



An economic lens for sustainable dietary guidelines

The Global Syndemic encompasses three interacting pandemics of obesity, undernutrition, and climate change that collectively threaten human and planetary health.¹ The *Lancet* Global Syndemic Commission recommended that governments incorporate sustainability principles into national food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) as one of many triple-duty actions to mitigate these concurrent pandemics.¹

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that more than 100 countries across six regions have developed FBDG recommendations for populations, described in scientific reports and graphic food guides that offer textual and visual messages to encourage people to adopt healthy dietary patterns.²

A 2019 FAO and WHO report advised Member State governments to “develop national FBDG recommendations that define context-specific sustainable healthy diets by taking into account the social, cultural, economic, ecological and environmental circumstances”.³ The UN report described 16 guiding principles for the health, environmental, and sociocultural domains.³ Although one principle listed under the sociocultural domain recommended that diets should be accessible and affordable, the report did not contain principles for economic sustainability.³

When economic considerations are excluded from FBDG analyses, countries are unlikely to achieve the recommendations in the other sustainability domains.

For example, James-Martin and colleagues⁴ used the 16 UN principles to examine how environmental sustainability was addressed in the FBDG documents of 37 countries. These authors found that most countries did not include specific environmental sustainability advice and recommended that governments update national guidelines to emphasise a planetary health diet.⁴ Yet economic sustainability was not examined, which presented an incomplete picture of governments' willingness and political feasibility to implement this recommendation.

The use of an economic lens to examine the opportunities and challenges to advance sustainable diets is essential to promote human and planetary health. Economic sustainability principles encompass the type of agricultural production system, food prices and diet costs, economic viability, profitability, wealth distribution across the food system, clean and green business innovation, and stable jobs with liveable wages to improve livelihoods.⁵⁻⁷

Ecological economics offers an alternative paradigm and principles⁸ from neoclassical economics for governments to advance sustainable diets and food systems by: establishing new business innovation standards and sustainability metrics; ensuring fair profit distribution through food-value distribution systems; prioritising stable employment and liveable wages for people to afford and access adequate,

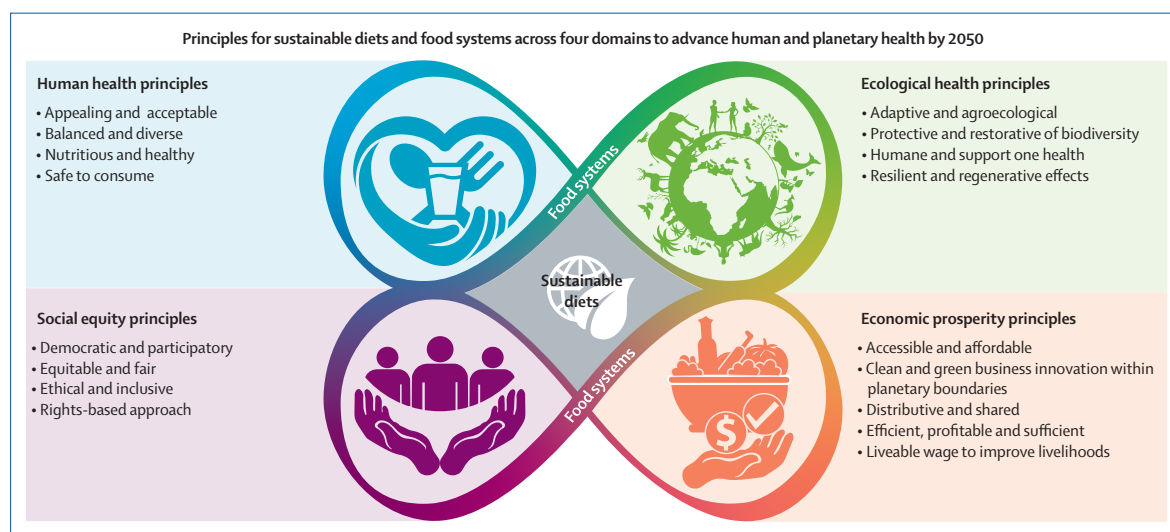


Figure: Principles for sustainable diets across four domains to advance human and planetary health by 2050

high-quality, nutritious diets; and protecting equitable safety-net programmes.⁵⁻⁸

Many conceptual models show the multifaceted aspects of the four domains that influence sustainable diets and food systems.^{1,5-8} The figure presents principles for sustainable diets and food systems across these domains to advance human and planetary health by 2050. Human hands were purposefully incorporated into the images for each domain because humans have agency to facilitate or hinder actions toward sustainable diets.

The UN's guiding principles should be updated to include economic sustainability and highlight the interconnected nature of issues across all four sustainability domains. For instance, principle 5 recommends "safe and clean drinking water as the fluid of choice" to support human health.³ Water security is a multidimensional concept⁹ that impacts human health by ensuring healthy hydration, sanitation, and hygiene; ecological health to protect and support resilience and biodiversity; economic prosperity for livelihoods and businesses; and social equity by ensuring the human right to access clean water. Yet, people might distrust the quality and safety of drinking water due to bacterial contamination and microplastic pollution; prefer sugary beverages aggressively marketed worldwide for taste, cost, and convenience; and have restricted access to affordable potable water exacerbated by inequities and climate change.⁹ Other issues are equally controversial. Reducing red meat consumption and encouraging affluent populations to adopt a planetary health diet could have co-benefits for human and ecological health.¹⁴ Yet progress to advance planetary health diets is impeded by sociocultural, economic, and governance challenges.¹

Diverse actors operate within these four sustainability domains to negotiate targets and implement triple-duty actions to mitigate the Global Syndemic.¹ Future research should examine the trade-offs needed to balance many principles across the four domains and identify feasible triple-duty actions at local, national, regional, and global levels. The sustainability

challenges will vary across time and within each country's food system type.⁷

Civil society organisations could urge governments and businesses to commit to a post-growth vision grounded in ecological economics⁸ that values economic sufficiency over growth, resource regeneration not extraction, wealth distribution not accumulation, and the commons over private ownership.¹⁰ By shifting the vision, paradigm, and discourse, humanity could make progress to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the *Lancet* Global Syndemic Commission's recommendations for human and ecological health, social equity, and economic prosperity by 2050.¹

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