

UN FSS Science Group “True cost of food” paper

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In June, the UN Food Systems Summit Science Group published a paper on the “True Cost of Food.” Several Action Tracks and game-changers reference the True Cost of Food as a method to ensure that food is healthy, sustainable, and affordable to all. A draft copy of the UN Secretary General’s remarks for the UN FSS, also notes the importance of accounting for this concept. The premise is that one of the most challenging problems in the food system is that the costs of “harmful foods” are externalized, i.e. are not reflected in market prices while the benefits of healthy foods are not captured. Due to this, healthy food is less sustainable and affordable than unhealthy foods.

There are many concerns with this paper, its methods, and its conclusions. The methodology and scientific evidence to support the paper’s sweeping claims are not clear, yet the “true cost of food” features prominently in the draft outline discussed above and in multiple game changers. Drawing from a small set of academic papers selected by the group, the authors conclude that accounting for externalities they deem negative should make food at least 33% more expensive.

The paper relies heavily on the 2019 EAT-Lancet Report (EAT is a privately-funded NGO that supports plant-based diets) and on previous research by EAT-Lancet authors, despite admitting the EAT-Lancet reference diet did not “consider differences in protein quality and nutrient bioavailability” (pg 19). The paper repeatedly demonizes specific foods and nutrients (e.g., animal-source foods, fat, sugar), which is not consistent with many national and international dietary guidelines, nor with evidence on building and maintaining overall balanced diets. While admitting that organic production can result in higher greenhouse gas emissions, the paper elevates “agroecological systems” (e.g., pg 7) and organic production (e.g., pg 37) over modern agriculture.

Overview

True Cost of Food paper (note that one of the principal authors and member of the Science Group is... the director of the [NGO](#) that is most prominently associated with “True Cost Accounting”). The paper concludes that:

- “Food is roughly a third cheaper” than it would be if externalities were included in market pricing. **Essentially, the paper recommends that food should cost at least 1/3 more.**
 - o “Current externalities were estimated to be almost double (19.8 trillion USD) the current total global food consumption (9 trillion USD). These externalities accrue from seven trillion USD (range 4-11) in environmental costs, 11 trillion USD (range 3-39) in costs to human life and one trillion USD (range 0.2-1.7) in economic costs.”
- Preferences “agroecological systems” and organic production over modern agriculture
- Includes multiple negative references to “harmful non-nutritive sweeteners”, refined grains, and processed meats
- Includes multiple negative references to livestock production and consuming animal-source foods

