

From Evidence to Action: Creating Healthier, Fairer and More Sustainable Food Environments

A practical brief for policymakers, researchers and research funders

Europe is at a crossroads: rising diet-related diseases, persistent undernutrition, and widening inequalities in access to healthy food are compounded by growing environmental pressures. These interconnected challenges demand a concerted response—no single country or sector can solve them alone. Moreover, the health and sustainability of Europe's food systems are increasingly linked to economic performance, influencing healthcare costs, workforce productivity, innovation, and the global competitiveness of the European agri-food sector.

At the same time, European policy windows and processes offer timely opportunities to push for change. Initiatives such as the EU Vision for Agriculture and Food, the Cardiovascular Health Plan (Safe Hearts Plan), Healthier Together – the EU NCD Initiative, Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, Europe's climate and environment targets are important levers to drive change and realise impact.

Moving beyond the assumption that change will automatically follow from improved communication of evidence to policy makers, HDHL organised a conference in Brussels inviting participants to explore the broader dynamics shaping food environments. The conference aimed to contribute to and inform emerging policy windows, bringing together researchers, policymakers, and innovators to explore how we can finally move from evidence to action. The transition to healthier, more sustainable diets requires political leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and inclusive science.

On 21 April 2026, HDHL brought together 150+ stakeholders from the food, nutrition and health domains, using Art of Hosting approaches, to co-create solutions to these challenges. The key question was: *"If the evidence is clear, how do we as a society, collaboratively yet critically, navigate power relations to drive action and develop policies for healthy and sustainable food environments in Europe?"*

Why progress is slow – and what must change

Across panels, policy labs and interactive sessions, participants agreed that the main barriers to healthier, more sustainable food environments are not technical or scientific, but lie in power relations, resources allocation, governance choices, and how evidence is translated into policy and practice.



The HDHL conference surfaced key recommendations for **policymakers, researchers** and **research funders**. Based on the conference outcomes, HDHL proposes the following priorities for EU and national level action:

1

Put health centre stage by strengthening regulatory frameworks for healthier food environments, reducing the burden on healthcare



Policymakers

Shift from voluntary commitments to binding regulations, with clear responsibilities and enforcement mechanisms. Areas requiring urgent action include marketing to children, front-of-pack labelling, and food reformulation.



Researchers

Investigate (enforcement) mechanisms in various domains (food, health, socio-economic) that yield positive public health outcomes.



Research funders

Support and prioritise research to strengthen regulatory frameworks for food environments.

2

Embed transparency and accountability in food-system governance



Policymakers

Ensure transparent decision-making, manage conflicts of interest, and align accountability mechanisms with system-level outcomes, not isolated interventions.



Researchers

Map conflicts of interest in food system decision-making. Design accountability mechanisms tied to system-level outcomes (e.g., population health, equity, sustainability).



Research funders

Stimulate interdisciplinary research on power imbalance in food environments and on governance models that enhance transparency and mitigate conflicts of interest.

3

Elevate lived experience and local knowledge in policymaking and research



Policymakers

Recognise people's knowledge as essential evidence. Policies must be co-created with communities, especially those facing food or health inequities, otherwise, implementation will fail. Explore the creation of citizens' assemblies to co-design policies with underrepresented communities.



Researchers

Integrate lived experience and local knowledge into (action) research, and systematically validate scientific findings against local and indigenous knowledge systems.



Research funders

Allocate funding for co-creation processes i.e. research agendas with communities experiencing food insecurity or health inequities.



4

Invest in implementation, scale-up and long-term impact

**Policymakers**

Support research that is designed from the outset with implementation, translation and societal relevance in mind, and where researchers are stimulated to engage with policy and practice (including people's lived experiences). This will lead to social, economic and technical innovation and overall competitiveness of the sector.

**Researchers**

Focus on implementation science to design studies with real-world applicability and stimulate scalability and long-term impact.

**Research funders**

Support translational research that bridges the gap between evidence and real-world application.

5

Support participatory leadership and food democracy

**Policymakers**

Facilitate bottom-up processes, such as food policy councils, and community-driven initiatives. This can be done by hosting convening spaces that enable stakeholders to have an open and meaningful dialogue.

**Researchers**

Investigate the role of bottom-up governance in food systems such as the impact of food policy councils, barriers and enablers for community-driven initiatives.

**Research funders**

Support initiatives that empower bottom-up processes, enable participatory research agenda-setting and community-driven food system transformations.

6

Use public procurement as a strategic lever

**Policymakers**

Leverage public procurement in schools, hospitals, and other public institutions to drive healthier and more sustainable food environments at scale, supporting public health and strengthening the competitiveness of sustainable food systems.

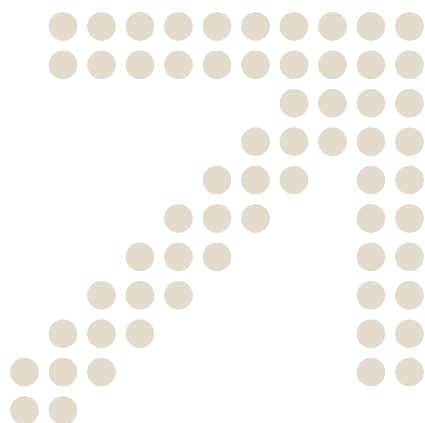
**Researchers**

Explore how public procurement can shape healthier and more sustainable food environments, and design, pilot and evaluate different procurement approaches and policies.

**Research funders**

Stimulate research and experimentation on how public procurement (e.g. in schools and hospitals) can be expanded and institutionalised to drive healthier and more sustainable food environments at scale.





Why HDHL Matters for Europe's Future

The conference confirmed that HDHL is uniquely positioned to:

- Bridge the gap between evidence and action;
- Connect food, nutrition and health communities;
- Create safe spaces for critical reflection and joint action;
- Support the EU and Member States in aligning priorities and accelerating progress.

Europe needs coordinated, transdisciplinary, and participatory approaches to transform food environments. HDHL provides the platform that connects research, policy, civil society, and practice to make this possible.

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Since 2010, HDHL has pooled resources to fund interdisciplinary research, to align national research and innovation priorities and strengthened the connection between science and policy to ensure evidence informs action.

HDHL brings stakeholders and sectors together. We are part of key European initiatives like **CLEVERFOOD** and **FOODPathS**, and through the **HDHL Food4Health** project, we align with **Horizon Europe Partnerships** such as **FutureFoodS** and **ERA4Health**, expanding our network and amplifying impact.

HDHL's vision is to ensure healthy diets and healthy lives on a healthy planet, for all.

We do this by informing the European Research Agenda and landscape; by funding transdisciplinary and transnational research and by strengthening stakeholder collaboration between research, policy and practice.

Together, we can turn the tide. Join HDHL in shaping a healthier, more sustainable future for Europe.



**Where Evidence
Informs *Action***

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Read the full HDHL
Conference Report [here](#)

