocks and transform diets to be healthier, more equitable, and inclusive. For example, several NUS crops (e.g., bambara groundnut, cowpeas, amaranth, millets, wild mustard) are nutrient-dense and could be a sensible addition to the current average African diet, which typically lacks micronutrients. Furthermore, there will be environmental co-benefits, as NUSs typically can adapt to marginal environments: they require less landscape modification, are more tolerant to stresses (e.g., drought, heat, salinity), and need fewer external inputs (e.g., fertilizer, water, pesticides). Hence, diversifying the food system by incentivizing NUS production and consumption can be pivotal in adequately addressing food insecurity, micronutrient deficiencies, vulnerability to climate change, and environmental degradation. To gain momentum, policy changes are needed to acknowledge NUS's critical value and