



Book Review

Can fixing dinner fix the planet?

By Jessica Fanzo

John Hopkins University Press, 2021: 240 pages

Review by Kathleen Kevany*

Exposing the strengths and weaknesses driving the complexity of globalized food systems is at the heart of Jessica Fanzo's book, *Can fixing dinner fix the planet?* Throughout, she asks penetrating questions and offers substantial research to back up her analyses. The chapter builds upon Fanzo's decades of field work in immunology and nutrition, and she grounds the book through relevant illustrations, and accessible and personable text. Readers newer to this field may find it practical and compelling, as it underscores the sense of urgency and the need for immediate actions to prevent catastrophic collapses within global food systems.

The book is arranged into six chapters that integrate evidence and identify priority actions. She tackles challenging issues, including the nature of individual food identity and the trade-offs that nations face when balancing food sovereignty and international trade goals with the right to sufficient, nutritious, and diverse foods. Based on a growing body of research on national food guidelines, dietary patterns, and population

health, she also raises other penetrating questions like, "How have we gotten ourselves into this ironic situation in which diets meant to nurture us are essentially killing us?" (Fanzo, 2021, p. 15).

In chapter two, launched by the lead-off, *Can cooking curry in Cambodia trigger a tornado in Texas?*, Fanzo describes the circumstances and interconnections in food systems, inviting readers to come to their own conclusions. Her research into and analyses of government policies, and industry and agricultural practices help to explain the quandaries and paradoxes within agriculture that have become significant drivers of destabilizing planetary systems. She effectively describes how greater reliance on global supply chains is fueled by the drive for strong economic and caloric potential, among many other factors. She flags issues of agricultural industrialization, concentration, and intensification and the concomitant social, environmental, and health issues.

*Corresponding author: kkevany@dal.ca

Copyright © 2022 by the Author. Open access under CC-BY-SA license.

DOI: [10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i3.595](https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v9i3.595)

ISSN: 2292-3071

The text also reveals some of the vicious cycles within food systems, such as those producing overnutrition and undernutrition, and issues of inequity and access, affordability, and food insecurity. As one of the authors of the EAT Lancet Health Planet Diet, Fanzo notes that not all reviewers and users of that report supported all the EAT-Lancet findings and recommendations. Based on the evidence, she advises her readers to adjust their meat and dairy consumption by reducing the amounts in developed nations and, affording greater access, where needed in under-developed countries, to help address malnutrition and undernutrition.

The book also adds to the growing inquiry into whether better policies might produce better food. “Diets are shaped by where you live, who you are and what options you have, and are also driven by deep (often unseen) systemic social factors and injustices. Approaches that focus on population health policy rather than on those that require personal agency are more effective, equitable, and enforceable” (p. 114). Here, Fanzo stands with many scholars calling for governments to prioritize system levers for change, and placing needs of citizens over corporations, while also shifting food systems through mandating greater transparency and facilitating improved food systems literacy.

So, *Can fixing dinner fix the planet?* Fanzo thinks so, given that the power of food systems—with—their far-reaching influences, can be humanity’s greatest levers for intervening in the interconnected issues of inequality, ill-health, and climate crises. While the focus

is on system shifts that need to be orchestrated, she does not shy away from urging the public to do their part as well.

At times, the text reads like a stream of consciousness, as themes linked to previously covered issues are reiterated. Readers might have benefitted more from an elaboration of demonstrated government action and industry innovation, while attention to the circular economy and maximizing resources along the food chain would have added value to the book. The text leaves questions unanswered about the impacts of agricultural subsidies, like supports continuing to be provided for foods that are contrary to national food guidelines, and how best to incentivize sustainable practices. Overall, reading this book is like Fanzo inviting readers into conversations she is having with leading thinkers, food producers, processors, and policy makers. Her analyses underscore the tenuous states of transparency, truth, and trust in neoliberal food systems environments. As the text exposes readers to an array of actors and leverage points, it also could be a guide to accelerate shifts to sustainability. It would be a helpful text to accentuate the learning of those new to the field of food systems but likely would serve as a review or be repetitive for those well-informed on globalized food production and consumption. As the challenges in shifting to more sustainable systems are monumental and pressing upon humanity, a range of educational materials are needed. This book offers a helpful, broad view with practical and engaging examples informed by first-hand experiences.

Statement of no conflict of interest: I am a researcher in the field of sustainable diets and am not positioned to profit from undertaking this review. It is part of my paid work as a professor.

References

EAT Lancet Health Planet Diet

Fanzo, J. (2021). *Can fixing dinner fix the planet?* John Hopkins University Press.