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The EAT-*Lancet* Commission Report: A solution or perpetuation of the problem?

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In 2019, the international EAT-*Lancet* Commission proposed a global strategy for "healthy diets from sustainable food systems" (EAT-*Lancet* Commission, 2019, "Exec. Summary," para. 1). The authors claimed theirs was "the first attempt to set universal scientific targets for the food system that apply to all people and the planet" (EAT, n.d., p. 5). Within the first three months of its release, the report generated over 5,800 media articles in 118 countries and over a million shares on social media (Stockholm Resilience Center, 2019). The report has been praised primarily by advocates of animal welfare and vegetarian and vegan diets. It has been criticized primarily for its draconian restrictions on the consumption of animal products and its lack of affordability and acceptability to many of those in greatest need of healthy foods.

The Commission acknowledged that the current global agri-food system is not sustainable, noting that "Food systems have the potential to nurture human health and support environmental sustainability; however, they are currently threatening both" (p. 442). The Commission's "defini-

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*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer?** In his historic pamphlet* Common Sense, *written in 1775–1776, Thomas Paine wrote of the necessity of people to form governments to moderate their individual self-interest. In our government today, the pursuit of economic self-interest reigns supreme. Rural America has been recolonized, economically, by corporate industrial agriculture. I hope my "pamphlets" will help awaken Americans to a new revolution—to create a sustainable agri-food economy, revitalize rural communities, and reclaim our democracy. The collected Economic Pamphleteer columns (2010–2017) are at https://bit.ly/ikerd-collection*

tion of sustainable food production stays within safe planetary boundaries for six environmental processes that together regulate the state of the Earth system" (p. 485). Numerical boundaries were developed for climate change, land-use systems change, freshwater use, biodiversity loss, and interference with the nitrogen and phosphorus cycle. However, by focusing on the need for global food security as well as ecological sustainability, the Commission implicitly accepts the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, n.d.).

The Commission repeated the *conventional wisdom* that "increasing crop yields and improving production practices have contributed to reductions in hunger, improved life expectancy, falling infant and child mortality rates, and decreased global poverty" (p. 449). However, it acknowledged the failure of current agri-food systems to provide nutritional food security: "Although global food production of calories has kept pace with population growth, more than 820 million people have insufficient food and many more consume low-quality diets that cause micronutrient deficiencies and contribute to a substantial rise in the incidence of diet-related obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases, including coronary heart disease, stroke, and diabetes" (p. 447).

Its proposed strategy for sustainable production was to develop and implement new, sophisticated production technologies that would allow today's industrial farming systems to produce still more while using fewer resources, polluting less, and wasting less—which it called "sustainable intensification" (p. 449). The Commission suggests that governments should somehow make sustainable intensive technologies accessible to small-scale producers. As is clearly evident in the United States, however, smaller sustainable intensive farms would be forced to "scale up" in size to provide the dependable supplies of uniform commodities needed to accommodate large-scale processing and distribution systems (Miller, 2021).

There is little to suggest that sustainable intensification would be significantly different from today's conventional industrial farming systems, other than increases in production efficiency. Increasing efficiency of resource use was also the primary means proposed for reducing wastes and pollution. Regardless of efficiency, industrial systems are extractive and exploitative systems of production that degrade and deplete the natural and human resources that provide their ultimate sources of productivity. While this characteristic is commonly acknowledged for industrial manufacturing, it is largely ignored for industrial agriculture. Sustainable intensive agriculture might slow the process of degradation, but the productive capacity of agricultural resources eventually would be depleted or permanently damaged.

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The EAT-*Lancet* Commission's proposed strategies for addressing nutritional food security relied primarily on better consumer information and education. The diets proposed by the Commission—which limit or exclude red meats and rely heavily on alternative sources of protein and on fruits and vegetables—have been widely accepted, at least in general, as means of improving both planetary and human health (Ramsing et al., 2021). However, there has been considerable skepticism regarding whether consumers would willingly accept the strict dietary requirements of the EAT-*Lancet* diet or whether it would be appropriate in many parts of the world (Bloch, 2019).

Regardless, the Commission mistakenly assumed that today's unhealthy food consumption patterns reflect the free choices of sovereign consumers in competitive markets and that food production patterns would change to accommodate

changes in consumer preferences. However, once markets are allowed to move away from the essential conditions for effective economic competition, as is clearly the case for today's global agri-food systems, there is no assurance that changes in consumer preferences will be accommodated by changes in production. A lack of enforcement of antitrust laws in the United States has allowed large corporate food processors and retailers to gain control of the agri-food system all the way from production to consumption (Hendrickson et al., 2020).

The only choices left for most consumers are to select from whatever food retailers choose to offer for sale—wherever, however, and at whatever price they choose to sell. The only choices left for most producers is to produce whatever products processors choose to buy—wherever, however, and at whatever price they choose to pay. Consumption and production alternatives to these choices are very limited, and not accessible or affordable to the people in the greatest need, nor profitable for most independent producers of healthy foods (Hendrickson et al., 2020). There is no mention in the EAT-*Lancet* report of a strategy for restoring effective competition in the global agri-food sector.

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The Commission also failed to acknowledge that food insecurity is not caused by a lack of agricultural production. Global agriculture already produces more than enough food to meet the basic food needs of everyone in the world (Holt-Giménez et al., 2012). This is clearly true in the U.S., where the percentage of food-insecure people has been greater during the 2000s than during the1960s, despite the scale of production increases over that period (Ikerd, 2015). The vast majority of hungry people in the world are hungry because they are poor and cannot afford the costs for healthy food in local or global markets. As decades of unsustainable agricultural intensification have clearly demonstrated, increasing agricultural production is not a logical strategy for nutritional food security.

Near the end of the report, the Commission recognized that "biodiversity conservation is essential to maintain ecosystem services that support agriculture. . . Sharing space for biodiversity in production landscapes is necessary to secure biodiversity's contribution to food production, including pollination, pest control, carbon capture, and regulating water quality" (EAT-*Lancet* Commission, 2019, p. 481). The only significant proposal made in this regard is to require that 10% of "production landscapes" be designated for "sharing space" for biodiversity and conservation purposes. This suggests that 90% of production landscapes would be occupied by large-scale, specialized, industrial farming systems.

Finally, the EAT-*Lancet* report states that "A healthy diet should optimise health, defined broadly by WHO as being a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not just absence of disease" (EAT-*Lancet* Commission, 2019, p. 453). However, the proposed strategies would offer nothing to improve the physical, mental, or social well-being of consumers left to the mercy of corporately controlled food markets—and certainly not of the farm families inevitably displaced by sustainable intensification.

The EAT-*Lancet* report dismisses agroecology and other alternatives to sustainable intensification as not being "scalable" and thus inadequate and impractical (EAT-*Lancet* Commission, 2019). Agroecological farms function in harmony with nature and rely on healthy natural ecosystems,

rather than synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, to sustain their productivity (Ikerd, 2018, 2019). Numerous highly credible global studies have shown that agroecological farming systems are capable of producing enough healthful food for a growing global population without compromising ecological, social, or economic integrity (International Panel of Experts on Sustainability-Food [IPES-Food], 2016).

Food sovereignty is a global movement that emerged specifically to address the problems inherent in today's corporately controlled, industrial agri-food systems (Ikerd, 2015). Food sovereignty proclaims that access to enough nutritious, sustainably produced food is a basic human right. It also claims the right of all people to choose their own foods and local systems of food production.

The diets of people in food sovereign communities reflect the food preferences of the people and the sustainable capacity of the agroecosystems upon which they depend for their food. The proportions of animal and vegetable products in diets reflect the correspondence of people's food preferences with nature's productive capacities. The physical, social, and mental health of people in food sovereign communities reflect the health of the soils, plants, animals, and natural agroecosystem they choose to depend on for their food. Agroecology and food sovereignty are logical agri-food systems for the future that cannot be dismissed in any credible scientific study of agri-food sustainability.

Many probably share the skepticism of the EAT-*Lancet* Commission concerning the possibility of using the principles of agroecology and food sovereignty for guidance in developing a new, sustainable global food system. However, few envisioned the possibility of a transition from the small independent family farms and local food systems of earlier times to the corporately controlled global agri-food system of today. But it happened, largely because of new industrial technologies and changes in farm- and food-sector government policies. In the U.S., it happened over a period of about 50 years—between the 1950s and 1990s. New post-industrial farm and food system technologies and government policies could just as easily create a post-industrial agri-food system. The EAT-*Lancet* report suggests that we should just *do industrial better*.

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