

Connecting food-related well-being and social sustainability towards achieving sustainable food diets

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Abstract

This paper proposes a reflection on sustainable diets and (forced) migration by rooting sustainable diets in the context of social sustainability to which food-related well-being is proposed as a central feature; we do so by analyzing the food and dietary practices of Syrian refugees in Stuttgart, Germany as a case study.

Migration has always been a feature of human beings' life, but recently the dramatic eviction of people from their country of origin has occurred as a result of the spread of political and ethnic armed conflicts across different countries and their underlying causes of climate change (Abel et al., 2019). According to a recent report on food and migration (MacroGeo & BCFN, 2017), food systems constitute a part of the push and pull factors of migration. Indeed, recent major migratory movements have resulted from a turmoil in the traditional food systems, due to "climate change and droughts (Sahelian countries in the 1970s), inadequate food policies (Ethiopia in the 1980s), controversial trade agreements (West African countries since 1990s)", or armed conflicts and their implication on food availability and accessibility (Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya since 2010s). In the destination countries, usually the developed ones, the lack of labor in agro-food sectors has acted as a pull factor for those migrants and facilitated the exploitation of intensive workers (MacroGeo & BCFN, 2017). If we look at the migration flows that invaded Europe in the past five years, we cannot help but notice that, though losing its emergency trait and destined to stabilize, migration will stay as a feature of our contemporary society. After arriving in a new country, migrants have to adapt to different lifestyles and are confronted with a variety of economic and social adversities, which results in psychological discomfort and stress. This process is usually much more challenging for asylum seekers and refugees due to a great deal of uncertainty they experience and the post-traumatic stress and emotional problems resulting from loss of family and social support (Carswell et al., 2011; Rosenblum & Tichenor, 2012). Recently, food turns out to play a substantial role in fostering or blocking integration processes, as the link between migration and food is much more profound than one might think. Migrants are often coopted into different (unsustainable) diets, based on Western food products with the whole range of health-related and environmental issues these bring forth. Unfortunately, the present food system which is supposed to nurture human health and anchor environmental sustainability are currently threatening both people and the environment (Willett et al., 2019). Lately, efforts are being made to transform the food systems into sustainable, diverse and inclusive ones. In order to reshape the food system towards sustainability, and in a way that ensures a better quality of life for all, we must include all the constituents of the society; the impoverished, the minorities and the migrants. By including them and understanding their food-related well-being, effective strategies and interventions that impose drastic changes in consumption patterns towards healthy eating and healthy planet can be defined. Achieving this requires a shift in the focus from "feeding people" to "enabling people to nourish themselves" (Haddad et al., 2016); i.e. empowering them to make informed and autonomous food choices in a way that ensure sustainability.

In this paper, we pose the following question: How should sustainable diets be understood in complex contexts like the one experienced by refugees and enacted by people in a foreign and often hostile context, far from home and habits? We argue that a reconfiguration of the food system needs a better understanding of the relationship between food-related well-being and sustainability. The latter consists of environmental sustainability which is strongly affected by the current and the future food systems, and the socio-economic dimension which could be arguably represented by the concept of well-being (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). In this context, the well-being represents the “livability of the environment”, more precisely the objective conditions that make people happy and the intangible needs that enable them to achieve their potentialities (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). Therefore, we root our reflection about sustainable diets and migrants in the context of the third pillar of sustainability, i.e., social sustainability. We argue that the concept of food-related well-being is useful to understand the intangible food-related needs of refugees, such as integration, contribution (participation), acceptance (cultural values and openness), actualization (dignity and equity) and coherence. However, meeting these needs might be very challenging in the case of migration and the current failure of the food system. Moreover, we argue that understanding the food-related well-being of refugees and their social sustainability will enable the design of better programs that empower them to make informed food choices that are sustainable and to participate in reshaping the food system. Lately, all the efforts to change what people eat ended up being controversial, and some delivered diminishing returns in terms of health, employment and destroying cultural heritage (Carlisle & Hanlon, 2014; Mullens & Sche, 2019). The failure of these interventions could be understood by their inability to overcome multiple challenges, such as nutritionism, economism, consumerism and individualism. Hence, the achievement of a “healthy and sustainable diet” within the current social, economic and cultural system requires a holistic change to reshape the current system (Carlisle & Hanlon, 2014).

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