

**Johan Rockström & Walter Willett**  
Co-Chairs of the EAT-*Lancet* Commission  
On Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems

March 26, 2019

Dear Colleagues,

As Co-Chairs of the EAT-*Lancet* Commission, we are responding to the letter 0488 sent by the honorable Ambassador Gian Lorenzo Cornado on March 20 to all permanent representatives to the United Nations and International Organizations in Geneva regarding the EAT-*Lancet* Commission report on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. The letter lays out a number of concerns that Ambassador Cornado has about the report and its upcoming launch in Geneva on March 28th. We are deeply troubled with the content of this letter as it fundamentally misrepresents the EAT-*Lancet* Commission as well as the scientific findings and recommendations of our report.

Firstly, we would like to clarify the nature of the EAT-*Lancet* Commission. The letter briefly refers to EAT, which is an international platform for dialogue and action between science, policy, and business to catalyze food system transformation. The EAT-*Lancet* Commission is entirely different. The need for an independent scientific commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems was identified during dialogues at the EAT Forum in 2016. The EAT-*Lancet* Commission emerged from these dialogues and is an independent commission of distinguished scientists in the areas of human health, agriculture, political sciences, and environmental sustainability that used the latest available evidence to define global scientific targets for healthy diets and sustainable food production. The EAT-*Lancet* Commission was proposed to and approved by the editorial leadership of the scientific journal *The Lancet*. Over three years, the Commission has operated entirely independently, and after external peer-review the scientific report was published in *The Lancet* following its extremely high academic standards. The Commission has received funding for its operations (a small science secretariat at the Stockholm Resilience Centre at Stockholm University) and meetings, from the Wellcome Trust, an independent global charitable foundation. No remuneration or honoraria have been provided to any of the Commissioners. The EAT-*Lancet* report is thus an independent assessment of the latest scientific knowledge on healthy diets from sustainable food systems.

Regarding the report's content, the first concern raised in the letter is that the Commission calls for "centralized control of our dietary choices". Nowhere in the report do we advocate for any form of centralized control. Quite the contrary, the EAT-*Lancet* Commission gathers the latest science in defining intake levels and ranges for the major food groups in our diets that optimize human health. We then complement this with a universal definition of sustainable food production. This gives, for the first time, a scientific guide of what we know today regarding food for healthy people and a healthy planet. Our current system feeds only a prosperous minority well and rapidly degrades the remaining environmental space on our planet. It's clear that change is needed.

Unhealthy diets are now the single largest cause behind pre-mature mortality in the world. Our report cites the independent Global Burden of Disease project, which concluded that "unhealthy diets pose a greater risk to morbidity and mortality than do unsafe sex, and alcohol, drug, and tobacco use combined". To counter this situation, the EAT-*Lancet* report offers the most up-to-date scientific evidence for healthy diets.

Another unfounded concern is that the healthy reference diet is a standard "one-size fits all" diet and would result in the destruction of culinary traditions around the world. We could not disagree more.

Flexibility to adapt to local diets is inherent in the reference dietary targets. The Commission suggests broad ranges of intake of all basic food groups in any diets (cereals, tubers, vegetables, oils, fruit, nuts, legumes, dairy products, animal source proteins) to ensure human health (table 1) and similarly ranges for planetary boundaries for food production to ensure a stable Earth system (table 2). Within these scientific targets for healthy diets and sustainable food production there is room for a myriad of different food cultures around the world. This includes diets found in Indonesia, Mexico, India, China and across West Africa, and we specifically cited some of these as examples. In fact, traditional diets are not in danger from adoption of the healthy reference dietary targets presented in the *EAT-Lancet* report, they are in danger from adoption of industrial Western dietary patterns, which is accelerating globally. Even in Italy, Greece, and Spain, the WHO warned in 2018 that the healthy Mediterranean diet is dying out as people shift to industrial Western eating patterns. Hence, global adoption of the healthy dietary targets would in fact help protect many traditional diets.

Further, the Ambassador's letter warns that the recommendations from the Commission will limit consumer choice in favor of "decisions cast from above". Referenced as proof of this strategy is Table 6, an overview of policy interventions. In fact, Table 6 illustrates exactly the opposite. As we state in the report, "a full range of policy levers is likely to be needed". This includes bottom up measures such as education and enabling choice (e.g. through labelling), as well as top down measures such as taxation that account for the true cost of food systems. These true costs entail substantial costs to social and healthcare systems due to rapidly rising rates of obesity and related diseases, as well as the environmental costs from non-sustainable agricultural practices. As such, the results and policy tools presented in the report are fully in line with the Political Declaration of the 2018 High-Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases, unanimously approved by Heads of State, including the Italian Republic, and the General Assembly.

Another significant misunderstanding is that the healthy reference diet is nutritionally deficient and therefore dangerous to human health. We live in a world where more than 820 million people have insufficient food and many more consume low-quality diets. Adoption of the dietary targets would greatly improve the nutrition and health status of most people on the planet and prevent approximately 11 million premature deaths annually (20 to 25% of total deaths globally). Based on a detailed nutrient analysis of the reference diet, the Commission estimates that widespread adoption would actually improve intakes of essential micronutrients (such as iron, zinc, folate, vitamin K, and vitamin A, as well as calcium in low-income countries). Exceptions are vitamin D (which is primarily obtained by sun exposure, not foods), sodium (which is low in natural foods and added in processing and food preparation), and retinol (also very low in natural foods except for liver, and mainly obtained by conversion from pro-vitamin A sources, which are high in the reference diet, or added by fortification). The Commission points out that if intakes of animal source foods are low, supplements of vitamin B-12 or fortified foods may be needed (foods are already often fortified with retinol, folate, and multiple B-vitamins but not always with B-12). A detailed nutrient assessment of the healthy reference diet can be found in Table 3 of the report's appendix and we are happy to provide more details as needed.

An extremely troubling argument is that a transformation of the global food system would "certainly lead to economic depression, especially in developing countries" due to the "nearly total elimination of food of animal origin". Again, this statement is unfounded, and we would welcome any evidence that supports such a strong conclusion. In fact, the report very clearly shows (Figure 1) that moving towards the healthy reference dietary targets would increase total dairy consumption across most of the developing world and the average per capita intake of red meat could approximately double in South Asia and remain roughly at today's level on average across Africa.

Moreover, the Commission fully recognizes and states within the report that to achieve healthy diets from sustainable food systems, “local and regional realities must be carefully considered”. This includes the economic and social realities of developing nations as outlined in Panel 2 of the report. To highlight the Commission’s sensitivity to the economic and social realities of developing nations, we point to the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions scientific target which is set at 5 Gt of GHG emissions. This target in fact could have been set much lower (as low as 2 Gt) if the Commission focused only on minimizing GHG emissions and was insensitive to the economic and social realities of developing countries. However, the Commission kept this target at 5 Gt precisely because we know that meat consumption will continue to be an important source of nutrients across the world, particularly in developing countries, and recognize that livestock plays a fundamental role for poverty alleviation in many local communities across the world. Nowhere do we state that cattle farming must end globally. In fact, in Panel 3 of the appendix we outline a strategy for how livestock could continue to play an important role in providing protein for a global population of nearly 10 billion persons. In addition, we do not state or claim that companies involved in the production of food or beverages that are unhealthy should remove their products from the market.

We welcome constructive and open debate on the content of the report. It is only through public, far-reaching discussions (and actions) that we can succeed in transforming the global food system to deliver sustainable and healthy diets for everyone. We trust that the launch in Geneva – along with more than 35 events across the globe – will provide such a forum.

We are deeply concerned by the Ambassador’s letter. The EAT-Lancet Commission provides a framework for much-needed immediate action that is closely aligned with, and supportive of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. We appreciate that the Republic of Italy adopted and signed both agreements and is working with the international community to ensure humanity moves to an environmentally safe and socially just operating space within the limited time available for achieving both. While we welcome debate on the details of the report, we wish to correct several errors and misconceptions about the Commission so that we can collectively focus on one of the greatest issues facing humanity at this critical juncture, that of ensuring everyone on the planet has access to healthy diets without destroying our common home.

Sincerely,



**Johan Rockström**

*Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Potsdam  
Director, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research*



**Walter Willett**

*Professor of Epidemiology and Nutrition, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health  
Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School*