

Sweet Transition

Priorities for collaborating
to transform the food system in Australia

Consensus report of a roundtable
hosted by The George Institute for Global Health

May 2020

The
George
Institute
for Global Health



*Better treatments
Better care
Healthier societies*

Acknowledgements

The George Institute for Global Health would like to thank all those who participated in the Roundtable—and the organisations that they represented—for their contributions, as well as to acknowledge Geoff Brown from Reos Partners, who helped design and facilitate the Roundtable discussion.

We would also like to thank Vanessa Clarkson, author of the report *Sugar in Australia: A Food System Approach: Competing Issues, Diverse Voices, and Rethinking Pathways to a Sustainable Transition* that formed the stimulus for these discussions.

Last, we would like to thank Maarinke van der Meulen, Chelsea Hunnisett, Imogen Zethoven, Alana Mann and David Raubenheimer for their contributions to the writing of this report.

The views of this report represent the outcome of a group discussion; they do not necessarily represent the view of any specific individual or group named in the report (some of whom have official positions that differ from those listed in this report).

We are all part of the system

Many of the present discussions and debates in Australia relating to sugar have focused on the implementation of a sugar tax or sugar-sweetened beverage levy—policy concepts that are often polarising and that have currently exhibited little traction. Additionally, even where implemented, a tax on certain sugary products would only be one small step, part of a solution to a much greater problem.

With this in mind, The George Institute for Global Health commissioned a report, 'Sugar in Australia: A Food Systems Approach: Competing Issues, Diverse Voices, and Rethinking Pathways to a Sustainable Transition', with the objective of broadening the debate on sugar in Australia so that the entire system is considered, including sugar's effects on people and the environment.

This broad, deep-thinking report examined sugar through the eyes of the stakeholders involved throughout the food system. It considered key issues that were relevant for policy development in this area, including the necessity of sugarcane production to the livelihoods of the growers and their communities; the environmental effects of production and processing, including water usage and fertiliser pollutants that enter waterways and flow into the Great Barrier Reef; the health effects linked to the excessive consumption of sugar, including Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, dental caries, overweight and obesity; and the associated socio-economic costs borne by wider society.

In organising the Roundtable, we also paid special attention to the diversity of stakeholders required for this conversation. If you trace any systemic change back to its source, you will find that change to have most likely started from conversation—from people of good will who discovered opportunities to work collaboratively in new ways and to overcome challenges. These conversations facilitate the consideration of new perspectives that support change and have an impact.

Research on this topic and collective wisdom is clear: the teams of stakeholders that make the most progress in solving complex systemic problems are diverse in nature. The combination of multiple perspectives and a creative space helps reveal new questions to ask and different ways of perceiving the system that needs to change. The stakeholders involved in these processes must also recognise that they are a part of the system.



Keziah Bennet-Brook – Program Manager, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program,
The George Institute for Global Health

Thank you to Craig Madden on behalf of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Lands Council for the Welcome to Country and reminding us of the inequitable impacts of sugar on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities [@georgeinstitute](#) [#Aboriginalhealth](#) [#AusSugarSystem](#)

About the Roundtable

On 20 February 2020, The George Institute for Global Health hosted a Roundtable with invited stakeholders from across the policy, health, consumer and environmental sectors to discuss sugar in Australia and to consider a specific question: is it sugar, or is it the system?

The aim of the Roundtable was to highlight that everyone is part of the system. This was accomplished by challenging notions of ‘othering’ (i.e., believing that it is someone else’s fault), generating ideas and considering the food system through the lenses of *health, environment, consumers* and *policy*. Roundtable participants were asked to reflect on a series of questions in the context of these themes as follows:

1. What are the greatest challenges that the sugar system in Australia faces?
2. How would the food system operate if it considered both people and the environment?
3. What should we do to transform the system?
4. What are the next steps for change?

The day was facilitated by an external consultant, Geoff Brown from Reos Partners, who used a modified ‘world café’ method of workshopping to direct the group of participants from specific issues of concern to actionable priorities. These world café conversations allowed teams of stakeholders to review and provide feedback on the work of other groups, thereby improving the quality of outcomes.

Main takeaway

The main conclusion from the day was that we cannot solve the identified problems by focusing on sugar alone. To address the adverse effects of sugar on health and the environment, we must first understand the broader food system and take actions from within this context. This is explained in further detail below.



The workshop provided a really engaging opportunity to discuss the complex issue of sugar and found that discussions led back to the food system more broadly, with sugar as one component

Emma Lonsdale, Executive Officer, Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance



@mmoore50

Dr Michael Moore AM PhD – Distinguished Fellow, The George Institute for Global Health

Sugar system works on short term “maximisation of profits” says [@realfoodness](#)
Issues are so much broader. Public health challenges include environmental issues.

Address system issues in unfettered market

[#AusSugarSystem](#) [@WFPFA_FMASP](#) [@CroakeyNews](#) [@SoilsforLife](#)

Overarching challenges and priority actions

This high-level summary synthesises the different perspectives that were presented at the Roundtable discussion. It articulates the key points that participants noted as they reflected on challenges, identified ideal future states and set priorities for action, which are outlined below.

Greatest challenges of the current food system:

- Competing interests throughout the system and a focus on short-term profits that adversely affect the health and wellbeing of people and the environment.
- Limitations in knowledge regarding how to transition to a food system that supports more equitable, healthier and sustainable choices while supporting regional livelihoods.
- A lack of policy coherence, as well as competing and conflicting messages from food and environmental sectors.
- Limited trust in the mechanisms for government engagement with the food industry.

Our vision for the future:

- A coordinated, system-wide approach to transform food and environmental policy.
- Improved access to an equitable, healthy and sustainable food system for all.
- Transparency and independence from conflicted interests when setting policy.
- A focus on equity, the health and wellbeing of people and the environment, and the economic sustainability of communities.
- A clear transition pathway to healthy food choices for people and the environment.

How we will get there:

- Establish effective and transparent governance mechanisms.
- Develop a whole-of-system approach, with a long-term view and a clear pathway for transition.
- Facilitate collaboration between different sectors to support the transformation of food systems.
- Increase investment and advocacy to foster a greater influence and transform unhealthy, unsustainable and inequitable systems.

Our priority actions:

- Extending collaboration initiated at the Roundtable and examine methods of supporting, consolidating and growing social movements that drive the transformation of food systems.
- Establish an approach for co-designing key activities and messages that are based on our shared values.
- Advocate for federal and state governments to adopt indicators of success that reflect equity and the health and wellbeing of people and the environment.



@ACDPAlliance

Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance

A 20% sugary drinks levy can reduce consumption, slow obesity rates and ultimately save lives, while raising up to \$400m a year for initiatives to reduce obesity, particularly in children.

#fightstroke



@AUS_Dental

Australian Dental Association

Great to be part of the conversation about sugar in our society and looking at sustainable solutions. **#AusSugarSystem #oralhealthtracker #dentaldecay**

The greatest challenges of the current food system

The report, *Sugar in Australia: A Food System Approach: Competing Issues, Diverse Voices, and Rethinking Pathways to a Sustainable Transition*, reveals the complexities in the Australian food system that relate to sugar. These include industry operations; market forces; the economic contributions of the crop and those of manufactured products to the Australian economy; employment opportunities that are created by the sugar system; support for communities; negative effects induced on health and society; and effects on the environment.

It is with these complexities in mind that Roundtable participants gathered to discuss various challenges from environmental, health, policy and consumer perspectives and then identify some cross-cutting, whole-of-system challenges that should be addressed. The points raised in the discussion have been synthesised into the four key themes explained below.

Limitations in knowledge regarding how to transition to a food system that supports more equitable, healthier and sustainable choices while supporting regional livelihoods

The system is structured so that many food choices are subliminally influenced by the food environment, such as product promotion, pricing or positioning that encourages unhealthy purchases. Ultra-processed foods are convenient and available everywhere. In a relatively short time, there has been a shift away from cooking with basic ingredients and a decrease in knowledge regarding how to prepare healthy meals. This system transition has led to a disconnect between people, their food and the environmental influence of food production (e.g., excess fertiliser polluting waterways and flowing into the Great Barrier Reef). Consumers undervalue and underestimate the effects of what they eat. Poor access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food can also be a barrier.

A lack of policy coherence, as well as competing and conflicting messages from food and environmental sectors

Across the health and environment sectors, messages are often complicated and compete for space, with organisations often focusing on specific issues rather than on the entire system. Consequently, there is a lack of unity and focus regarding the large-scale change that is required throughout the system. There is no central body to promote coherence between environmental and health policies with a whole-of-government approach. This approach is required for incorporating the voices of citizens and various aspects of the health and environment sectors, so that agreed-upon priorities can be established and collaboration for the wellbeing of people and the environment can occur. There is a fundamental need to strengthen advocacy in this area.

Limited trust in the mechanisms for government engagement with the food industry

There is growing concern regarding the food and agricultural industry's influence on the development of evidence-based health and environmental policies. There are few mechanisms or frameworks that both guide constructive engagement with these industries and acknowledge and manage potential conflicts of interest and their associated risks. Examples from nutrition and environmental policies with which the food industry has been involved suggest the potential for this involvement to undermine public trust in government-led initiatives and stall meaningful progress. Concurrently, resource constraints have made public-private partnerships more common at both the international and national level in addressing policy challenges.

Our vision for the future

Acknowledging the many challenges listed above, Roundtable participants progressed to discuss what the future would be if people and the environment were considered priorities within the food system. Key themes emerged from the group discussion and are outlined below.

Improved access to an equitable, healthy and sustainable food system for all

Access to affordable and nutritious foods is easy and equitable. Our food system is designed to encourage the production of food that minimises harm to the environment and to offer consumers access to information about the environmental and health effects of their food choices.

A coordinated, system-wide approach to transform food and environmental policy

Consumer, farmers, researchers, policymakers and industries recognise common interests and work together to develop a coordinated systems approach that supports an equitable, healthy and sustainable food system for both people and the environment. All parties acknowledge that the natures of issues are interconnected, with diversity included in conversations and encouraged in collaborations.

Transparency and independence from conflicted interests when setting policy

Independent and transparent mechanisms for establishing regulations and policies exist. Regulations and policies are regularly reviewed to ensure that they are designed for long-term health, equity and environmental sustainability, within the context of a changing climate.

A focus on equity, the health and wellbeing of people and the environment, and the economic sustainability of communities

Measures are implemented in the design of food systems to ensure the equity, health and wellbeing of people and the planet, as well as the economic sustainability of communities. Communities, including those in regional and remote settings, and farmers are included in the planning and design of food systems.

A clear transition pathway to healthy food choices for people and the environment

A clear pathway and strong leadership from the government exists to transition to healthy food choices for the long-term benefit of people and planet. Education programs about growing food, determining what is healthy to eat and learning how to prepare healthy meals using basic ingredients are implemented in schools so that every person has a connection to healthy food from a young age. Every Australian is empowered to cook healthy, culturally appropriate food using basic ingredients—and our wider system is designed in a way that supports and enables this.



@ellyhouse

Elly Howse – Public health researcher, The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre

Great to see today's #AusSugarSystem report & event taking a systems approach, talking about both health and environmental impacts of sugar. We need multi-sectoral & inter-sectoral collaboration, research & advocacy. @georgeinstitute



@alikhones

Dr Alexandra Jones – Research Fellow, The George Institute for Global Health

We can't retrofit values onto a system that is driven only by (commercial) value. But transitions *do* happen, and we do have the possibility of a new food regime. By understanding the system, we can think about the path forward @realfoodness #AusSugarSystem

How we will we get there

Establish effective and transparent governance mechanisms

Establishing a set of clear rules for change based on good governance will help develop a framework and mechanism that supports structural reforms that promote long-term policy goals for health and the environment and that ensure accountability. Ideas for these rules include legislative or constitutional reforms to protect and change the environment for future generations, including the establishment of a Wellbeing for Future Generations Act (a legislative change similar to the *Well-being of Future Generations Act* introduced by the Welsh Parliament in 2015) or a Bill of Rights in Australia (constitutional change) that elevates a rights-based approach to protecting health and the environment for current and future generations. Essential to this would be a united group of stakeholders who can advocate for bipartisan change.

Develop a whole-of-system approach, with a long-term view and a clear pathway for transition

To facilitate change in the context of competing policy priorities and diverse voices, we must first understand the entire system and adopt a long-term view for change. Developing priorities for food systems transformation within the context of the existing Sustainable Development Goals and adopting a rights-based approach provides the macro-level focus needed to develop targeted initiatives and actions that are united by a common purpose.

Facilitate collaboration between different sectors to support the transformation of food systems

Greater and more effective collaboration and advocacy for change is required to transform the current, fragmented approach. This includes establishing a forum of consumers and health and environmental leaders; using this group of diverse voices to co-design positive actions for change; and engaging all groups—including NGOs, the government, industry and the private sector—to create consistent messaging.

Increase investment and advocacy to foster a greater influence and transform unhealthy, unsustainable and inequitable systems

To successfully transform food systems, we must mobilise adequate investment. This investment would support a shift in focus from short-term treatments to a long-term, holistic impact approach of preventing disease and protecting the environment. This could include the creation of a fully funded federal office, that spans the Department of Health and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. It could be called an Office of Planetary Health (with planetary health referring to the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends).¹ Although some states have an Office of Preventive Health, there is currently no system-wide office that is responsible for health and the environment. This office could also oversee the development of a properly funded initiative to develop and communicate shared messages.



Such inspirational and thought-provoking conversation with lots of fabulous ideas

Melanie Chisholm, Manager, Healthy Eating, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth)



Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance

The costs of sugar are high for both planetary & human health, says [@realfoodness](#) in the new [@georgeinstitute](#) report on the [#AusSugarSystem](#)

1 Whitmee S, Haines A, Beyrer C, et al. Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of the Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on planetary health. *Lancet* 2015; 386: 1978

Priority actions

The Roundtable discussion culminated in various groups reviewing the issues that had been raised and identifying key actions that should be taken to move forward, as listed below.

Extending collaboration initiated at the Roundtable and examine methods of supporting, consolidating and growing social movements that drive the transformation of food systems

Many discrete movements already exist to drive changes in the food system. By extending the collaboration that was initiated through the Roundtable, we can examine other methods that further support, consolidate and grow social movements that drive the transformation of food systems.

Establish an approach for co-designing key activities and messages that are based on our shared values

One of the challenges in the current system is the short-term, linear approach that results in fragmented and competing appeals for incremental change. An alternative approach could include more diverse voices and a focus on co-benefits; it could be driven by a shared vision for the transition to a healthier and more sustainable food system that leaves a light footprint on the environment. This shared vision could adopt a rights-based approach and use a planetary health and Sustainable Development Goals framework. This would ensure that a macro lens is applied and it would facilitate a foundation in which all voices are heard and a correct balance of power is established. Factors such as the rights of the consumer, rights of the child and protection of the environment, as well as a focus on sustainability, would be integrated into current food systems thinking.

Advocate for federal and state governments to adopt indicators of success that reflect equity and the health and wellbeing of people and the environment

Adopting measures of success based on common values that include indicators for equity, health, wellbeing and the environment could facilitate longer-term planning and a system-wide shift. This, in turn, would require the implementation of effective and transparent governance mechanisms and investment to achieve long-term success and to facilitate greater collaboration towards shared goals.



The Systems based analysis was fantastic and something that I think will assist in making the work more transferrable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts where understanding cultural and social determinants are so important to good research and policy outcomes

Leonie Williamson, Senior Policy Adviser, The Lowitja Institute



@MirandaRBlake

Miranda Blake – Research Fellow, GLOBE, Deakin University

A call to action this morning & some personal reflection at the @georgeinstitute talking about #AusSugarSystem. The public health community must look beyond incremental changes to the broader food system and all the challenges that entails to generate meaningful progress.



@janemartinopc

Jane Martin – Obesity Policy Coalition

Being challenged to consider the sugar food system in a different way to make change.
#AusSugarSystem

Thank you

The George Institute for Global Health is grateful for the participation of the following representatives in the Roundtable discussion that constitutes the basis for this report:

Tony Bartone

Australian Medical Association

William Bellew

The University of Sydney

Keziah Bennett-Brook

The George Institute for Global Health

Miranda Blake

Deakin University

Siobhan Boyle

The Good Foundation

Peter Brukner

SugarByHalf

Melanie Chisholm

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth)

Vanessa Clarkson

Author, *Sugar in Australia: A Food System Approach*

Peter Griggs

Sugar historian

Elly Howse

Sax Institute/Australian Prevention Partnership Centre

Clare Hughes

Cancer Council NSW

Eithne Irving

Australian Dental Association

Ingrid Johnston

Public Health Association of Australia

Alexandra Jones

The George Institute for Global Health

Emma Lonsdale

Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance

Alana Mann

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President of the ANZ Obesity Society

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Heart Foundation Australia

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UNSW School of Medical Sciences

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Leonie Williamson

The Lowitja Institute

Andrew Wilson

Menzies Centre for Health Policy

Imogen Zethoven

Australian Marine Conservation Society



Keziah Bennet-Brook – Program Manager, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Program, The George Institute for Global Health

Leonie Williamson [@LowitjaInstitut](#) responds to Sugar in Australia report “If we want to talk about systems change we need to consider truth telling” says important to remember role of colonisation and loss of cultural practices/cultural knowledges in this process [#AusSugarSystem](#)



Elly Howse – Public health researcher, The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre

History of the sugar industry in Australia incl the practice of ‘blackbirding’ (slave labour of South Sea Islanders) in Qld. Sugar is closely linked to colonialism & development of farming & industry in Aus. [@realfoodness](#) [@georgeinstitute](#) [#AusSugarSystem](#)

About The George Institute for Global Health

The George Institute for Global Health is an independent medical research institute that aims to improve the health of millions of people worldwide by generating effective, evidence-based and affordable solutions to the world's greatest health challenges. Headquartered in Sydney, with major centres in China, India and the United Kingdom, it oversees projects in more than 50 countries and is affiliated with world-class universities. In 2018, The George Institute was ranked the number one independent research institute in Australia by *Times Higher Education*.

The George Institute's Thought Leadership program seeks to challenge the status quo and foster debates and discussions that lead to positive changes in health outcomes within several strategic focus areas, such as the promotion of healthy environments. By providing different perspectives and driving new thought, we can rethink how to create healthy environments that facilitate healthy eating.

Project team

Professor Jacqui Webster

Head of Public Health Advocacy and Policy Impact, The George Institute for Global Health

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“

Discussions like this highlight again the importance of advocacy to governments for a national food policy

Dr Michael Moore AM PhD, Distinguished Fellow, The George Institute for Global Health

 @DaisyCoyleAPD

Daisy H Coyle – PhD Candidate, The George Institute for Global Health

Presentation by Vanessa Clarkson @realfoodness asking us to see sugar through a food system lens. Many costs associated with sugar (not just health) - its resource intensive, huge impacts of the environment inc concerns with use of agrochemicals #AusSugarSystem

Contact

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