

Why do anti-hunger and anti-obesity initiatives always fall short?

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With widespread hunger continuing to haunt developing nations, and obesity fast becoming a global epidemic, any number of efforts on the parts of governments, scientists, non-profit organizations and the business world have taken aim at these twin nutrition-related crises. But all of these efforts have failed to make a large dent in the problems, and now an unusual international collaboration of researchers is explaining why.

Publishing in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#), the researchers argue that while hunger and obesity are caused by a perfect storm of multiple factors acting in concert, the efforts to counter them have been narrowly focused and isolated. Overcoming the many barriers to achieving healthy nutrition worldwide, the researchers argue, will instead require an unprecedented level of joint planning and action between academia, government, civil society and industry.

In particular, the authors of the papers in the PNAS special feature propose an ambitious plan to remake the ways food is grown, processed, distributed, sold and consumed. The plan focuses on innovations that simultaneously take into account the needs of farmers, the complexity of nutrition-related human biology and decision-making, and the power of profit incentives in the [commercial sector](#). The result, the researchers say, is "a roadmap for a transdisciplinary science to support change of sufficient scale and scope" to carve out "an alternative path from tradition to [industrialization](#)" -- one that "promotes [healthy lifestyles](#) and environments rather than undermining them."

Global food output has doubled in the past half-century, representing a nearly 20% increase in per-capita [food supply](#), note the lead article's co-authors, Prof. Laurette Dubé of McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management, Prabhu Pingali of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Prof. Patrick Webb of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Yet the remarkable gains that flowed from the improvements in agriculture -- known as the Green Revolution -- have led to some new and unexpected health and nutrition problems, while leaving others unsolved.

Hunger and malnutrition continue to plague the world's poorest populations. At the same time, an obesity epidemic is fueling diabetes, cardiovascular ailments and other chronic diseases in developed and developing countries alike, straining healthcare systems and public finances. How can 21st Century society do a better job of translating the benefits of agricultural and industrial growth into improved nutrition? That is the core question addressed by the researchers.

With the transition from traditional lifestyles and subsistence agriculture to a Western-type diet and lifestyle now occurring within a few decades in many parts of the world, new approaches are needed to alleviate hunger and prevent rising obesity and non-communicable diseases from undercutting these countries' fragile health systems, the researchers conclude.

Among the paths explored in the papers are promoting fuller integration of small farmers into national and global value chains and health systems; fostering collaboration among business, civil society and public organizations; and applying computer technology and systems-science models to make new streams of critical demographic, consumer and health data readily available to networks of policy makers, producers and market entrepreneurs.

The authors also stress the importance of harnessing the profit motive of the private market in order to unleash product and marketing innovation that is focused on the need to change the way people eat. "Business innovation as a catalyst for change is a key to full and sustainable nutrition security," says Prof. Dubé.

Taken together, the papers in the PNAS feature represent a significant contribution to the growing debate over the obesity epidemic, the globalization of food markets, and the role of food companies in addressing health and nutrition problems.

Provided by McGill University

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