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The Global Food System and Sustainability

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Dec 06, 2022 The Global Food System and Sustainability

By Andrew Rowan, DPhil

In the last few years, several major reports have all called for changes in the world's food system – usually emphasizing the need to shift to diets that emphasize plant-based nutrition – to ensure a sustainable future for the planet. These reports include:-

- 2015 WHO [report](#) on Biodiversity and Human Health,
- 2016 report by the Oxford Martin Programme on the [Future of Food](#),
- 2019 Global Biodiversity [report](#),
- 2019 Climate Change (Chapter 5) [report](#),
- 2019 [Report](#) by the EAT-Lancet Commission,
- 2021 Chatham House [biodiversity report](#)).

The most recent of the above reports was produced by Chatham House, a London-based policy institute whose mission statement notes it seeks “to help governments and societies to build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.” Its 2021 report on “Food System Impacts on Biodiversity Loss” was funded by the NGO, Compassion in World Farming, with in-kind assistance from the United Nations Environment Programme. The Chatham House report defines the “food system” as including the production, transport, manufacturing, sale, consumption, and waste of food – in other words, the term includes the entire food supply chain, from farm to fork to waste. All activities within a food system – production, processing, retail, or cooking – impact the environment.

For example, according to the Chatham House report, agriculture accounts for 80% of global land-use change. From 1980 to 2000, 42 million hectares of tropical forest in Latin America were lost to cattle ranching, and 6 million hectares were lost to palm oil plantations in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the global food system accounts for around 30% of total anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. But climate change is reducing crop yields and nutritional quality, increasing pressure to convert more land to agriculture.

The Chatham House report also examines the “cheaper food” paradigm and the complicated relationship that cheaper food has on food production, biodiversity loss, food security, and food waste. It notes that, for all countries, economic insecurity is closely linked to food insecurity, and this creates challenges for any proposals to move away from the “cheaper food” paradigm. However, the cheapest foods are often calorie-dense but nutritionally poor. Fresh fruits and vegetables tend to be more expensive, and the “cheaper food” paradigm encourages the consumption of a nutritionally

suboptimal diet by low-income households. The result has been a rapid rise in the incidence of obesity alongside micronutrient deficiencies.