A 'Common Food Policy' for Europe: How governance reforms can spark a shift to healthy diets and sustainable food systems

More than half of adults in the European Union (EU) are now living with overweight or obesity (53%). Non communicable diseases (NCD's) such as type 2 diabetes are often linked to obesity and unhealthy diets, with a growing share of healthcare costs. There is broad agreement on the basic dietary patterns that reduce/increase the risk of obesity, as well as what more can and must be done to make the healthy and sustainable choice the easiest one for consumers. Despite this consensus, there has not been progress on improving diets. This is because food system transformation is required. This paper puts forward a holistic policy framework at EU level, 'A Common Food Policy'.

The paper argues for a system wide, whole government approach to tackle unhealthy diets and other negative consequences of unsustainable food systems such as climate change, biodiversity loss and poor working conditions for food and farm workers. Four distinct areas related to governance change are outlined in the paper. The first area is focused on aligning objectives and actions across the range of EU policy areas that affect food systems. This is proposed as current policies are criticised for being incoherent and retaining existing systems harmful to dietary health eg. insufficient junk food marketing controls. The second area is focused on building coherence through different levels of governance. This relates to more collaboration and facilitation with and for regional policies at different levels in the food system eg. community agricultural schemes . The third area criticises the short term thinking of policy making, while also highlighting that it is disconnected and embedded in existing practice that harms dietary health. The authors propose that long-term, integrated thinking is essential for food system transformation. The fourth area is focused on creating greater democracy in food system decisions. The importance of the participation of a wider range of stakeholders, including the public is stressed within this domain.

The paper outlines some EU projects that are focused on shifting food system governance for food system transformation. They include the Farm to Fork Strategy and IPES foods's 'Common Food Policy' report. Overall, the authors have argued that existing EU governing structures are not promoting healthy diets and building sustainable food systems. They propose four areas of governance shift to inform future EU decisions on food policy.