



Book Review

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

Pamela Mason and Tim Lang
Routledge, 2017: 353 pages

Review by Jennifer Sumner, PhD

This path-breaking book situates the thorny issue of diets firmly within what has been called the Anthropocene—the era of human-induced changes to the planet. Since many of these changes are associated with food production and consumption, the authors argue that we need to develop sustainable diets in order to reduce the negative impacts of the current global food system on the environment, as well as to improve public health. To this end, the book is informed by an ecological public health perspective, which “views health as a function of relationships, a web of connections between humans, planet and society” (Mason & Lang, p. 4).

From the beginning of the book, the authors lay out their arguments for a diet that is “green, healthy and fair” (p. 4) and also breaks down the barriers between seeming opposites: nutrition and environment, food safety and plentiful food supply, quantity and quality, production and consumption. Overall, they view a “good food system” as “one that creates the conditions to meet all these goals and one that does not prioritise short-term gains over long-term losses” (p. 5), as opposed to the current food system that focuses on extracting resources and does not protect the means for future generations to eat well.

To achieve a good food system, Mason and Lang propose six criteria to operationalize sustainable diets: health and nutrition, environment, social values, quality, economy, and governance. The criteria are based on the approach of the UK Sustainable Development Commission and each one is the subject of a chapter that lays out a wealth of information for curious readers. These chapters begin with a masterful overview of the particular criterion, gathering together ideas from an impressive range of sources and presenting them in a

compelling and comprehensive fashion. Then they move to research studies that back up the overview, providing the firm foundation on which the authors have built their case.

As these chapters make abundantly clear, there is a need for dietary guidelines to address the issue of sustainability, which they see as a complex set of omni-standards or poly-values that encompass the six criteria listed above. In doing so, the authors emphasize that “the debate about sustainability raises fundamental criticisms of the impact of neoliberalism” (p. 230)—an inevitable confrontation, given the narrow market orientation of this life-blind perspective that exploits people and the environment and denies full-cost accounting.

One of the most difficult aspects of implementing sustainability involves changing human behaviour, and nowhere is this more difficult than in the realm of food. For this reason, Mason and Lang maintain that more thought needs to be given to culture via, for example, appeals to old ways and traditions. They cite the example of Sweden, which was the first country to provide clear, detailed, evidence-based dietary guidelines, but had to retract them because it faced infringement of the European Union non-discrimination rule because of its advice to eat locally and seasonally. Sweden’s second attempt involved the pragmatic use of soft guidance: deliberately looser advice that was cultural rather than nutritional. In this vein, Canada faces a conundrum. Some might argue that Canada does not have a strong traditional cuisine to fall back on, unlike countries such as France or Italy. In dispensing advice on sustainable diets, we would therefore have to imagine and create a cultural/culinary future based on the many foodways that make up Canada’s multicultural society, including First Nations foodways, while following Mason and Lang’s six criteria.

The strengths of this book are many. It is original and timely, using the ample evidence provided as a springboard for developing their ideas about “ecological nutrition” (p. 139). Each chapter begins with core concepts and clearly links the subject matter to diets. The chapter on governance is particularly enlightening, investigating players from the global to the local level and lamenting the loss of leadership by the state in this vital area of planetary concern. The authors point out that, with the exception of a few notable examples, no country dares to take on the powerful industrial food lobbies that have led us down the path of maldevelopment.

At times, the combination of sweeping overview and specific studies seem somewhat at odds with each other, giving the sense that this is two books melded into one. And the sheer volume of studies can occasionally seem overwhelming. That said, their function is to provide an impenetrable wall of evidence that cannot be gainsaid, thus laying the groundwork for the ultimate argument that we must change our diets or select ourselves out of existence.

The final chapter concludes that a sustainable diet is simply a diet that is good for human and ecosystem health. To better implement this understanding, Mason and Lang include a number of teaching tools. They provide two useful images: a working model that helps to explore and order the complex, interrelated criteria of sustainable diets and a shift wheel to conceptualize dietary change behaviour. They also offer some basic principles of a diet that is consistent with optimum public health and low environmental impact, which can be used as the basis for developing globally applicable guidelines for sustainable diets. Finally, they lay out

such guidelines, while emphasizing that they should be owned by the state and developed by a number of ministries and a wide variety of experts.

Overall, Mason and Lang emphasize that “what humanity eats has major impacts on public health, the economy, the environment and the future” (p. 10). This is undeniably true and the sooner we act on this realization, the better. *Sustainable Diets* is one blueprint to get us there.

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