

# Practices and perceptions of the planetary health diet in sub-Saharan Africa

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09.01.2020 — **Practices and perceptions of the planetary health diet in sub-Saharan Africa: the need for a gradual but steady transition**



By [Charles Ssemugabo](#)

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Leicht gekürzt von Bettina Lutterbeck

In order to tackle climate change ..., sustainable development has been put high on the global agenda in recent years – with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda obviously being the most prominent example. SDG 12, sustainable food production and consumption, is one of the core sustainable development domains of interest. Along these lines, in January 2019, a new planet-friendly diet coined the ‘planetary health diet’, was launched. The diet is *“a global reference diet for adults that is symbolically represented by half a plate of fruits, vegetables and nuts. The other half consists primarily of whole grains, plant proteins (beans, lentils, pulses), unsaturated plant oils, modest amounts of meat and dairy, and some added sugars and starchy vegetables.”* Because of its diversity, the planetary health diet is flexible – it can easily be adapted to personal & cultural nutritional needs and tastes. At the same time, it helps to cut down on the intake of red meat and saturated fat. The latter is supported by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) Special Report on Climate Change and Land which highlighted the need to cut meat production (and thus consumption). A recent letter in the Lancet Planetary Health went in the same direction, calling for ‘renewed Paris pledges to transform agriculture’, among others because the livestock sector largely displaces natural carbon sinks.

In spite of all this, the planetary health diet is still largely considered a “northern construction” and remains unpopular in Africa. This is despite the fact that the continent is grappling with several challenges (including climate change and chronic health conditions ) which this diet seeks to address. It is evident that a largely plant-based diet has several medium- and long-term advantages, which are even more important in Africa, particularly in the light of the demographic pressure on the continent. The question however is, how can we facilitate the transition towards this diet in Africa? (...)

Despite the (relatively) high production, the meat consumption rate in SSA remains low compared to high countries. For example, in Luxembourg, meat consumption is at 754.8 kcal/capital/day compared to 93.26 kcal/capital/day in SSA. However, meat consumption in SSA is three times higher than vegetable consumption (which stands at a mere 26.00 kilocalorie/capita/day). Consumption of food high in saturated fats has also been steadily increasing over the past decade. In Africa, like in other developing and emerging countries, this is fueled by unregulated marketing strategies that largely target children and youths. With social media marketing, multinational food companies have created the perception among many African millennials that eating meaty food, and food chock full of saturated fats and other junk food is trendy. So increasingly, certainly in urban environments, there is a need

to gradually but steadily change African people's perceptions and feeding habits especially among the millennials in SSA, using existing platforms.

Dietary perceptions indeed play a big role in the increase in consumption of meat and foods high in saturated fat in SSA. They are largely considered 'good food' in SSA and are thus popular among the rich, and craved by the poor. Meat is also very popular at festivities including Christmas and 'Eid holidays. In fact, the prices of meat tend to escalate then, while those for vegetables remain stable or even reduce. During the 2019 Christmas holiday period, the cost of a kilogram of beef in Kampala, Uganda rose by about a dollar while the price of vegetables remained stable. This demonstrates the value attached to meat and foods high in saturated fat in SSA settings.

Conversely, the planetary health diet is still largely considered "a poor-man's diet" containing foods that produce less energy. In SSA, the consumption of vegetables has been decreasing over time, while there was an increase in consumption of high-calorie and heavy starchy foods including meat, cassava, and yams among others. Heavy starchy foods provide quick satisfaction and supply the necessary energy and they are thus preferred to vegetables within many African settings. For example, in Uganda, plantain, one of the food crops produced on a large scale, is not popular in some regions as it's low in starch ....

The correlation between food habits and chronic health conditions is also beginning to shape people's perceptions of the planetary health diet. So, there are ongoing efforts to adopt the planetary health diet in SSA, although so far on a (too) limited scale. But what about the affordability of this diet in SSA?

The planetary health diet might be very expensive for resource-limited communities, yet these account for more than 70% of Africa's population. Recent research in the Lancet Global Health pointed this out. The cost of a largely plant-based diet is high compared to current diets, at least for the world's poor. Fruits and vegetables, and nuts and legumes, account for the biggest percentage of the total cost of the most affordable planetary health diet (global median of US \$2.84 per day), with 32.1% and 18.7 % respectively. An example, today, a glass of passion juice in an average restaurant in Kampala, Uganda costs 4 times as much as drinking a coke. ...

Let's also not beat about the bush: campaigns to reduce meat consumption should start in high-income countries. High-income countries are, by far, the largest meat consumers, and this already for decades ( ...).

In conclusion, despite the relatively low consumption of meat and their diets relatively low in saturated fats, Africa needs to gradually and steadily increase its fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes production and consumption – a planetary health diet is not just a 'Northern' thing. Done right, with also enough attention for affordability, this will greatly contribute to climate change mitigation and help tackle chronic health condition challenges that the continent is currently grappling with.



*Photo credit: Standards and Trade Development Facility, World Trade Organisation*

Charles Ssemugabo is a Research Associate in the Department of Disease Control and Environmental Health, Makerere University School of Public Health; EV 2016; Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA) fellow; and a UJMT Fogarty Global Health Fellow.

1. Welches sind die Hauptkritikpunkte des Autors an der Planetary Health Diet?
2. Welche Ernährungsprobleme müssen in Subsaharan Africa gelöst werden?  
Welche Zahlen werden genannt?
3. Wie steht der Autor/ wie steht ihr zur Planetary Health Diet?