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# Editorial: How to achieve a planetary health diet through system and paradigm change?

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

### How to achieve a planetary health diet through system and paradigm change?

A transition toward planetary health diets is urgent. Eating in ways that promote “planetary health” includes an increased intake of plant-based foods, such as legumes, nuts, grains, fruit and vegetables, and a reduction of meat and dairy, especially in the global North, in order to keep people and the planet “healthy” (Willett et al., 2019). Today’s food systems are responsible for an unsustainably large amount of negative impacts, including obesity and under-nutrition, global greenhouse gas emissions, deterioration of natural resources, erosion of biodiversity, and the suffering of billions of livestock animals (Weis, 2013; Gilson and Kenehan, 2018; Swinburn et al., 2019; Almond et al., 2020; Bovenkerk and Keulartz, 2021; IPCC, 2022). Shifting toward plant-rich eating, especially in the global North, is often identified as essential for climate change mitigation and adaptation, for restoring damaged ecosystems, alleviating the sixth mass extinction of species, and creating a more just and resilient food system.

Exploring food-related consumer practices, behaviors and characteristics and the possibilities for new products, such as meat replacements, to help this transition has been the focus of significant research (e.g., Twine, 2018; Varela et al., 2022; Hansen et al., 2023). However, transforming current food systems toward sustainability is largely a political and power-related issue (Béné, 2022; Mylan et al., 2023). Our Research Topic draws attention to these dimensions of a planetary health-focused dietary transition.

*We ask: What drivers—beyond individual practices—can generate system and paradigm-level change?*

The incumbent actors and structures strongly resist necessary transformative changes but purposive change in food systems is also largely about discursive power (Fuchs et al., 2016), as well as about establishing and cultivating new values, norms, and paradigms, associated with the deeper, stronger leverage points for societal change (Meadows, 1999; Dorninger et al., 2020; see also Kaljonen and Lonkila, forthcoming; Northcott et al., 2023). Finally, it is about transformation in food systems governance (Béné, 2022).

The article collection in this Research Topic offers case studies and more global views, to identify through qualitative and quantitative analyses some key barriers to, and potential opportunities for, a sustainable food system transformation. The main proposals include a sharp focus on discourses, especially how to move beyond a polarization between animal-free and animal-centric food system paradigms; creating a level playing field for alternative protein industries, e.g., by shifting subsidies; exploring opportunities within alternative socioeconomic models of agriculture and new forms of human-animal relationships to bring about value and paradigm changes; building strong policy coalitions toward dietary change; and recognizing the feasibility of aligning food system transformation in terms of food security, land use, and global trade, as well as with sustainable development goals.

In her article, [Bless](#) uses the successful reduction of tobacco consumption in Australia to discuss a potential large-scale reduction of red meat consumption, within a national context where both tobacco and red meat have had strong cultural and economic significance. [Bless](#) explores policy actions along the *3Is framework* of “Ideas, Interests and Institutions”, stressing the importance of addressing the discourse level—e.g., ideas, beliefs and paradigms—building unified and substantial policy coalitions to successfully break the inertia, challenge powerful vested interests and push for change, and allowing for enough time to bring about a transformation.

In Brazil, a country with a very powerful animal agriculture sector, [Newton et al.](#) identify opportunities for scaling up plant-based meats through policy measures. The authors use the Delphi method to explore what actions should be prioritized when resources are limited, considering importance, neglectedness, and tractability as key criteria. The experts’ consensus is that lowering the price of plant-based meats and creating a level playing field for the alternatives industry should be prioritized. The authors recognized, however, that, in this context, one of the biggest challenges will be how to ensure meat replacement rather than (simply) the addition of alternatives to animal-based meat consumption.

In the next article, [Bellamy et al.](#) explore modes of dietary change that, if scaled up, could facilitate paradigm-level change. Using interviews and food diaries to compare the diets of people joining Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes in the United Kingdom with those of the wider UK population, the authors show that, in line with prior studies, people joining a CSA scheme feel more empowered to change their diets toward a planetary health diet. Being involved with CSA schemes may also positively affect wellbeing and nature-related values. The authors discuss the policy implications of their findings, encouraging further research on the dynamics of joining CSA schemes vis-à-vis willingness to change diets.

Analyzing existing success stories of transitioning away from livestock farming, [Salliou](#) studies the voluntary *transformations* of 27 livestock farmers in Europe and the United States. These post-livestock farmers take two distinct transformation pathways. In the first, they set up farm animal sanctuaries, largely motivated by

compassion. In the second, they remain in the agricultural sector but move to direct-to-consumer market gardening or mushroom production. Notably, the sanctuary model offers opportunities for the *care economy* ([Lorek et al., 2023](#)) whereby both animals and humans are cared for. [Salliou](#) argues that sanctuaries could become “incubators of new social arrangements between humans and non-human animals” (p. 8) and blueprints for a wider diffusion of a paradigm shift toward interspecies justice.

Investigating potential large-scale change, [Schiavo et al.](#) present a modeling exercise assessing the global impacts of a deep agroecological transition in the European Union including a 50% reduction in meat consumption. The analysis suggests that ensuring global food security, while maintaining existing EU farmlands is possible *as long as* EU diets become more plant-based. EU food export levels could also be maintained and food imports reduced, even if the rest of the world undergoes a similar transformation in agriculture and diets. In sum, a large-scale, system-level transformation is possible and can also be just, meeting the needs of both global South and North.

In another global analysis, [Chen et al.](#) offer a quantitative review of how global dietary change can align with relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Comparing current diet patterns to the EAT-Lancet reference diet ([Willett et al., 2019](#)), dietary environmental footprints and the affordability of healthy diets are mapped for over 150 countries. In this process, geographic hotspots are identified and potential trade-offs in achievement of different SDGs highlighted. The authors emphasize that transformation-related policy challenges can only be solved by breaking disciplinary silos and bringing different actors and stakeholders together to drive the transformation.

Finally, [Béné and Lundy](#) propose a political economy and critical discourse analysis to explore the current debate around protein transition toward alternative, or *new meats* ([Kanerva, 2021](#)). Their analysis suggests that the polarization of the present discourses between the alternative protein proponents and the red meat supporters functions as a powerful barrier holding back progress toward the necessary transformation of the system. A concerning message emerging from the study is that powerful actors benefiting from the current red meat dominance might have already co-opted the transition process, in part by investing heavily in it, to ensure that they can have it both ways. The authors conclude, however, that managing the transformation successfully is possible since no principle conflict exists between transitioning to more plant-based diets in the global North while increasing meat consumption for vulnerable groups in the global South.

The road to transformation includes many hurdles, yet needs to be traveled fast. Although addressing the most difficult power-related questions remains challenging, this collection of articles identifies the importance of having a strategic approach to system change, especially in the context of power imbalances; addressing counterproductive discourses and mobilizing beneficial ones; building alliances; and using economic and social policies which hold potential to facilitate paradigm change.

## Author contributions

MK: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SE: Writing – review & editing. CB: Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

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