

Press release, Bonn, August 21, 2020

Developing an integrated food policy and creating fair food environments

The Scientific Advisory Board on Agricultural Policy, Food and Consumer Health Protection (WBAE) of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) released today its report “Promoting more sustainable food consumption: Developing an integrated food policy and creating fair food environments”. “Achieving key sustainability goals requires a comprehensive transformation of the food system. The current food environment is not conducive to sustainable food consumption” says Harald Grethe, the Board’s chairman. “More decisive policy intervention is required to help consumers make more sustainable food choices.”

The WBAE defines four key dimensions of sustainable food consumption, the “Big Four”: health, social issues, environment and animal welfare. Germany is lagging behind other countries in developing and implementing a food policy that addresses these sustainability goals in a coherent and consistent manner. Current food policies place too much weight on consumers’ own responsibility for sustainable food choices. “Such a low-key approach to policy sends the wrong signal in a complex policy field that is heavily influenced by lobbying activities”, says agricultural economist Achim Spiller. “What is required is a dedicated food and nutrition policy where the government takes a more prominent role.”

The WBAE argues that policy should ensure a fair food and eating environment. The influence of the food environment on consumers’ food choices is often underestimated in the public debate, whereas individual behavioural control is overrated. Health psychologist and co-author Britta Renner emphasises: “Promoting more sustainable food choices across the whole spectrum of society requires a fair framework encompassing provision of solid and comprehensible information, easy access to healthy foods, more food choice options and price incentives which make sustainable choices financially more attractive for the consumer”.

The report shows that the political debate is often dominated by symbolic issues, such as a possible ban of plastic packaging, rather than focusing on key levers to promote sustainable food choices, such as reduced consumption of animal products. Environmental ethicist Lieske Voget-Kleschin stresses: “We need a strategic reorientation and sustainable reinforcement of the entire food policy area to facilitate the necessary transformation of the food system and create a fair food and eating environment for all.”

Based upon an extensive review of the German food system, the Advisory Board derives nine key recommendations for this transformation process:

- 1) **Bring about a system change in day-care and school catering – “Focussing on children and young people”.** The Advisory Board recommends, among other things, to introduce free and high-quality day-care centre and school catering and to launch a federal investment campaign “Best Canteen”.
- 2) **Make consumption of animal products globally compatible – “Less and better”.** Key recommendations in this respect are to abolish the VAT rate concession on animal products and to launch a mandatory climate label for all foodstuffs.
- 3) **Use price incentives – “Prices should tell the truth”.** The Board recommends, inter alia, that the government introduce significant price incentives for a reduction in the consumption of less sustainable products (e.g. by imposing an excise tax on all sugar-sweetened beverages). This is to be achieved in a socially acceptable manner by relieving low-income households of the additional financial burden that comes with this policy.

- 4) **Ensure health-promoting food consumption for all – „Reducing food poverty“.** One of the Board’s key recommendations is to adequately account for the extra costs of health-promoting food in calibrating social security benefits.
- 5) **Provide reliable information – „Enhancing choices“.** Three key recommendations in this respect are to: (1) launch compulsory state labels for the crucial sustainability dimensions of health (“Nutri-Score”), greenhouse gas emissions (“climate label”) and animal welfare, (2) restrict adverts for unhealthy foods targeting children, and (3) develop a "digital ecosystem for more sustainable food consumption".
- 6) **More sustainable food consumption as the „New normal“ – „Calibrating social norms“.** The Board recommends, among other things, that small portion sizes be made available in out-of-home catering, free tap water be provided in public places, and the potential of reformulation be realistically assessed and exploited.
- 7) **Improve services in public institutions – "Making canteen kitchens more sustainable“.** The Advisory Board recommends, inter alia, that food consumption in nursing homes, hospitals and rehabilitation centres should not be viewed solely from a supply perspective. Rather, high dietary quality standards and a fair food environment must be ensured (e.g. through mandatory quality standards).
- 8) **Develop and label agricultural systems – "Organic and more“.** Key recommendations of the Board are to advance the promotion of organic farming and to develop more sustainable farming systems and make them recognisable to processors and consumers.
- 9) **Strengthen and advance the policy field „More sustainable food consumption“ – „Establishing an integrated food policy“.** The Board recommends a comprehensive reorientation and strengthening of food policies that integrate the four sustainability dimensions. This requires, among other things, enhanced collaboration of the responsible ministries (in particular: food and agriculture, health, environment) and coordination among the different levels of government (from municipalities all the way to the EU) as well as an expansion of personnel capacity and budgets.

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Further information about the report:

Download: <http://www.bmel.de/DE/Ministerium/Organisation/Beiraete/Texte/AgrOrganisation.html>
 (Executive Summary (in English) and full report (in German))
 Website: <http://www.nachhaltigere-ernaehrung-gutachten.de>

Save the date: Public presentation of the report (digital form, german language)

When: September 8, 2020, 10 to 11:30 am. Registration via
https://uni-goettingen.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_uvgxpANRFyC_zyUO1eY7Q

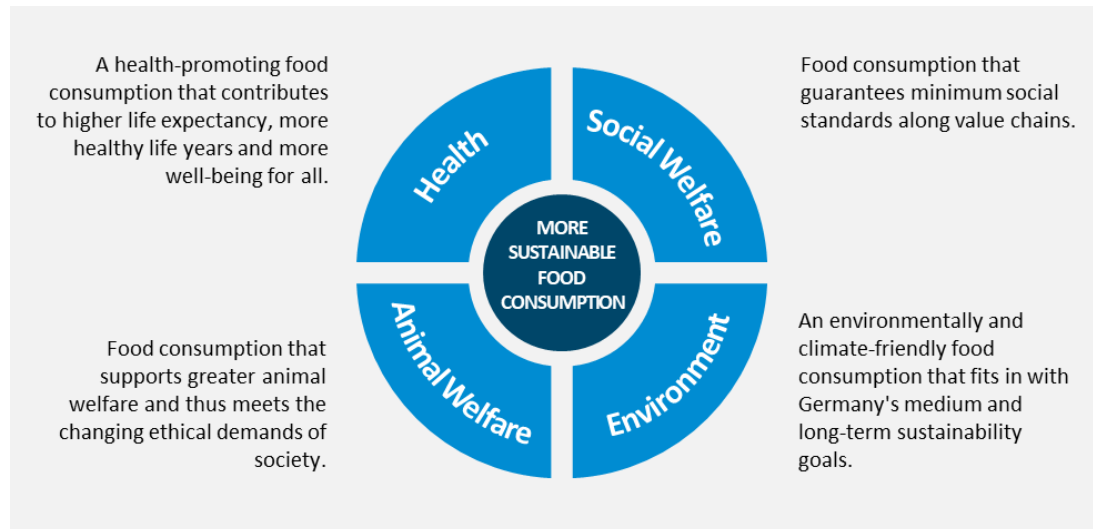
Information about the WBAE: The Scientific Advisory Board on Agricultural Policy, Food and Consumer Health Protection (WBAE) supports the German Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) in the development of its policies in these fields. The Board is interdisciplinary in its composition and works independently and on an honorary basis.

<https://www.bmel.de/DE/ministerium/organisation/beiraete/agr-organisation.html>

Annex: Key figures of the WBAE report

The following figures are available in printable resolution on the website of the report: www.nachhaltigere-ernaehrung-gutachten.de.

Figure: The four key goals of a more sustainable food consumption ("Big Four")



Source: WBAE (2020).

Figure: Nine key recommendations for an integrated policy for more sustainable food consumption



Source: WBAE (2020).