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### Sustainable diets

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## **Sustainable Diets: How Ecological Nutrition Can Transform Consumption and the Food System**

**By Pamela Mason and Tim Lang (Abingdon, UK; New York, NY: Earthscan Routledge, 2017)**

Concerns about the negative impacts of the food system go back at least fifty years to the beginnings of the modern environmental movement. However, in the last decade - under the new heading of sustainable diets - policy literature on this topic has expanded enormously. Food production is seen to be under increasing stress due to climate change, pollution of natural resources, and competition for land. Due to increasing rates of diet-related non-communicable diseases, like cancer, diabetes and stroke, consumption is also seen as a problem. However, there appears to be much less understanding of how these aspects of the food system relate to each.

Pamela Mason, a public health nutritionist with a Masters in Food Policy, and Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy at City University, London have done much to increase such understanding by providing an authoritative account of this complex and contested policy area. Their book describes the negative impacts of the contemporary food system, explains the concept of sustainable diets, and explores ways in which the UK and other affluent countries can shift towards healthier, fairer and less environmentally damaging patterns of eating.

*Sustainable Diets* benefits hugely from the expertise that members of the Centre for Food Policy have developed from a long engagement in British food policy – for example, Tim Lang’s role in the Sustainable Development Commission. The authors display an impressive breadth of knowledge and command of detail as they explain a turbulent and fast-evolving policy area.

In the first chapter Mason and Lang define sustainability as composed of six key aspects: health, environment, culture, food quality, economics, and governance. A second methodologies chapter then surveys the large number of indicators and measures of sustainability, assessing the value (and limitations) of existing methods such as lifecycle analysis, and arguing for the development of new multi-criteria indicators that can capture more aspects of sustainability. Their definition provides the framework for the rest of the book which contains six chapters, one for each of aspects of sustainability identified, and a short conclusion that pulls together the threads of their arguments.

These six chapters provide concise and readable of overviews of these important topics that carefully explain the technical details, and implications, of a range of rapidly evolving research areas. Each also has a list of references at the end which allows the reader to investigate the material discussed in greater detail. For example, the chapter on health discusses the difficult issue of the sustainability of different patterns of healthy eating (pp. 99-106). Surveying the existing research – which has mostly been conducted in rich countries – the authors describe how reducing overall consumption, and especially consumption of meat and dairy products, can significantly reduce the environmental impact

of diets. Although the argument that 'diets must change' runs throughout this book, the authors argue for limiting, rather than eliminating, meat consumption.

I found the chapter on policy and governance particularly valuable. In just over sixty pages the authors provide (and this is not an exhaustive list): a typology of policy responses to sustainability (p.268); examples of recent initiatives ranging from the global to the city-level; a table comparing six different sustainable eating guidelines (pp.280-3); and a discussion of the main themes of recent policy discussions. These are some of the book's many excellent visual tools which give the reader a real, and sometimes rare, sense of clarity about the topics discussed. The description of specific initiatives also gives a sense – uncommon in academic literature – of how to begin the process of reforming food systems.

The UK focus of this book may be considered a limitation by some, but it allows both authors to draw on their professional expertise to the fullest and explore a relatively well-developed research literature on sustainability. Those in public health who see the food industry as a major cause of ill-health, due to its aggressive marketing of ultra-processed products high in salt sugar and fat (e.g. Moodie et al., 2013; Freudenberg, 2014), will also question the authors' optimistic account (pp. 291-5) of the food industry's willingness to embrace sustainability. Such scepticism is probably warranted in light of the major changes – reduced overall consumption, radically revised product ranges and re-localised distribution – that this will necessarily entail.

However, these are minor caveats and I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is new to the topic of sustainable diets, as well as those already working in the field who want a broad interdisciplinary understanding of the policy implications of this growing research field.

## Bibliography

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