

Better Diets for All

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”In a way,” says Corinna Hawkes, “the multinational food industry is providing solutions for women.”

Her point is that demonising industrial food, for example, ignores the realities of life, that choosing to feed your family instant noodles may actually be a sensible choice under some circumstances. The failure of policy-makers to take account of lived experience is probably why diets remain inadequate, unhealthy, unsustainable, and unequal.

We talked about her recent paper, boldly titled *The full picture of people’s realities must be considered to deliver better diets for all*.

Corinna: I got into this because, for a couple of reasons. One was because I was doing a lot of work on food environment policies — restricting marketing to kids, taxes, nutrition labelling, school meals programmes — and wanting to understand how they could have more impact. The other aspect was just like we need to ... was from a food environments perspective, and I was convinced it was all about like, if we got the food environment policy sorted, it was going to solve the problem. Just take the unhealthy food away, it’s fine.

But then you realise that when you are doing that, you are actually, in a strange way, undermining women’s agency because they’ve no longer got a choice to choose something that’s convenient, that helps solve other problems, like energy poverty. So in a way, the multinational food industry is providing solutions for women. And so we have to think, okay, what ... let’s embrace that complexity rather than just saying this is just a single cause and it’s evil, let’s actually embrace that complexity and see what we need to work with in order to make change.

Jeremy: In your paper, you say that despite all the policies and interventions and initiatives, most people still are not eating according to government-approved guidelines. But why is that?

Corinna: There are many different elements that influence what people eat, and collectively they are not aligned to help people eat

well. Well, the starting point of the paper, the starting point of the ideas that went into the paper, was that the reason for that was because we live in an unhealthy food environment in which the ... When we're walking down the street or whatever we're doing, we're not surrounded by foods that help us be healthy. But what we discovered through the research that I was doing at that time was that it's really an interaction between a whole range of different realities of people's lives. So I can live in the same food environment as somebody else and interact with it in a different way, depending on how much money I have, what kind of material resources, what my health is like, what my mental health is like, the kind of social relations that I have, whether there's gender equity. There's so many different elements that shape what we eat. And we as a world haven't taken that seriously. We just think that somehow people just decide what they eat. That's not the reality of how people make decisions about what to eat.

Jeremy: So if you take an example like, oh, I don't know, ultra-processed food or convenience foods, there does seem to be more evidence than ever that they're not really very good for us, but people choose them nevertheless. And that's despite even ... I mean, there's not much advice to avoid them yet, but people choose them for good reasons.

Corinna: That's right. I mean, the really important finding of the work that we were doing at that time was that it's actually very logical to choose ultra-processed foods. And sensible. We were doing some work in South Africa, in really low income communities. And in those communities, people are living in very difficult housing, tiny little places that are very vulnerable and — shacks really, to be absolutely honest. And if you are in that circumstance and you're ... you've got someone saying, yes, you should cook a really nice meal with lots of vegetables and so on. Well, yes. You know, actually that that's what you want to do, but then you have instant noodles and you think, I'm going to save money on energy — and by the way, my energy supply is completely unreliable — so I can make myself and my kids instant noodles. Or I can put on a dodgy gas stove which might not even be reliable, and prepare some food. It's actually very logical and it's also safer. These are places where gas means that if something sets alight, the whole place burns down and then you have no home. So why not eat instant noodles? It's sensible. It makes sense.

Jeremy: But that's also true ... people are also eating instant noodles in countries where their houses are not going to burn down, their energy supply is OK.

Corinna: There's always many different realities, and one of them is time and labor. So in many industrialised countries, women, because it is still typically women, often work a lot of jobs And they're often low pay jobs. So they have to work a lot of them. And if they're living in households where there's gender inequity, where they're still responsible for feeding their kids, and when they come back from a busy day, it's the middle of the night or whatever it is when their shift finishes, or where they have to leave food out for their kids. Well, of course, ultra-processed food is convenient and packaged. And another circumstance, you might have lots of time, you might not even be working, but you might experience mental health problems — we live in a difficult world — and find it really difficult to cope with all of the different aspects of our lives. And the idea of then preparing food just becomes too much. Or you may be having a sense of identity as a mother where you say, I want to be a good mother, so I'm going to make my kids some nice food, and then the child doesn't like the food. And so you feel like a bad mother because you're feeding your kids some bad food. So you say, I'm going to feed my kid the food that they like. And as a mother, I am doing the right thing by feeding my children the food that they like. So there's just so many reasons that drive people towards ultra-processed foods. And because we are treating people as atomised individuals with responsibility for feeding their children, rather than it being a social project, that we should help the world, you know, whether it's children, ourselves or whatever (it's not only about children) eat better, and that collectively we need to be saying, how in the world can we help us all eat better, as opposed to that individual should be doing better to feed their children? Very judgmental. We need to get away from that.

Jeremy: That's an incredible observation that actually, if you're dealing with a difficult toddler, the food industry's got you covered because they know how to make stuff that even toddlers will like.

Corinna: They know how to make things that toddlers will like. And they also understand what it's ... how hard it is to be a parent. And they understand that if you are finding it difficult to be a parent and you go into a place that's selling these foods, they understand the psychology so that they say they know that mothers want to have a

bonding moment with their child, and you're more likely to have a bonding moment over something that a child immediately brings a smile to their face rather than a carrot. It's just, they know that. And so what happens is they exploit them. They don't say, you know what? We get that, but it's not really right. How do we create bonding moments over food that's really going to help kids be healthy, help families be healthy? They say we're going to exploit that. And because we can and there is a need, there is an emotional need, and we will exploit that. And even though they might not use that term and they might just say we're just giving people what they want, it's kind of weird because they are giving people what they want, and they're also exploiting them at the same time. So it's not simple. It's quite a complex picture.

Jeremy: But when the toddler gets older and goes to school, that's when they sort of have less choice over what they're going to eat. And that's an opportunity maybe — maybe — to step in and say, okay, when you're at school, at least once a day, you're going to eat healthy. So why don't school feeding programmes work so well?

Corinna: They can work well. And I think there's a lot of evidence that they should be in place, but they don't work well when they don't take into account children's realities. So if they say, I know I've got a great idea, I'm going to put healthy food and I'm going to just change the menu and put ... They don't take into account that children might not be accustomed to that food, especially if you're from a more marginalised, more vulnerable family, where you haven't been exposed to healthy foods so much. Then you've got this food on the table and you're like, I don't like it. And so people ... The kids haven't got accustomed to it, so it takes time. So that means that you have to do extra measures to help kids learn how to like it.

But the other key element here is the social element. If you're with other kids who are laughing at you for eating that food as opposed to being with you, then you're not going to do it. If you're in a social space that is unpleasant, that you don't want to be in, and you're a teenager, you're just going to leave the school, and all over the world, whether it be India or the UK or whatever, and you find that unhealthy food grows up around the school. And what happens is that the kids say, I want to take some autonomy. I want to enjoy time with my friends. I'm going to exert my identity by going out and showing that I'm independent and going and buying this unhealthy food, as

opposed to eating the potentially healthy food in schools. Or the food in schools just tastes terrible, and nobody's modeling it. Teachers disown it. You know, they're not interested in it. So what the evidence says is very clear, that you can design a school meal programme with kids co-created with kids and young people, put it in a nice environment, make it socially acceptable. It works. If you don't, it doesn't work.

Jeremy: But there may well be a problem then, with some kids who are having to pay for their meals because their parents are relatively well off, and others who are getting free meals, and there's a stigma associated with that.

Corinna: Yeah, certainly in Western contexts that's very widespread. I can't talk for all contexts, but certainly in Western contexts. And so this is again understanding the reality of social relations that you can say, right, okay, we're going to give the kids ... it's, we're just going to see it as purely as an economic thing. So there's a narrative. It's all about food prices. Food prices is incredibly important. But you can make something free for someone and if you don't take into account social relations, then you're missing this picture, which is that it's stigmatised. It's like, oh, they're the free — it was like this when I was at school — they're the kind of kids with the free school meals. And then if you're in that free school meals place, you're like, I don't want to be here. I'm not going to go and get that meal. And then overall, there is a sense that, you know, these are not meals that are desirable. So the point is that when you're designing an intervention and a policy, you need to take into account all of these different elements; the quality of the food, yes. Create access. But if you only make healthy food accessible, it's not enough. If you only make it affordable, it's not enough. You need to think about the social aspects. You need to think about the identity aspects, the meaning, all of these different things.

Jeremy: So the kids, the kids who are getting free meals and don't want free meals, in a way that kind of relates to the people who probably can't afford it, but see processed food as modern and upper class, maybe higher status.

Corinna: This is particularly the case in lower and middle income countries where new foods, new processed foods have come in and are seen as modern and desirable because they upset the the

standard social, very often very hierarchical, social relations. Now, I'm not saying that that isn't the case in Western cultures. I'm saying that, and the combination of these new foods coming in, which have been around in other places for a longer time. And so in places like India, for example, and many Asian countries, the new foods come in and you think, I want to be modern, I want to identify with the future and this is my future. Going back to, you know, adobo or, you know, kind of fish or whatever, like rice. That's the past. And for some people who are living in more impoverished circumstances, that past is associated with hunger. So even though the food might have been healthy, there wasn't enough of it — healthier — there wasn't enough of it. So you might have had rice, you might have had, you know, protein if you were lucky, you know, a bit of vegetables and you didn't have enough. So you when you think about the future, you think ... you want to associate with having enough food. And then what happens again is that the modern food industry understands that. And they come in with advertising, and they advertise these foods in a way that says, if you want to be modern, if you want to aspire to be better — which everybody does, we all do — eat these foods. And so it's a combination of something that's really genuine in people about wanting something better, a frustration with perhaps kind of very structured social relations but particularly gender inequities and where young people are kind of kept down, with the advertising companies coming in. So it's this combination of things that then flip people, and then we see dietary change as a result of that.

Jeremy: When you consider people who are growing their own food ... I mean, there's been a lot of noise over the past decade or so about so-called nutrition-sensitive agriculture, which is persuading people to grow more nutritionally interesting things rather than what they were growing before. That seems like a good idea. Does that work?

Corinna: Well, look, everything can work. It all depends on whether you take people's daily realities into account. So that's a really good example of how absolutely it makes intuitive sense. People are growing, just growing too many staple foods. And that's an important part of the diet. But it's not diverse enough. We know that dietary diversity is associated with good nutrition. The science is very clear on that. So how do we improve nutrition diversity for these really low income families? Let's do nutrition-sensitive agriculture, have them grow more nutritious foods. But if you do that without taking

into account social relations, in particular gender relations, in these contexts, you wouldn't be successful because it's the women who feed themselves, feed their families and feed their children. And it is women who are often responsible for growing foods for the family. So if you say, okay, get families growing, growing this, this food, and you don't take into account the labour demand of what is required. And women are running around doing a hundred and one other things, then it's just not going to be successful. But if you're encouraging women to grow in order to generate income, in other words, they have to sell at markets in order to generate income, and it is men who control the income, then you end up with a situation where women are still having to do the work, but then men take the income and that doesn't improve the nutrition at all.

Jeremy: Coming away from poverty in a way, people in rich countries, rich people, are also not eating as well as they might. And one of the great examples in the paper is about trying to reduce the consumption of meat, especially red meat. You'd think that would be ... I mean, once people agree to it ... that would be a kind of easy one, Meatless Mondays, whatever it might be. But even that doesn't work on a kind of institutional level.

Corinna: And that, again, I mean, there's a range of reasons for that, but that comes back to the identity and meaning that we associate with food. And meat is a high status food in pretty much ... not every culture, but in many cultures. And in the example that I give in the paper, it's an example which is a well-reported, well-evidenced association between masculinity and meat, in this case in the military, in the armed forces. But it could be any situation where masculinity is important and where taking away meat was viewed as, but hang on, you know, I associate that with being masculine, with being strong, and you're taking it away from me. And you're basically saying, I'm taking that away from you, and that's taking away someone's masculinity. And you're also taking away, in this case, the idea of a comfort food that people really enjoy. So people have these very strong senses of associations with food, and that's fine. That's reasonable. Again, it's not this, oh, these stupid people, they don't understand that meat is damaging the planet. It's let's understand why people are coming from, you know, why is this? Why is this? And actually, if you work with that, you probably can work with communities to move them away from meat. It's perfectly possible. And you should do that because the fact is, high meat consuming populations, it's neither healthy nor good for

the planet. And but let's not do it in a patronizing way. Let's understand where people are coming from and see how we can work with that.

Jeremy: You list in the paper, you and your colleagues list twelve different things that you ought to consider in developing food policy. That that's a lot of things to consider. But I mean, do you have any advice for policy makers? Are they supposed to consider all twelve or can they focus on one or two? How does that work?

Corinna: Yeah. You can't focus on twelve. It's too many. It's unrealistic. So what we try, and the point that we make in the paper, is actually a process of prioritization that will vary between contexts. And so, we were talking about gender earlier, in certain contexts, you'd say look I'm putting this policy into place. If I don't take into account gender relations, I'm really, really not going to have much impact. So it's just going to be inefficient to do it. So if I want something, if I want to get bang for my buck, I just need to take this into account. Now there's all of these other things around here too, but in this context, they're just not as important. The idea is that you step into people's shoes. So in the work that we were doing in other publications, we were tracing the daily lives of people. So if as a policy maker, you remove yourself from it's just because they can't cook, they're just not educated or it's just that, you know, the food prices or whatever, and you actually try and stand in someone else's shoes and you might actually begin to understand what the issues are. So that's really what we're saying. And then you can think, in this community, in this place, these are the areas that are really we really need to focus on.

Jeremy: The big problem with that is that every community, every situation is different. And all you hear from people in big policy think tanks and whatever is: it has to work at scale. If you want it to work at scale, you can't take account of communities.

Corinna: The question that you raise is one that I struggle with. I mean, I began and I worked for many years on national policies, and that's, as I said earlier, that was my entry point in the sense that, like, no one should have exposure to junk food marketing and so on. And I still adhere to that. So what we're really talking about is deciding on what the biggest problem is and among who and saying for that, what do we need to do? And then understanding the situation in those communities. You can't solve all of these problems all differently.

But just let me give you an example again, of a situation that we were — I think it was in the Philippines — that we were, I was working with Unicef on this, where there was a situation of people living in rural, more rural communities, of not having accessible transport to markets that sold food at affordable prices. The local markets were, the local stores were very expensive. So this is very inherently local. But when you think about it, that's really about a rural transportation issue. So then you think, okay, how does this then connect in with the people who are looking at rural transportation? There were people who were looking at that issue. So we should get out of the idea that all of the solutions lie in the Ministry of Health and think about who it is that we need to work with in order to scale these solutions, to think, well, rural transportation, it's not just about food, it's about a whole load of things, about employment, livelihoods. So there's other people looking at that. Let's connect in with other people looking at other issues. Because if we just say, this is just from the Ministry of Health, looking at health problems in our little community, then you're not able to start to see the bigger picture. So that's that's that's good policy making.

But you are right. And I get, you know, get stuck in this sometimes in the process. Like how do you actually, you know ... We call it evidence of lived experience. How do you gather this evidence of lived experience, you know. We agree that this is difficult, but we say at the end of the paper that the least that can happen is for policy makers to come into communities and actually to try and get a sense of the ... of, you know, how these things are. I remember giving a talk when I was first ... quite soon after starting this work, to some policy makers, and they were really ... They said to me afterwards, they said, I'm really taken with what you've said. We're going to arrange some walks through this, through this neighbourhood. And just that is a move in the right direction.

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