

News

"The mother of the Mediterranean diet" shares her insights around sustainable food systems

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Antonia Trichopoulou, MD, PhD, President of the Hellenic Health Foundation, Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre of Nutrition, Medical School, University of Athens and Professor Emeritus, School of Medicine, University of Athens, and Harvard School of Public Health, explains why the traditional Mediterranean diet should be seen as a sustainable food system.



Given your extensive research and knowledge about food systems sustainability, and the role of the diet within these systems, please describe your vision of an ideal sustainable food system in the Mediterranean region.

The traditional Mediterranean food system is actually a sustainable system. The traditional Mediterranean diet reflects the dietary habits of the Mediterranean population in countries where olive trees have grown, particularly before the 1960s. This is because olive oil is a fundamental component of the traditional Mediterranean Diet. After the 1960s, significant global changes led to steadily and continuous shifts in dietary habits, also affecting the Mediterranean. An important part of sustainability is biodiversity, and the Mediterranean diet is sustainable since it emphasizes locally produced foods, as well as seasonal.

I have great appreciation for the EAT-Lancet Commission report. Drawing on extensive international literature about food and nutritional composition, diet quality and the health and environmental effects, they developed an international, healthy and sustainable diet which is very close to the Mediterranean diet. So, I think that automatically answers your question.

We are facing a climatic crisis. And food systems, along with our dietary and food consumption patterns, are responsible for approximately 30% of the global human-caused carbon emissions. Food systems comprise food production, food processing, food distribution, and then food consumption. And a lot of the negative effects of the current food systems are due to the way of producing and processing food. And consumer's preference influences the foods available in the market. Meat, for example, which consumption we should reduce or avoid, is associated with detrimental effects, not only on health, but also on the environment. Meat production requires extensive land-use and water resources. Moreover, growing feed for livestock often involves deforestation and contributes to methane emissions. The environmental impacts of food waste should also be accounted for. And these are all parts of the food system.

In my opinion, the extensive research published in the EAT-Lancet Committee report clearly defines what a sustainable and healthy diet is. Therefore, any policy should prioritize integrating these findings. To effectively design a policy, you first have to describe the problem. Quite often, a policy recommendation is made without explaining why, without describing the problem, and without providing data to support it. Without clear "numbers" to justify a proposed action, it becomes difficult to gather acceptance and adopt it.

The Mediterranean Diet was recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. How do you

envision preserving the traditional principles of this diet while tackling the challenge of diet globalization?

My proposal is basically the principle of “produce locally, consume locally”, which means emphasizing local food and local food markets. At least in my country, Greece, they are excessively approved. But we must ensure that local markets are “real local farmers markets”. For instance, in Athens, the vendors sell lemons from Israel or fava beans from Egypt. These practices need to be restricted. Local markets should prioritize foods sourced from within 100 to 300 kilometers in diameter, maximum. Special rules may be considered for products that are not available within this area. Otherwise, these may not be considered “local farmers markets”.

This implies two things: respecting the local environment and products and supporting farmers to keep cultivating their lands. We also need to reassess the value of traditional foods. Many years ago, I have launched a project in which we developed a definition for traditional foods, that is distinct from the one developed by the European Commission, which considers “traditional” any food available in the market for at least 25 years. However, for Greece and other Mediterranean countries with thousands of years, 25 years is not sufficient to qualify as “traditional food”. Using the term “traditional food” requires several prerequisites, namely, respecting the source of the ingredients, the historical preparation methods, and their chemical composition, and many others.

Nowadays, a food must be standardized in order to be labeled. But how can we standardize in the farmers’ market? We must find a way. As an example, in the United States, certain foods that have been safely consumed for generations, were denominated “GRAS” (Generically Recognized as Safe) and were exempt from some testing requirements. We could, similarly, establish standards based on widespread acceptance of good sources of phytochemicals, vitamins or minerals for fruits and vegetables.

Legislation might be one of the key entry points, but are there other actions in the food system that can tackle these challenges?

Yes, to promote farmers cooperatives, give emphasis to the value of traditional foods, the nutritional value, as well as the cultural and the economic value of local, traditional foods.

About consumer awareness, how to increase awareness towards healthy and sustainable diets?

As mentioned before, try to avoid ultra-processed food; rediscover your traditional foods; support the local farmers, providing what they offer that is locally produced; rediscover the recipes of your grandma; teach them to your children; use local products. And then, of course, try to reach the schools and the young generation and make them proud of their past.

Do you think there is a role for “science policy interfaces” in the changes towards food systems transformation?

Of course! We need to try to bring together science with policy. Quite often, the politicians take decisions without scientific evidence supporting them. We researchers need to ask, “Why?”. For example, “let’s increase that” – Why? “give money to that” – why? We need to ask, “What is the science behind this?”. When we have these answers, we can accept the decisions.

You have been participating in several dialogues throughout your career...

Yes. I remember that 30–40 years ago, when I began talking about the Mediterranean diet, people were skeptical. They viewed me as someone from a small university in the southern Europe. There was a common belief that the

Mediterranean diet was fattening, and recommendations were issued to “reduce the fat”, namely, to reduce the consumption of olive oil. However, the consumption of vegetables pulses and legumes would also decrease because olive oil is frequently used to prepare them. So, it was detrimental to use scientific research to prove that the Mediterranean diet is not fattening, and has several benefit health effects, and for the population to accept this.

Now, it is proven that the Mediterranean diet is also sustainable. Now, nobody neglects all the findings. Nevertheless, these findings are still not being taken into account in policy design. So, we will have to bring the policy, research and other stakeholders together to hear what the politicians are thinking, because it is needed to take action urgently.

Professor Trichopoulou, I want to thank you very much for your valuable insights, on behalf of the SASi-SPI team. It was an honor.

Thank you. I am happy to see young scientists like you to continue this important work. Because this is the most important, to leave behind us people who believe in science and strive for the best for humanity.

This interview was made by Gabriela Albuquerque, ISA/University of Lisboa, at the Science Policy Lab in Malmö on June 18-19, 2024.

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Antonia Trichopoulou is a nutrition epidemiologist, specialised in the study of the health effects of the Mediterranean diet. She has been called the "mother of the Mediterranean Diet". Trichopoulou is a Professor

Emeritus of the School of Medicine of the University of Athens, Harvard School of Public Health and the President of the Hellenic Health Foundation. She has published more than 900 scientific papers and was president of the Federation of European Nutrition Societies (FENS). For her contributions, she was elected in December 2021 a full member of the Academy of Athens in the Chair of "Medical Sciences: Epidemiology and Public Health". In 2003 she was awarded the Golden Cross of Honor by the President of the Greek Republic.

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