

Report of the HDHL Conference 2026

Turning Evidence into Action for Healthier, Sustainable and More Equitable Food Environments

Brussels, 21 April 2026



Executive Summary

The HDHL Conference 2026 brought together over 150 participants from 23 countries, including researchers, policymakers, civil society, international organisations, industry representatives, and early-career researchers to address a shared question: **if the evidence on healthy and sustainable food environments is strong, why is progress still so slow?**

Across plenary discussions, panels, policy labs and interactive sessions, participants largely agreed that the main barriers to action are not technical or scientific, but lie in power relations, governance choices, and how evidence is translated into policy and practice.

Five key messages emerged:

1. The main barrier to healthier food environments is not a lack of evidence, but how power shapes action.

The most pressing needs lie in implementation, scale-up and enforcement, rather than in further expanding the evidence base. Power imbalances, conflicts of interest and governance arrangements continue to slow progress, particularly where voluntary or fragmented approaches dominate.

2. Structural change requires clear rules, transparency and accountability.

Shifting food environments at scale depends on binding regulation, clear responsibilities and greater transparency around decision-making and influence.

3. Whose knowledge counts matters for effective and equitable policy.

Lived experience, local insight and implementation expertise are critical for designing policies that work in real-world settings and reduce inequalities.

4. Participatory leadership enables more authentic dialogue and systems-level action.

Engaging citizens from the beginning, and inviting them to identify what matters to them and where they have influence, created a more relational and authentic working environment. This participatory approach made it possible to explore food environments as a system, test ideas at a smaller scale, and build shared understanding. While such ways of working require time and effort, the conference showed that they provide a strong foundation for collaboration and meaningful progress.

5. The conference led to concrete next steps and follow-up between organisations.

Beyond shared insights, the conference created momentum for continued collaboration, including follow-up conversations with WHO and concrete actions emerging from the policy labs. These outcomes demonstrate how a convening and participatory approach can move beyond dialogue and support tangible next steps towards action.

The conference reinforced HDHL's role as a platform that connects food, nutrition and health communities, and that creates space for dialogue, critical reflection and joint action across sectors.

Why Food Environments Matter - and Why Change Is Hard

Food environments play a central role in shaping what people eat, how food is produced and marketed, and who benefits from the current food system. They influence access, affordability, availability and desirability of food, with direct consequences for health, sustainability and equity across Europe.



Eileen Gibney

Chair of HDHL; Director UCD Institute of Food and Health at UCD

In her opening remarks, **Eileen Gibney** emphasised that food and health must be addressed together. While scientific evidence on nutrition and health has grown substantially, progress remains limited if food systems, policies and environments are treated as separate domains. She underlined that many of today's challenges – from non-communicable diseases to climate pressures and food insecurity – sit precisely at this intersection.

The conference was organised against a backdrop of:

- persistent diet-related non-communicable diseases,
- continued undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies in specific groups,
- widening inequalities in access to healthy food,
- and increasing environmental pressures on food systems.

“HDHL really wants to keep health and food together and bridge the two, and make sure that we have an effect at the policy level. That means continuing the dialogue, bringing all stakeholders together, supporting knowledge exchange and meaningful conversations, ensuring that we listen to each other, and work towards the change we want to see in our food environments and food systems.”

Eileen Gibney framed HDHL's role as creating space for the connection between food and health. No single country or sector can address these challenges alone. Over more than 16 years, HDHL has worked to bring together research, policy, civil society, industry and funding organisations to support transdisciplinary approaches and collective learning.

Providing “healthy diets for all” may sound simple and straightforward and something society can easily deliver, but it is not. Food environments are shaped by production systems, economic incentives, marketing practices, governance structures and cultural and social norms. These factors interact in complex ways, making change difficult and often contested.

The purpose of the conference was therefore not simply to share evidence, but to better understand what is blocking action, whose voices shape decisions, and how progress can realistically be achieved.

“Healthy diets are one of the major leverage points for improving the environment, staying within planetary boundaries and improving the climate. That’s why it’s so important to bring the healthy diet community together with the food and agriculture communities.”



Abigail Muscat

Coordinator & Advisor EU Research Collaborations in Food Systems, Agriculture and the Bioeconomy at WUR; Coordinator FACCE-JPI

When Evidence Meets Power

Keynote Perspective: Power as the Missing Link

As keynote speaker, **Kremlin Wickramasinghe** set the analytical frame for the day by addressing a central paradox: the evidence on healthy diets and food environments is strong, yet policy progress remains slow and uneven.

Drawing on WHO Europe data, he highlighted that diet-related risk factors remain among the leading contributors to cardiovascular disease and other non-communicable diseases. While progress has been made, improvements have stalled in recent years, and large differences persist between countries.



Kremlin Wickramasinghe
Regional Adviser for Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention and Health Promotion (PHP) at WHO; HDHL Advisory Board

“Our aim is to make sure that the European population has the best nutrition [advice], backed by the best scientific evidence available to us. To do that, working with all stakeholders and managing power [dynamics] will be key.”

A core message of the keynote was that the main barrier is not lack of knowledge. Instead, power dynamics shape how evidence is prioritised, interpreted and acted upon. These dynamics influence agenda-setting, narrative framing, stakeholder access to decision-making, and the reliance on voluntary rather than regulatory approaches.

Kremlin Wickramasinghe illustrated this with examples such as marketing to children, front-of-pack labelling and reformulation. In these areas, strong evidence exists, yet policies are often

delayed or weakened through reframing around individual responsibility, market freedom or unrealistic demands for proof of impact from single interventions.

Importantly, he stressed that action is possible within political cycles. WHO has identified proven, cost-effective interventions that can deliver measurable health benefits within five years or less. The key question, he concluded, is whether institutions and stakeholders are ready to engage with power, not just evidence.

Panel 1: Addressing Resistance to Change in Food Environments

Building on the keynote, **Greg Garrett**, Executive Director at Access to Nutrition Initiative (ATNi), **Sara Lamnaca**, Director for Consumer Information, Nutrition and Health at FoodDrinkEurope and **Milka Sokolović**, Director General at European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) explored how resistance to changing food environments manifests in practice, and what could help overcome it. The discussion brought together perspectives from public health, civil society and industry.



Greg Garrett
Executive Director at Access to Nutrition Initiative

Several themes emerged clearly:

- Voluntary commitments are insufficient on their own; regulation and enforcement remain essential.
- Accountability mechanisms need to focus on system-level change, not only individual actors.
- Conflicts of interest must be recognised and managed transparently.
- Engagement with industry remains contested, with differing views on where and how it should take place.

Panelists highlighted that commercial power, particularly through marketing and lobbying, continues to shape food environments in ways that undermine public-health goals. At the same time, there was recognition that not all actors have the same capacities, responsibilities or incentives, and that engagement approaches need to reflect these differences.

The discussion underscored that progress depends on strong public leadership, clearer rules, and better alignment between evidence, policy objectives and accountability structures.

“We need ways of understanding how to drive healthier profits. It has to be good for nutrition, but it also has to be good for business.”

Rethinking the Role of Research and Knowledge

Panel 2: Changing the Way We Do (Action) Research and develop policy – Whose Voices Are Heard, Whose Knowledge is Included, and Who Decides?

The discussion among **Fabrice DeClerck**, Chief Science Officer at EAT, **Anant Jani**, Senior Researcher at Heidelberg University and University of Oxford, **Milka Sokolović**, Director General at European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) shifted the focus from policy resistance to the role of research itself. Participants broadly agreed that Europe already knows what works to improve food environments, but that critical forms of knowledge remain undervalued or underused.

“We recognise that food systems are the number one driver of both poor dietary health and environmental harm, but they are also our best opportunity for solutions. Scientists need to change their own behaviour to engage more effectively with these processes.”

These include:

- implementation and scale-up knowledge,
- local and contextual insight,
- lived experience of communities affected by food environments, and understanding of political and commercial determinants.

Concerns were raised about repeated pilot projects without pathways to long-term impact, and about weak incentives for researchers to engage with policy processes. Evidence was described as often entering policymaking spaces already shaped by existing power structures. The panel called for a shift towards “science for solutions” – research that is designed from the outset with implementation, translation and societal relevance in mind. This implies new roles for researchers, stronger interaction with policymakers, and greater recognition of engagement work.



Fabrice DeClerck
Chief Science Officer at EAT

From Discussion to Direction: Policy Labs and Collective Action

The policy labs provided a space to translate analysis into concrete directions for action, using participatory methods to surface shared understanding and priorities. Rather than starting from predefined solutions, participants were invited to reflect on what matters most in shaping food environments and where influence can be exercised.

Four cross-cutting insights structured the discussions:

- **Health matters.** Health should be a central priority in food systems, particularly for those with decision-making power.
- **People matter.** Who is at the table, and whose voices are heard, shapes outcomes. Actively seeking out perspectives that are often overlooked is essential for meaningful dialogue.
- **Money matters.** Funding priorities influence what is researched, implemented and who is affected. Co-creation with people and organisations impacted by these choices is crucial.
- **Food democracy matters.** Bottom-up, people-driven processes—supported by civil society and food policy councils—can play a key role in advancing food and health equity.

These discussions highlighted several levers for shifting power dynamics in food environments, including stronger governance and regulation, citizen participation, public procurement as a tool for change, and reframing narratives around food, health and responsibility.

The policy labs were co-created with EAT, CLEVERFOOD, HDHL Food4Health and FEAST.

“The conference felt like a mini-experiment of what HDHL wants to do: building bridges between disciplines, connecting actors, and using our collective intelligence to move towards healthier and more sustainable diets.”



Isabelle Guelinckx

*Executive Director at ILSI Europe;
HDHL Advisory Board*

In the afternoon, using an Open Space Technology approach, participants from diverse backgrounds identified concrete actions and collaborative initiatives to address these levers. Priority areas included healthier and more sustainable school meals, community-based approaches in vulnerable neighbourhoods, more inclusive coordination mechanisms in policymaking, and experimentation through coalitions and joint initiatives. A recurring message was that inclusive processes matter, but that inclusion must be purposeful, transparent and accompanied by clear roles and accountability.

From Discussion to Direction: Policy Labs and Collective Action

The parallel sessions explored how evidence can be translated into action in different contexts. Rather than providing detailed project reports, they focused on implementation challenges, practical lessons and conditions for impact.

Science to Policy: Thinking Beyond Research Projects and Results

Contributors:

Lene Hegelund (Aarhus University)

Anja Skjoldborg Hansen (Aarhus University)

The Science to Policy session addressed the gap between research and policymaking, with a particular focus on the skills researchers need to engage beyond academia. Participants discussed differences between the scientific and policy worlds, including timelines, incentives and communication styles.

Through interactive discussions and a role-play exercise, the session illustrated that strong evidence rarely leads directly to policy change.



Edith Feskens

Vice-Chair of HDHL; Dean of Research & Professor of Global Nutrition at WUR

Instead, impact depends on researchers' ability to translate findings into relevant messages, understand policy processes, and build relationships over time.

A recurring point was that while researchers are increasingly expected to demonstrate societal impact, they receive limited training or institutional support to do so. The session therefore highlighted the need to better recognise and support science-policy engagement within academic careers.

"I was very happy to see so many early-career researchers and students. We had strong discussions about what they need to learn to become scientists in a world where funding is tighter, but expectations for real-world impact are growing."

“We learned a lot about how different people think about food and health. Hearing these different perspectives was really interesting.”

Mirthe van Besauw
Student

Strategies to Tackle Undernutrition in Older Adults

Contributors:

Paula Varela (Nofima & Norwegian University of Life Sciences – EAT4AGE)

Claire McEvoy (Queen’s University Belfast – PROMED-COG)

Francesco Galli (University of Perugia – CHOKO-AGE)

Amedeo Amedei (University of Florence – AMBROSIA)

Claire Sulmont-Rossé (Université Bourgogne Europe, INRAE – FORTIPHY)

Clare Corish (University College Dublin – APPETITE)

This session presented insights from six PREVNUT-funded projects and focused explicitly on implementation and action. Discussions highlighted the complexity of undernutrition in older adults and the limitations of one-size-fits-all solutions.

Participants identified several barriers, including difficulties in reaching diverse target groups, challenges in recruitment and follow-up, and the need to adapt interventions to different life contexts and levels of independence in this older population. At the same time, opportunities were identified around co-creation with older adults, clearer



communication for different audiences, and closer collaboration between research, care practice and policy.

The session reinforced that preventing undernutrition requires flexible, acceptable and scalable approaches, embedded in real-world settings

Food and Health Equity: Addressing Vulnerability in Research and Policy

Contributors:

John Mathers (Newcastle University)

Alba Gil (Association of European Cancer Leagues)

Amelia Lake (Centre for Public Health, Teesside University)

Luc Hageaars (Amsterdam UMC)

The Food and Health Equity session examined how food environments contribute to unequal health outcomes, using the FOODPATH project as a case example. Participants emphasised the limits of approaches that focus primarily on individual behaviour change, especially in contexts where choices are constrained by affordability, access and commercial pressures.

A central theme was the importance of meaningful participation of people affected by food and health inequities.

Lived experience was repeatedly described as a crucial form of knowledge, which should be recognised, supported and linked to concrete policy follow-up.

The session also highlighted the role of commercial determinants of health and the need for strong public leadership to address structural drivers of inequality.



Alba Gil
Senior Policy Officer at Association of European Cancer Leagues

“Food systems are complex. Only by bringing all voices together will we find solutions – and this is exactly what HDHL enables.”

Cross-cutting reflections

Across the parallel sessions, several shared insights emerged:

- Implementation challenges are common across topics and populations.
- Evidence needs to be accompanied by skills, structures and incentives for action.
- Participation and co-creation are essential for relevance and impact.
- Bridging research, policy and practice requires sustained engagement, not one-off projects.

These insights fed directly into the policy labs and closing discussions, reinforcing the conference’s focus on how to move from evidence to action in practice.



Claire Sulmont-Rossé
Researcher at Université
Bourgogne Europe, INRAE

“To face the power of industry or lobbying, we need to work locally but think globally – and HDHL is a good place to do that.”

Conclusion: From Momentum to Meaningful Change

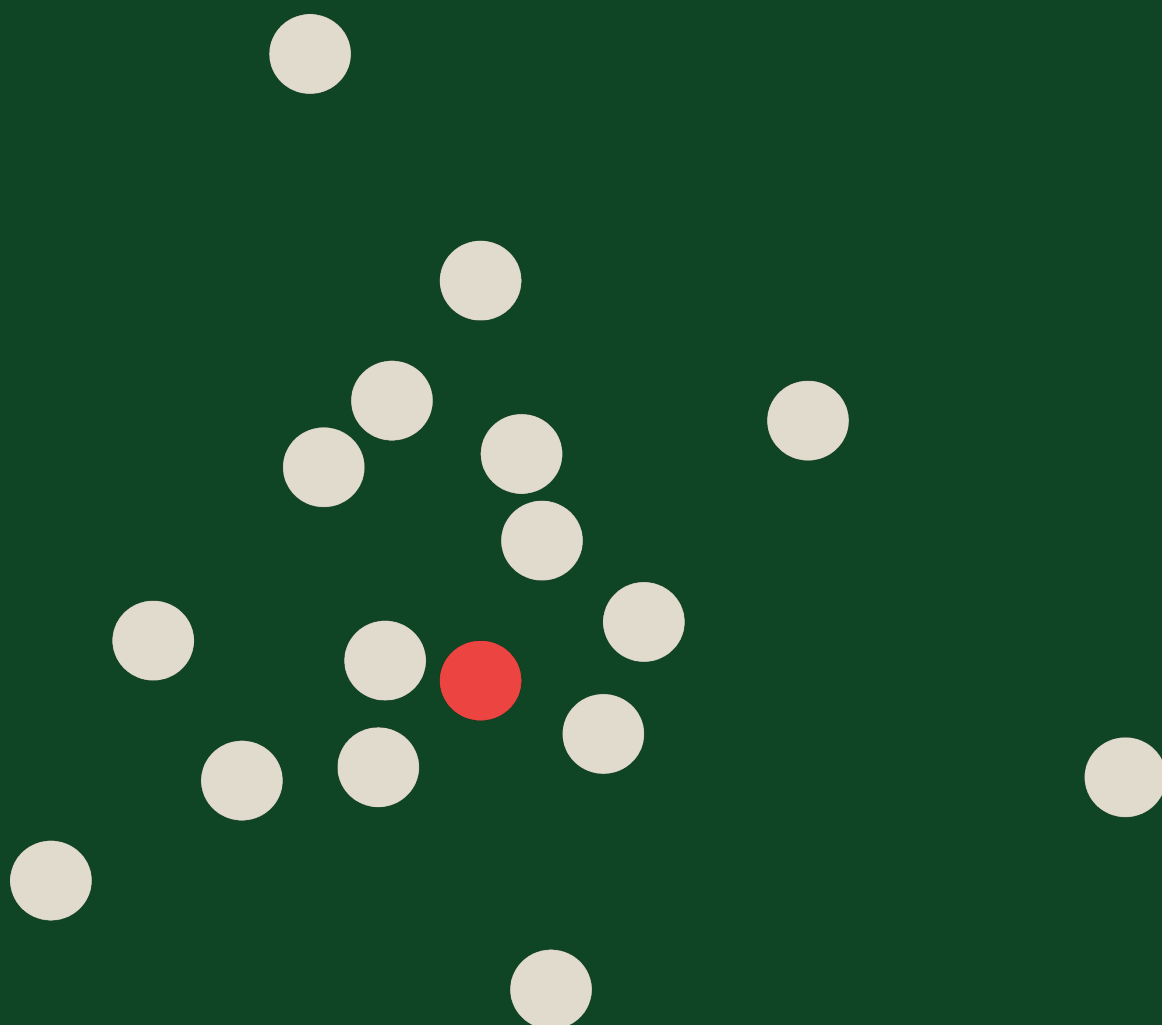
The HDHL Conference 2026 highlighted that the challenge around food environments in Europe is not primarily a lack of evidence, but how evidence is acted upon in complex policy contexts. Addressing power relations and strengthening implementation are essential, and the conference showed that participatory leadership can be an integral approach for bringing actors together, navigating complexity and supporting concrete follow-up.

Discussions underscored that structural change requires moving beyond voluntary industry commitments toward binding regulation, transparency, and accountability. Shifting food environments at scale will depend on clear responsibilities and greater transparency around decision-making and influence.

To see meaningful change, stakeholder voices need to be used and heard. The citizen voice – bringing the lived experience, local insight and implementation expertise – need to be considered in the development and delivery of policies. While we need to consider the whole of society, we urgently need to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups.

By engaging people in an inclusive and participatory way, the conference made it possible to explore food environments as a system, test ideas at a smaller scale and build shared understanding. While this approach requires time and continued effort, it provides a strong foundation for collaboration and meaningful progress.

Overall, this conference reinforced HDHL's role as a platform that connects food, nutrition and health communities, and that creates space for dialogue, critical reflection and joint action across sectors. The task ahead is to turn this momentum into sustained action.



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