Science to policy dialogue for a food and agriculture policy roadmap

Summary outcome paper for discussion

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) through the Food and Nature Policy & Advocacy team is convening a series of Science-to-Policy Dialogues. The first dialogue workshop took place on 8-10 September 2020, bringing together business, science and civil society to co-construct transformative food system-related policy asks. Taking a consumer perspective, three "big issues" framed the dialogue: 1. Changing consumer behavior to healthy and sustainable diets, 2. The food we need to produce and eat for a healthy sustainable diet and 3. Trade for sustainable food systems in a (post) COVID-19 reality. The following paper summarizes the discussion and emerging solutions spaces for business to provoke initial discussion and feedback.

A healthy food system is one with inclusive outcomes for healthy people and a healthy planet, including healthy businesses. To achieve a more resilient and healthy food system, we will require a deep and fundamental shift in our current food systems, informed by a collective understanding of the current challenges and guided by an evidence-based, common vision and collective solutions spaces for business action. COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing weaknesses of the global food and agriculture system exposing the fragility of a system across the value chain.

Today, the double burden of malnutrition is growing, disproportionately affecting the poorest and most vulnerable. "With healthy diets that are unaffordable and less accessible for many people in all regions of the world, several populations are facing simultaneous wasting, stunting and obesity. Hence, transforming our food systems offers potential social, environmental and economic win-wins across societies. Nevertheless, the challenges consumers are facing are also context-specific, both across countries and within them, and a global vision must retain enough agility to be adapted in local contexts to best meet the needs of diverse groups of consumers.

Indeed, there is no one-size-fits-all set of policy asks, but rather a range of asks that will depend on both consumers' capability and maturity of the business-government-consumers relationship. Trade-offs must be carefully considered at a local level, for example, repurposing subsidies to incentivize consumption of more sustainable or healthy food could increase food insecurity amongst certain demographics.

We will need governments at all levels to become aligned in policy making efforts, and engage with companies from across the entire value chain, civil society organizations and the scientific community to ensure that mechanisms are in place to move countries successfully towards achieving the UN SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement. Policy has a critical role to play. In 2021, two milestone events, the UN Food Systems Summit and the Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit, provide unique opportunities to both raise awareness and make the commitments that are necessary to shift the system. As part of this series of Science-to-Policy Dialogues (SPDs), WBCSD is producing a set of key policy issues, asks and recommendations to contribute to these summits.

The three "big issues" that this SPD is addressing from a consumer perspective are as follows:

1. **Changing consumer behavior to healthy and sustainable diets**
2. **The food we need to produce and eat for a healthy and sustainable diet**
3. **Trade for sustainable food systems in a (post) COVID-19 reality**

For each of these "big issues", key challenges and solutions are outlined below based on the three-day workshop. From this discussion we have also lifted the most promising cross-cutting proposed policy recommendations.

Cross-cutting policy recommendations:

- Promote change at global, national and local levels: leverage the global community to coordinate regulation, use national legislation to promote implementation and to enhance the capacity to innovate at a local level.
- Coordination of government ministries: support more integrated policy making by coordinating amongst departments including health, agriculture, environment, education finance and trade departments; and weighing system wide costs and benefits to create holistic policies.
- Public-private and cross-sector partnerships: use public policy to enable greater private sector innovation, new business models and scaling through regulation, financing and incentives.
- Increased transparency: use digital innovation to support communication with consumers where possible, harmonize and simplify guidelines around labelling to increase consumer understanding, improve choices and build trust.

"Big Issue" 1 - Changing consumer behavior to healthy and sustainable diets

Food consumption patterns often do not reflect healthy or sustainable diets. The core drivers are a gap in understanding of healthy and sustainable diets, skewed pricing not accounting for health and environmental externalities, the role of trends and marketing, and a lack of availability, affordability and accessibility.

There is currently a lack of transparent and clear information available for consumers to make informed choices on healthy and sustainable food. There are multiple definitions of healthy and sustainable diets used by governments, companies across the value chain, the scientific community and civil society. Most national dietary guidelines, while taking into account health concerns, are not sufficiently ambitious to bring food systems to within planetary boundaries, and there is a lack of coherence amongst different national dietary recommendations. In addition, there is great potential for marketing and advertising techniques to influence consumer behavior towards healthy and sustainable eating.

Consumers globally hold varied values and perceptions associated with food consumption which is influenced by geography, culture and socio-economic status. Values and economic means impact how price sensitive consumers are and what other priorities they may consider (e.g. taste, environment, health, social habits) when making their choices. Different policies are required to target different consumer segments and companies need to be incentivized to ensure that poorer consumers with lower spending power are not underserved.

Policy considerations and asks:

- **Guidelines:** develop a clear set of coherent guidelines to support consumers to make more informed choices on nutritious and sustainable foods and build public trust. For example, national and global food based dietary guidelines that are science-based with clear and consistent engagement from multiple stakeholders and consistent policy support. When fresh nutritious food is not available, government should seek to promote innovative approaches to food fortification and supplementation. Recommended diets should reflect variations in geography, culture, and demography, and local production environment to balance health and sustainability.
- **Standards:** introduce global standards to harmonize labelling and reporting requirements (e.g. the development of metrics) that cover both health and sustainability across agencies, markets and regions. Consider revisiting strict definitions of product categories (e.g. cheese products) and using new digital technologies to enable transparency for consumers along the supply chain.
- **Public procurement:** develop healthy and sustainable public procurement requirements across the public sector (e.g. schools, hospitals, government departments) with accompanying targets. This would model good behavior and provide a consistent demand to the sector.
- **Education:** use education to raise the awareness amongst children and consumers of the importance of making healthy and sustainable choices, as well as limiting food waste. Consider restrictions on marketing and advertising to more easily influenced consumer groups (e.g. children). Additionally, governments should consider forming advisory boards that are independent of private business actors, but also includes dialogue with the private sector so that recommendations are feasible.
- **Affordability:** make sure that healthy and sustainable food is affordable for all consumers. Rebalancing subsidies to make healthy and sustainable food cheaper could be an option and should be further explored.

"Big Issue" 2 - The food we need to produce and eat for a healthy sustainable diet

Economic considerations often take precedence over nutritional value, long-term health effects and food production sustainability. Misaligned financial incentives that hide the true cost of "cheap" food and make healthy, sustainable food products unaffordable for many, means that moderately food insecure people tend to consume foods that are typically cheaper on a per-calorie basis and fewer, more nutrient dense expensive foods.

In 2019, nearly 1 in 10 people were food insecure and 2 billion people did not have regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food. Additionally, in many countries of the world there is a shortage of any kind of food, and malnutrition is a real issue. In some regions the infrastructure is such that people live in "food deserts" with limited access to affordable and nutritious foods and "food swamps" where fast-food and foods high in sugar, salt and fat inundate healthy alternatives. Additionally, food loss across the system is another key factor driving availability and affordability across the value chain from pre-harvest through to the consumer.

Policy considerations and asks:

- **Incentivize research and development:** utilize policy to support companies to develop and strengthen the nutrient profile of existing food products and identify new ones. For example, supporting the diversification of protein sources through plant-based meat substitutes in addition to animal-based protein. Additionally, there is a role for the public sector to help scale and distribute innovations which are already ready to market but need incentives to accelerate acceptance amongst consumers.
- **Accelerate and incentivize best practices to enhance supply of sustainable, healthy products:** support dialogues and case-studies to share best practice information and build capacity across all levels of the value chain - for example, using technology as a tool to empower farmers by providing need-to-know production information and facilitating greater farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing.
- **Support innovative partnerships:** governments and financial institutions should work together to provide loans and grants and use blended finance mechanisms to de-risk private capital. Use financial instruments to bring public and private sector actors together.
- **Support infrastructure development:** investment to strengthen capacity for healthy food production (e.g. irrigation technology; distribution (e.g. cold storage systems, all-weather transit networks); and disposal (e.g. composting) to reduce food loss and waste throughout the product life cycle.
- **Fair pricing:** use multi-capital and true cost accounting methods to internalize the environmental and social capital costs associated with the production and consumption of food, to ensure they are fairly reflected within market prices. However, such approaches impact affordability, and subsidies and other incentives should be used in combination with these approaches to ensure that no individuals are marginalized as a result.
- **Promote companies focused beyond profit:** encourage companies and, as applicable, their shareholders, to value health and sustainability performance metrics beyond profit. Highlighting the brand impact for companies from actions that transform consumer behavior and build trust towards healthy and sustainable diets, which in turn can impact commercial success.

"Big Issue" 3 - Trade for sustainable food systems in a (post) COVID-19 reality

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses and the fragility of supply chains in the food system as well as the need to build resilience into supply chains.

Current trade systems are overly focused on political and economic issues, failing to integrate the value of externalities around health, equitable distribution of value (livelihoods) or the environment into market prices.

Global trade is incredibly complex and might not be fit for purpose for some of the 21st century challenges. It is currently associated with an increasing environmental footprint but has the opportunity to also become a conveyor and create benefits for society and the environment.

Although the WTO allows for environmental protection and preservation provisions, negative impacts associated with food production in one country are sometimes inadvertently transferred to other countries. In addition, there is growing demand for transparency on the impact of products across their lifecycle to be made available to consumers. Existing value chains are not always in balance, highlighting the inequitable distribution of value.

Policy considerations and asks:

- **Rules-based trade:** promote a predictable and fair rule-based trading system. Encourage the development of initiatives that support cooperation between national and international bodies to preserve trading channels and networks during production shocks, to limit increases in food prices. Consider how to enhance local food choices and shorter supply chains.
- **Capacity building:** assisting developing countries in implementing trade agreements and negotiations, developing standards for trade in a way that ensures measures are not applied in a manner that constitutes hidden protectionism, and enable digital trade, in an effort to help facilitate trade of safer food and integrate small producers into global markets. Ensure that organizations that are part of the UN system have the set up and expertise to support those efforts.
- **Global standards and certification:** incorporate externalities around healthy and sustainable food into international agreements. For example, through a "Codex Planetarius" with an accompanying set of environmental standards to support global food and agriculture trade.

Participants of the Science-to-Policy Dialogue

We would like to thank the participants who contributed to the discussions with open minds and ideas. While all the participants contributed to the above recommendations, the final text and ultimate recommendations may not reflect the individual positions of the participating organizations.

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