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Human rights depend on healthy and sustainable food systems

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The importance of healthy and sustainable food systems

Food is vital for life, but also for community and culture. Food also plays a vital economic role, supporting the livelihoods of more than 2 billion people and representing roughly 10 per cent of the global economy, rising to more than half of gross domestic product in some low-income countries. Enough food is produced annually to provide adequate nutrition for everyone, but a large portion is fed to livestock, wasted or used to manufacture non-food products such as biofuels. Some 2 billion people lack adequate access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food, including 720–811 million suffering from daily hunger.

Massive environmental impacts of food systems

Today's food systems are trapped in a vicious cycle, threatened by the global environmental crisis and at the same time exacerbating this crisis. Food systems are responsible for 21–37 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, use more water than all other human activities combined, and generate vast volumes of air, water and soil pollution. The industrial food system encourages the dominance of large monocultures that decrease agricultural biodiversity, reduce the resilience of food systems and jeopardize food security. Fisheries are overexploited, heavily subsidized and plagued by illegal, unreported and unregulated catches. Industrial food systems rely heavily on plastic packaging. Inadequate waste management systems cause plastic to enter air, water and soil. An estimated 30 per cent of all food produced is never eaten.

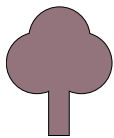
Not all food systems contribute equally to environmental degradation and human rights violations. There is a vast diversity of production practices and an even wider range of diets. For hundreds of millions of people facing hunger and malnutrition, poverty must be alleviated and the quantity and quality of accessible food must be increased. In middle and high-income States, diets with fewer calories but more nutrients would improve health and reduce environmental impacts.

Transforming food systems that exploit millions of workers, undermine the health of billions of people and inflict trillions of dollars in environmental damages is morally and legally imperative in order to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. A rights-based approach, focused on the right to food and the right to a healthy environment, is an essential catalyst for accelerating the transformation from today's unsustainable food systems to a future where everyone enjoys healthy and sustainable food, workers are treated fairly and degraded ecosystems are restored. This is an obligation for States, not an option.

Impacts of unsustainable food systems on human rights



Increasing consumption of highly processed, nutrient-poor foods contributes to many non-communicable diseases, which are shortening human lifespans and cause 70 per cent of all deaths worldwide. Unhealthy diets cause 10 million deaths annually.



Healthy and sustainable food is one of the six substantive elements of the right to a healthy environment, as recognized by regional tribunals, national human rights institutions, laws and jurisprudence.



The Human Rights Council observed that “environmental degradation, desertification and global climate change are exacerbating destitution and desperation, causing a negative impact on the realization of the right to food, in particular in developing countries”. In many States, policies promoting export crops have reduced land available for communities to produce their own food and caused extensive pollution. Some agrochemicals bioaccumulate, threatening the health of species at the top of the food chain, including humans.



People's health depends on access to safe, affordable food of adequate quantity and quality. Industrially produced foods often fail to meet these criteria.

Industrial agriculture contaminates air, water, soil and the food chain with toxic substances – pesticides, herbicides, synthetic fertilizers and drugs. Millions of suicide deaths since 1960 have involved highly hazardous pesticides.



Agriculture accounts for roughly 70 per cent of freshwater use globally, dwarfing all other human uses. Nearly one third of this is used for raising livestock, and close to 80 per cent of the water pollution that causes eutrophication is due to agricultural runoff.



Unfortunately, in 2019, 149 million children under 5 years of age were stunted, 45 million wasted and 39 million overweight, while at least 340 million children suffered from micronutrient deficiencies.



States should give special attention to other vulnerable or marginalized groups whose rights may be jeopardized by the environmental impacts of food systems, including women, Indigenous peoples, racially and ethnically marginalized groups, refugees, migrants, persons with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons (LGBT) persons, older persons, people living in protracted armed conflicts and people living in poverty. These groups often have fewer resources, are disproportionately impacted and have less access to health-care services, increasing the risk of illness or death.

Human rights obligations relating to healthy and sustainable food

The framework principles on human rights and the environment clarify the three categories of State obligations: procedural, substantive and special obligations towards those in vulnerable situations. States have **procedural** obligations to:

- (a) Provide the public with accessible information about healthy and sustainable food, including nutritional content, the environmental footprint and dietary guidelines based on human and environmental health;
- (b) Incorporate information about healthy and sustainable food throughout the educational curriculum;
- (c) Ensure an inclusive, equitable and gender-based approach to public participation in all food system planning, policymaking, budgeting and other actions;
- (d) Enable affordable and timely access to justice and effective remedies for all;
- (e) Assess the potential environmental, social, health, cultural and human rights impacts of all plans, policies, projects and proposals related to food systems;
- (f) Integrate gender equality into all plans and actions related to food systems, increasing women's access to land, credit, inputs, information and technology and empowering women to play leadership roles at all levels;
- (g) Provide strong protection for environmental human rights defenders working on food-related issues.

With respect to **substantive** obligations, States must not violate, through their own actions, the right to food, the right to a healthy and sustainable environment or other human rights that are jeopardized by the environmental consequences of food systems; must protect rights from being violated by third parties, in particular businesses; and must take positive actions to fulfil these rights. Failing to prevent foreseeable human rights harms caused by the environmental impacts of industrial food systems or failing to mobilize the maximum available resources in an effort to do so, could constitute a breach of States' obligations. States also must avoid discrimination and retrogressive measures.

Outlining a rights-based approach

Despite complexity and diversity, there are key changes that would improve the sustainability and equity of food systems globally, especially industrial food systems:

- **Reduce greenhouse gas emissions and safeguard carbon sinks:** Climate-smart agriculture employs crops that are more tolerant of heat, drought, salinity, pests and disease. Integrated animal and crop systems, better manure management and improved feed can reduce emissions.
 - **Reduce air and water pollution:** Key steps include: identifying major sources of pollution; ensuring that legislation, regulations, standards apply fully to pollution from food systems; developing and implementing action plans; and evaluating progress.
 - **Alleviate water scarcity:** Legislation should ensure that the highest priorities for access to water are fulfilling human rights to water, sanitation, food, an adequate standard of living, and a healthy environment.
 - **Decrease the use of pesticides, fertilizers and antibiotics:** Ban highly hazardous pesticides, strengthen regulations and impose taxes on all remaining pesticides, with revenues used to support producers in improving practices.
 - **Restore soil health:** Key actions include application of organic fertilizers, minimization of tillage, crop rotations, composting, integration of crops and livestock, restoring vegetation, application of biochar and improved grazing management.
 - **Safeguard biological diversity:** States should enact laws to end deforestation, encourage diversification at multiple scales, and incorporate food systems into national biodiversity strategies.
 - **Decrease the risks of pandemics from zoonotic diseases:** Key actions include enacting laws to end deforestation, strictly regulating wildlife trade, tightening regulations, and monitoring high-risk wildlife and vulnerable human populations.
- While the foregoing changes are necessary, they are not sufficient to achieve the required transformation of today's food systems. Fulfilling the rights to food and a healthy and sustainable environment requires additional policy and governance changes:
- **Increase equity** by supporting smallholders, empowering women, investing in youth vocational programs, supporting cooperatives, and strengthening social protection.
 - **Promote healthy and sustainable diets** by creating incentives for producing and consuming healthy, seasonal foods, publishing and promoting nutritional guidelines, requiring packaging labels, using public procurement, prohibiting marketing of unhealthy foods to children or mothers, taxing unhealthy food, and public food literacy programs.
 - **Reduce food loss and waste** by enabling smallholders to improve harvest timing, investing in better storage, applying circular economy principles, supporting local food systems, changing waste policies.
 - **Introduce economic reforms** by redirecting the current \$700 billion in food-related subsidies that undermine sustainability to support sustainable production, funding research, supporting urban food production and entrepreneurship in production, using anti-trust legislation, and ensuring equitable access to land.
 - **Transform food system governance** by incorporating the right to food and the right to a healthy environment into legislation, developing national food strategies, enacting legislation on the rights Indigenous Peoples, ban land, water and resource-grabbing, repealing laws that enable unsustainable practices, and ensuring the liability of businesses for human rights violations.

Some good practices relating to human rights and healthy, sustainable food systems



Agroecology improves air, soil and water quality, reduces greenhouse gas emissions and improves livelihoods for small-scale farmers.



The European Union banned non-medicinal uses of antibiotics in livestock in 2006, a vital action for protecting human health.



To protect the land rights of Indigenous peoples and peasants, Argentina and Brazil passed laws limiting foreign land ownership.



Taxes on unhealthy ultra-processed foods have reduced consumption in many States including Chile, Mexico and South Africa.



Banning hazardous pesticides significantly reduced suicides in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, without adversely affecting yields.



France has pioneering laws to promote agroecology, curb food waste, and increase corporate accountability, among others.



Micronesia reintroduced a traditional variety of banana, healthier than the commercial variety, improving nutrition.



The Brazilian Programme for the Purchase of Food from Family Agriculture uses public procurement for sustainable food.



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