

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TRIPLE HEALTH

Towards a healthy food system for
planet, consumer and farmer





This is an executive summary in English of the report *Gezondheid in Drievoud – Naar een gezond voedselsysteem voor planeet, consument en boer* (written in Dutch) and published by The Dutch Scientific Council for Integral Sustainable Agriculture and Nutrition (RIDLV) September 2021.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

of a report written in Dutch entitled *Gezondheid in drievoud – Naar een gezond voedselsysteem voor planet, consument en boer* (Triple Health – towards a healthy food system for planet, consumer and farmer)

RIDL (The Dutch Scientific Council for Integral Sustainable Agriculture and Nutrition)

September 2021

Agriculture, planet, health and farmers

Humanity is largely dependent on agriculture for its food. Agriculture has contributed enormously to food security, life expectancy and prosperity of the growing world population. But in its current form and size, it also causes more and more damage to the planet. It uses more land, fresh water, energy and raw materials than the earth can deliver, is a contributor to climate change, pollutes soil, water and air and threatens nature preservation areas. Current agriculture is also undermining its own future through land degradation and degradation of water, mineral and other natural reserves. In doing so, it contributes to the planet becoming sicker.

From the middle of the past century, all countries have strived for sufficient, cheap and safe food. Most succeeded in this, but there was too little attention to nutritional value and healthy food. More and more food is ultra-processed and contains too little fibre and essential nutrients and too much salt, sugar and/or trans fatty acids. This contributes to the increase in chronic diseases of affluence such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes, especially in lower income groups. Key factors: too low consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables and too high consumption of red and processed meat, which also harms the planet.

In the meantime, also farmers have become increasingly trapped. In the Netherlands, there is a crisis of confidence between farmers and government due to pressure on prices, inconsistent environmental policy, administrative burden and lack of perspective. Farmers protested frequently and drove with their tractors to the parliament and supermarkets. In short, the food system is contributing to four crises: of climate, biodiversity, chronic diseases and trust of farmers.

Causes

These problems have many causes, of which the most important in the Netherlands are:

1. **public policy.** Especially the policy aimed at low food prices, in combination with the increasingly lopsided power relations in the food chain. The inconsistent environmental policy also frustrated the farmers. And the neoliberal food consumption policy led to a shift from fresh food to cheaper, ultra-processed unhealthy products with a longer shelf life, from which the industry can earn more or more easily;
2. insufficient internalisation of **external costs and benefits** in prices and insufficient payment for services such as the protection and management of landscape and biodiversity;
3. the **efficiency paradigm**: that put a one-sided emphasis on short-term economic efficiency with minimal use of labour and land;
4. a **mechanistic worldview** with little regard for coherent biological and social systems. This contributed to a strong simplification of the agro-ecosystem, with little variation in crops and low resilience and biodiversity. The soil was conceived as a sum of nutrients; and food as a sum of constituents, making it easy to be further processed, remixed and anonymised. That weakened the position of the farmer because he no longer produced food but only the raw materials thereof;
5. **fragmentation and alienation.** The food chain was largely divided into specialized links that

compete with each other, so that hardly anyone has an inkling of, let alone feels responsible for the whole, leading to "built-in irresponsibility". As a result there is alienation between players in the food network, including between farmers and consumers. Food preparation also became more and more of a separate link, so that consumers became alienated from the origin of their food.

The common thread running through all these factors is compartmentalization and silo thinking among many players, including governments, farmers, supermarkets, food industries and research.

Coherence

Too often, the sustainability of agriculture is considered separately from healthy food and vice versa. The Dutch Scientific Council for Integral Sustainable Agriculture and Nutrition (RIDLV) was set up to create cohesion in the concepts of sustainable agriculture and healthy food. It did so in 2011 in the vision document 'Towards an Integrated Approach to Sustainable Agriculture and Healthy Nutrition'. Since then, numerous other publications have appeared and initiatives were taken that focused on a more integrated approach. Today, such an approach is unavoidable and urgent. Mentioned crises, but also the COVID-19 pandemic, have made it clear that human health cannot be seen in isolation from the health of the planet. The Council wishes to emphasize this coherence in this new vision.

Because the food system is increasingly contributing to a sickening planet and to sick people, it is in need of a new paradigm. The Council calls for a fundamental paradigm shift from low food prices and short-term efficiency to a system that puts health first (Figure 1).

More specifically:

Triple health for planet, consumer and farmer:

- the ecological health of the planet (through the impact of agriculture);
- the health of consumers (through high-quality food);
- healthy socio-economic conditions for farmers and other actors in the food system.



Figure 1. Triple health symbolically displayed, RIDLV 2021.

The latter includes, among other things: favourable working conditions and a fair distribution of the consumer euro between farmers and other players in the system. Ideally, any link in the food chain is being paid in proportion to its added value for the health of people and planet, in short: its added health value.

A key pillar of each of the three dimensions of health is resilience: the ability of the system to bounce back after a physical disturbance (e.g. due to drought) or after a market distortion (e.g. due to a trade boycott). But also to adapt if necessary to changing circumstances. Important for that resilience is diversity in biological, social, economic and technological aspects. Diversity buffers, spreads risks and benefits differences amongst locations and entrepreneurs. Also important for resilience are more and better connections and relationships between players.

Triple health options

There are countless possibilities to adapt our food system in such a way that it benefits either the health of the consumer, or that of the ecosystem or that of the food system. But those measures can also be in conflict with each other. More effective are measures that contribute to three goals at the same time.

This requires broadening the scope, an integrated approach at systems level and breaking through of the compartmentalization between and within interest groups, government institutions and the scientific community. Furthermore, direction is needed and cooperation between various players: farmers, citizens, companies, funders, governments and researchers from different disciplines.

Processes

Processes towards triple health can look like this at local, regional, national and European scales:

Local

Many innovations start from the bottom up. At a local and regional scale, the best opportunities lie for an integrated approach, trust and cooperation, and the common interests will sooner be found. In city districts, for example, schools, parents, local shops, sports clubs and alderman can work together on food education and a healthy food environment. And in rural areas farmers and citizens can build local communities for food chains and landscape management. There are already several examples of this.

Regional

At a regional scale, it is primarily about cooperation among farmers, citizens and other stakeholders. This requires new forms of consultation, for example in the form of a Citizens' Council for Agriculture and Food, in which relevant civil groups are represented. Goal: to share concerns and reach consensus on how triple health in the region can be promoted. The consultations may, among other things, result in short food chains with healthy food from a healthy landscape. Farmers, citizens and nature conservationists, can together set up cooperatives. The role of the regional government can vary from merely facilitating and sanctioning to coordinating and directing, including spatial planning.

National

In the short term, the central government will have to make important decisions in the field of nitrogen, biodiversity and climate. But at the same time, it must create space for new forms of consultation. The typically Dutch consensus model (polder model) with an umbrella of organizations and ministries often leads to half-hearted measures, such as those of the Prevention

Agreement of 2018, a covenant between the government and 70 stakeholders to address smoking, overweight and alcohol use. More interventions by the government are needed, but with more input from the bottom up. This is also possible at national level in the form of a Citizens' Council, with the challenge: an Agriculture and Food Agreement aimed at a triple healthy food system.

And further:

- Oblige companies to create full transparency on the costs and benefits of food for triple health, based on full cost accounting principles.
- Impose levies on sugar, meat and ultra-processed food, and combine that with VAT reduction and subsidies for vegetables, fruits and other healthy basic foods.
- Ban all forms of marketing (including via social media and via offers) for unhealthy and unsustainable products, starting with children's marketing.
- Subsidize healthy lunches in schools (because learned young is done old).
- Facilitate a triple health benchmark for supermarkets and food industries. They will then try to avoid red scores (see Figure 2).
- Facilitate a region-based approach where appropriate.

Because food, even some healthy foods, will become more expensive, at the same time a solid social policy is needed. Most feasible is raising the social minimum - a measure already advocated by many political parties.

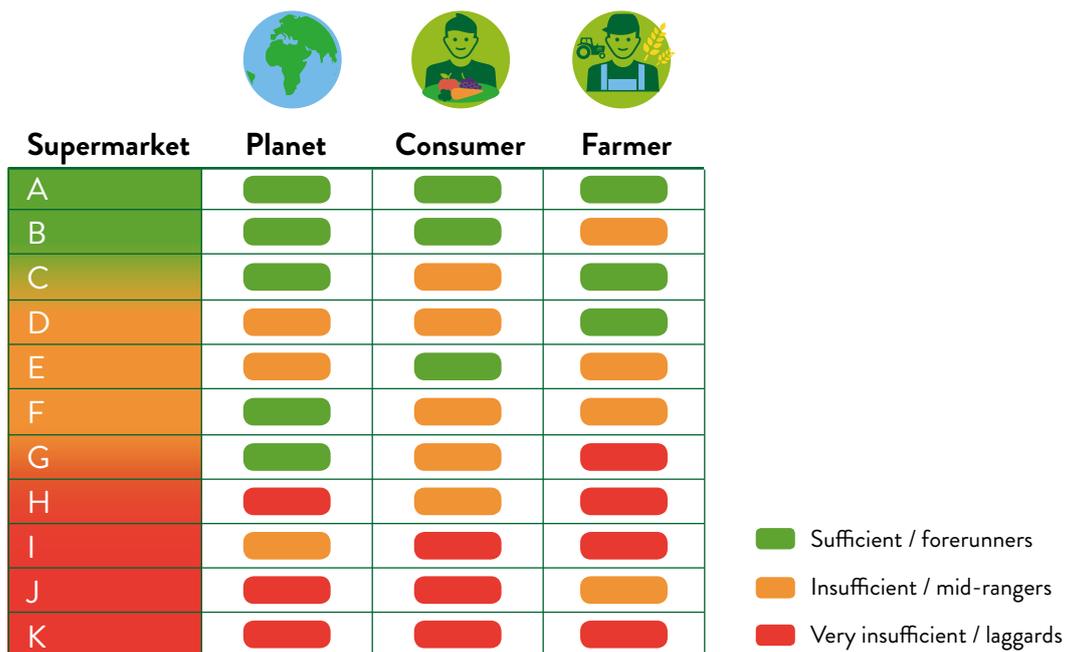


Figure 2. A possible benchmark for triple health scores of supermarkets, RIDLV 2021.

European

In the planned revision of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), some further steps are being taken towards a healthy planet, through eco-schemes and rural policy. But the impact will depend heavily on the National Strategic Plans that member states have to make. A serious attempt to

integrate agricultural and food policy is the EU Green Deal, particularly the Farm to Fork Strategy, which aims, among other things, for 50% less use of pesticides, 20% less fertilizer and 50% less antibiotics by 2030. Another challenging goal that would fit here: a lower, healthier level of protein consumption with a significant shift from animal to vegetable proteins, say of 60/40 to a maximum of 40/60. Furthermore:

- Impose strict rules on companies with a large market power in the food system about the use of that power and oblige them to account for that use transparently.
- Develop a European system of full cost accounting.
- Apply "healthy protectionism" in trade policy: where the EU sets relatively high standards, use the same standards for imported products.
- Implement the intended legal obligation for large companies to report and prevent adverse effects on the planet and human health, including in their supply chain.
- Facilitate an ecosystem or landscape approach in which rural development, production, biodiversity and healthy food are approached in conjunction.

Broader perspective

The above fits into the broader historical perspective of the development of life on Earth. This life is increasingly threatened in the Anthropocene by population growth, the consumption growth and the industrial revolution with its mass production and short-term efficiency. We must now reset the course of events and give priority to life on Earth and our own health.

This also has consequences for the financial system. While natural capital for centuries has been abundantly available and financial capital scarce, there is now - by contrast - abundant financial capital whereas natural capital is becoming increasingly scarce. Therefore, the financial system will have to serve preserving and restoring natural capital, with a keen eye on the interests of all people. Consequently full cost accounting should become the standard.

The new mission of Dutch agriculture can be to become a leader in triple healthy food and landscape systems with a combination of urbanisation and food production based on natural processes while sustaining ecosystems. Farmers are then not only paid as a food producers, but also as stewards and managers of the landscape to support natural resources (soil, water, air) and biodiversity. The food industry will inevitably shrink, as will the volume of exports, which will concentrate even more on the North-West European market. The entire system will be at the service of the great challenge of Triple Health.