



Annual Dairy Council for Northern Ireland Lecture 2024

Where does Food Processing Fit in Healthy and Sustainable Diets

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A sustainable food system should deliver food and nutrition security for all while ensuring that the economic, social, and environmental means of generating food and nutrition security are not compromised for today's society and future generations. Current food systems do not meet the economic, social and environmental bases needed to generate food security and nutrition for all and face urgent and complex challenges, both locally and globally. One in ten people are undernourished, one in four are overweight and more than one third of the world's population cannot afford a healthy diet. Food supplies are disrupted by heatwaves, floods, droughts and conflict. The global food sector emits about 30% of the world's greenhouse gases, significantly impacting planetary health. Poor farming practices degrade soils, pollute and deplete water supplies and lower biodiversity locally and globally. There is therefore widespread agreement, further reinforced by thought leaders attending the United Nations Food System Summit in October 2021, that radical transformation of our food system is needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

Whilst sustainability is driving change, there is perhaps a competing challenge of addressing how food processing is used in our food systems. As we transition to a more sustainable diet, that is good for our planet and our population we also need to make sure this is safe, accessible and affordable. Food processing will inevitably play a role in this. However, in recent years, food processing and its impact on health has come under scrutiny. Much work has focused on understanding the link between diet quality and environmental impact; however, it is also important to consider the role that food processing plays in this relationship. As we support the transition towards sustainable and plant-rich diets, the role of food processing will become more evident. It is crucial to understand how food processing can be used optimally to contribute to a balanced, nutritious, and sustainable diet.

The recently funded Co-Centre for Sustainable Food Systems aims to consider what we need to change and provide solutions from farm to fork that will support the required transition to healthier diets from sustainable sources. To ensure everyone has access to sustainable, fair and healthy foods we require innovative and joined up approaches across disciplines. Using a complete food systems approach, from soil to society, the Co-Centre will conduct translational research spanning food production to public health. It will develop innovative and transformative solutions to transition our food systems to ensure safe nutritious food for all. In doing so, the Co-Centre will deliver solutions to support our future food systems.