

Could economic systems change drive a healthier, sustainable food system?



Fellows from the Hothouse's Future Leaders Program reflect on their experience at the 11th International Degrowth Conference in Oslo and how the consumptogenic system is inhibiting planetary health equity goals

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We would like to acknowledge the contributions of workshop participants at the Conference in Oslo, 2025.

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As researchers, we are trained to follow the evidence, wherever it may lead. When it comes to the food system, the evidence is crystal clear. The commercialisation of food systems has led to an explosion of [diet-related non-communicable diseases](#), the [undermining of working conditions](#), [further intrenchment of food insecurity](#), [destruction of the environment and exacerbation of climate change](#), and the [disconnection of far too many First Nations communities from cultural food practices](#).

Despite this demonstratable state of play, institutions responsible for advancing a healthier, more sustainable food system remain heavily influenced by commercial actors and neoliberal economic norms that foster the status quo of the commercialised food system and undermine [Planetary Health Equity](#) (PHE) goals.

The United Nations Food System Summit

One notable institution is that of the United Nations Food System Summit. The inaugural summit in 2021 aimed to develop "... [bold new actions to deliver progress on all 17 SDGs, each of which relies to some degree on healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems](#)". While an ambitious goal, the Summit was widely criticised due to [procedural failings and lack of grass roots engagement](#).

This year's Summit did little to shift these criticisms.

While the UN Food Systems Summit +4 Stocktake ([UNFSS+4](#)) held in July was set to "...[provide a platform for reflecting on progress, strengthening collaboration, and unlocking finance and investments to accelerate food systems transformation](#)", minimal airtime was given for challenging the systems and structures that are perpetuating the problem.

Rather, while purporting itself to be a place for [global stakeholders across the food system to gather](#) and work in earnest on the challenges facing the future of food around the world, [consumptogenic norms dominated discussions](#). Dr. Stefanos Fotiou, Head of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub, highlighted this challenge in his [own remarks after the Summit](#).

The consumptogenic system

The consumptogenic system is clearly undermining progress in the food system.

"The consumptogenic system is characterised by institutions, policies, business practices, and social norms that embed and entrench principles of extractive capitalism and colonialism"

(Friel, 2022)

From the proliferation of unhealthy products that are high in salt, sugar and saturated fats, to industrial scale land clearing for agricultural purposes undermining climate change goals, the food system must undergo a paradigm shift if it is to meet the demands of the 21st century.

We must move beyond the rhetoric, towards actions that include principles of accountability, and prioritise equity, health and sustainability to ensure [food security](#). And, we must safeguard the fundamental human right to safe and healthy food against corporate capture of policy and regulatory environments.

If consumptogenic norms persist, the intention of the Summit will continue to be unachievable, and the ambition of PHE will go unfulfilled.

What can be done?

In the lead up to the next Conference of the Parties in Belém, Brazil ([COP30](#)), and the [increasing international focus on connections between climate change, health and equity](#), it is crucial to set a more ambitious agenda for food systems reform.

As Future Leaders at the Planetary Health Equity Hothouse (PHEH), we are starting with addressing the economic drivers of the consumptogenic system, and how they impact the ability to reform the food system.

At the [18th Conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics and 11th International Degrowth Conference](#) (the Conference) academics, civil society organizations, youth activist groups, unions, and practitioners working in local, regional and national governments all gathered from around the world to workshop alternative economic paradigms for a healthier, more equitable and more sustainable future.

We held a workshop with conference participants on the main barriers and catalysts to change the current consumptogenic food system towards one that is driven by PHE goals. Participants highlighted that there are many barriers locking us in, including rules of trade; the power of transnational corporations; the spread of industrial agriculture and the dependencies it creates; the weaponization of food in conflicts; and technological advancements that harm the natural world.

Participants also highlighted opportunities that could catalyze change. They noted that while the structural '[engine of inequity](#)' pushes down with injustice, exclusion and unfairness, bottom-up initiatives are connecting actors and building collective demands for change from institutions, food producers and retailers. The formation of cooperatives; sustainable farming

practices; Knowledges of Indigenous Peoples and communities; valuing food and its production in relation to the natural environment; and support from local governments for local projects, all foster economic systems change in food. These initiatives are also [challenging dominant ideas](#) of what constitutes a healthy, nutritious and sustainable diet, opening the way for alternative visions of the food system rooted in justice, culture and ecology.

The wellbeing economy

In the last 10 years, the wellbeing economy has grown in policy discourse, and featured heavily in Oslo as an alternative economic paradigm that could shift consumptogenic norms to improve food systems. The wellbeing economy proposes an [economic system that works for people and planet](#), and rejects the consumptogenic norms that have entrenched planetary health inequities and fostered commercialized food.

While it may sound lofty, the good news is [several countries around the world](#) have committed to embedding this new paradigm into the business of government. Each jurisdiction has undertaken this work differently to account for context, the central tenants of a fairer, more sustainable economy sit at the heart of the policy aspiration.

It's the fundamental shift in prioritisation in the economy – whether that be education, government activities and programs, regulation and social welfare programs – that can have a significant impact on the food system and broader PHE outcomes.

As Future Leaders at the PHEH we remain hopeful that things can change for current and future generations thanks to the leadership of countries working on economic systems change. But action has to start today. We are committed to advocating for systems change in all the venues we have access to as academics and producing research that supports evidence-based policy change, but we need people everywhere to do the same.