



## Healthy Diet, Healthy Life (HDHL) position paper

### Fragmentation in sustainable food systems - Is health being left behind in the dialogue?

**The current food system urgently needs radical transformation** to address health inequity, food insecurity, and diet-related diseases while preserving the planet's health (IPES-Food, 2019; Fanzo et al., 2022). **Fragmentation in research and policy and in actions in food and health hinder successful transformation.** Healthy Diet, Healthy Life (HDHL) can bridge the gap by bringing together food and health and drive system-wide change towards a safe, sufficient, nutritious, and affordable food system for all, that also protects and enhances the environment.

**Long-term governmental policies** in Europe and globally **prioritize highly integrated and economically efficient food systems, but often overlook the negative impacts on planetary and human health.** Despite recognizing the unsustainability of the current food systems and the urgent need for transformation, efforts have been fragmented across multiple entities and disciplines. This disconnect is observed at various levels, including policy, research, education, and institutional structures.

The European Environment Agency (EEA) report (2022) emphasizes the importance of consolidating interactions among all food system actors through a strategic and coherent approach to limit fragmentation. However, a significant gap remains between policies addressing food system and environmental issues and those focused on human health, a crucial indicator of global sustainable development. This gap signifies a **lack of effective connections between research and policy actors concerned with the food systems and those responsible for human health.**

To achieve equitable food and nutrition security and optimal health, a **"whole-of-government" and "whole-of-society" systems approach is needed** (HLPE, 2017). This requires breaking down silos and fostering collaboration across sectors and levels. Managing interactions between different actors, finding trade-offs, and addressing neglected areas are crucial for equitable progress. It also requires a comprehensive and holistic approach to overcome obstacles and achieve high-level objectives, as demonstrated by the SCAR portfolio analysis conducted by Scaramuzzi et al. (2023).

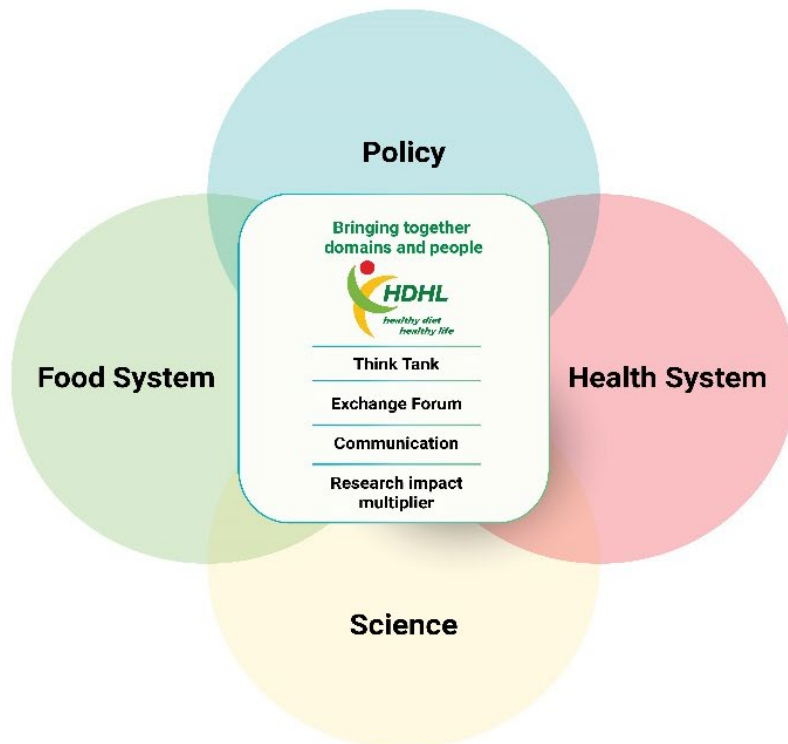
The EU Horizon Europe work programme has introduced new instruments called **EU Partnerships**, aimed at facilitating co-programming and co-financing among the Commission, Member States, and other partners, spanning various thematic clusters. **Two partnerships specifically address food, nutrition, and health: ERA4Health** focusing on public health, nutrition, and lifestyle-related diseases, and the **Sustainable Food Systems (SFS) Partnership** targeting changes in the way we eat, process, supply food, connect with food systems and govern food systems. While these partnerships represent progress, they were designed to avoid overlap, inadvertently maintaining a gap between research and policy actors responsible for food systems and those responsible for human health. For instance, the SFS partnership involves predominantly food-oriented funders and ministries, while the ERA4Health partnership involves mostly health-oriented counterparts. **This siloed model contradicts policy intentions and poses implementation challenges at various levels:**

- **Policy and Governance:** Inadequate coordination and integration between health and food sector policies and governance structures hinder the development of cohesive strategies addressing the interdependencies of food, nutrition and health.
- **Research and Innovation:** Although the nutrition community has a leadership role to play, limited collaboration and knowledge-sharing between health and food research communities hampers comprehensive research that bridges gaps in sustainable food systems (Fanzo et al. 2022). Multidisciplinary expertise and a systemic approach are essential to address complex issues effectively. Additionally, the recognised underinvestment in nutrition and public health research within the food and health domains underscores the need to strengthen national research investments through an international programmed approach (SCAR, 2018; DG RTD, 2023).
- **Education and Communication:** Empowering individuals to make healthy and sustainable food choices is crucial for food systems transformation. However, fragmentation in educational initiatives and communication efforts, along with a disconnect between health professionals, food industry stakeholders, and the public, impedes the dissemination of accurate, accessible, and actionable information on sustainable diets, nutrition, and health impacts.

These observations highlight the **urgent need for a paradigm shift in political and societal organization**. Improving policy coherence, enhancing collaboration in research and innovation, and implementing effective education and communication are essential to address the fragmentation issues between the health and food sectors and to achieve sustainable food systems.

**The Joint Programming Initiative “A Healthy Diet for a Health Life” (HDHL) was set up 13 years ago to bridge the gap between food systems-related research and nutrition and human health research, align research done at country-level and minimise duplication of research effort in Europe.** Since then, HDHL has been successful in nurturing interdisciplinary research consortia and in addressing major research questions that fall into this research and policy gap. Furthermore, it has contributed to empowering citizens indirectly and to increasing stakeholder engagement, awareness, knowledge, and decision-making for healthier and sustainable food choices. This successful track record combined with the extensive network of researchers, research funders, policy-makers, industrial partners and societal actors who have benefitted from HDHL-supported research, puts HDHL in a key position to **continue addressing the ongoing fragmentation** between research and policy actors and actions and to **bridge the gap both between SFS and ERA4Health, adding value to the partnerships and beyond.** We propose to do this through four major activity areas including **i) a think tank ii) an exchange forum, iii) facilitating communication between food and health and iv) a research impact multiplier (figure 1).** Through this new work programme, HDHL will play a key role in bridging the gap and bringing together food and health and continue to make a unique contribution to delivering transformation of the food system. With this in mind, it is clear that the need for the Healthy Diet, Healthy Life initiative is, if anything, at least just as big as it was 13 years ago.

**Figure 1 – HDHL Positioning. Bringing together domains and people.**



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