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Development of voluntary guidelines for the sustainability of the Mediterranean diet in the Mediterranean region



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**Development of voluntary
guidelines for the
sustainability of the
Mediterranean diet in the
Mediterranean region**

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Making the Mediterranean diet the preferred option? Possible contributions of the food environment

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There is, generally speaking, a broad consensus on the health and nutritional value of the Mediterranean diet (MD), as well as on its socio-cultural importance as acknowledged by UNESCO in 2010 when the MD was recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Bach-Faig *et al.*, 2011). There is also some evidence of its contribution to sustainability – in all its forms – although more work needs to be done to generate more solid and context-specific evidence (FAO, 2015). In spite of all this, and as rising obesity levels in the region point to, people today no longer adhere to the MD as in past decades, thus leading to a progressive erosion of the MD. The question then – as highlighted in the 2016 *Call for Action for the Revitalization of the MD* – is: how to revitalize the MD in such a way as to make sure that it also contributes to the sustainability of the food systems it draws upon? In other words, what is needed is a new revitalized MD that would be beneficial not only for health and nutrition, but also for environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability.

In a quest to move towards this objective, a series of methodological approaches and indicators were developed by CIHEAM, FAO and other scientific experts belonging to Mediterranean institutions (FAO/CIHEAM, 2012; CIHEAM/FAO, 2015). More recently, a reviewed methodological framework – the Med Diet 4.0 – was developed together with a more succinct set of indicators with the specific aim of “playing a very important educational and communication role towards the revitalization of the MD” (Dernini *et al.*, 2016).

As a complement to the above efforts, and with an aim of identifying areas of action/policy that would make it easier for Mediterranean people to make the MD the “diet of choice”, the food environment concept can provide a useful framework. The term was coined at the beginning of the 2010s to illustrate the importance of complementing educational efforts with actions aimed at changing the underlying material and immaterial determinants of healthy eating. Although there is no one agreed-upon definition of food environments, overall we can say that food environments are made up of the foods that are available, affordable and acceptable to people in their surroundings (IFPRI, 2015; Swinburn *et al.*, 2013). Translated into policy terms, which are those areas where policy action is needed to make healthier foods more available, affordable and acceptable? At the international level, among academics

and practitioners, there is a consensus on the core policy domains where action is needed to foster a healthier food environment: (i) nutrition labelling; (ii) food provisioning (or food offered in specific settings, such as schools); (iii) economic incentives/disincentives; (iv) food composition (or nutritional quality of foods produced by food processors); (v) food promotion (advertising and marketing); (vi) food retailing; and (vii) agriculture and food systems (Swinburn *et al.*, 2013; Hawkes, Jewell and Allen, 2013; IFPRI, 2015). Some policy frameworks – such as the NOURISHING framework – also include communication and education as key complementary areas of work.

Examples exist, for each of these policy areas, of actions taken by governments and other stakeholders worldwide to create an environment conducive to healthy eating. Some of these include national stop-light nutrition labels for highly-processed sugary products (e.g. Chile), public procurement of local foods in schools (e.g. Italy, Brazil), restrictions on specific food advertisements during children’s TV time (e.g. United Kingdom), taxes on sugary beverages (e.g. Mexico and some states in the United States of America) and actions in the realm of food retailing, such as fast-food zoning and the promotion of farmers’ markets. Similar actions could also be promoted systematically (rather than piecemeal, as is the case today) in Mediterranean countries with the specific aim of revitalizing a dwindling MD. While some actions have already been taken – such as actions related to school feeding or retailing – and are being called for in the context of a sustainable MD (Hachem *et al.*, 2015), the novelty could be that of providing a framework that can better help to identify and design a multipronged action. A missing element today is the sustainability aspect, which could be taken from the work done so far (described above) on identifying suitable sustainability indicators.

Not only can food environments help shape a “renewed” MD, but because the MD is so embedded in the culture of the Mediterranean people, so can the local food culture – that persists in spite of globalization – help construct healthier food environments. In other words, the socio-cultural determinants of the MD constitute a good foundation on which to rebuild – possibly even in a revised version – a healthier diet: a source of renewal upon which many other countries and regions facing similar challenges in terms of unhealthy dietary patterns may not have the possibility to draw.

From a governance standpoint, recognizing the different levels at which decisions and policies around food are taken and made (Lang, Barling and Caraher, 2009), what would be the role of local administrators in helping refashion the MD? Certainly that of assessing and monitoring local food environments, promoting the integration of policies from below, and helping rebalance local and global food systems (Brunori *et al.*, 2016). Observing the trajectories and experiences of food policy councils also hints at the role of local level administrators in promoting food narratives based on local culture and that of encouraging a “reflexive” localism by spurring local deliberations on food. By using the food environment framework, multiple stakeholders can thus come together to identify which actions would be the most appropriate to ensure that the food associated with the MD becomes more available, affordable and desirable, and that it does so in a sustainable manner.

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