

wknd lifestyle

What's the next course?

What is human hunger doing to the earth? If food production were a country, it would eclipse China as the leading carbon polluter of the planet. Food waste is a bigger climate villain than coal. To change the path by which food reaches our plates, we need to look at why we waste food, why we allow prices to fluctuate wildly, why feeding ourselves involves so much plastic. How can we shift mindsets, tinker with policy, and eventually reset the image of sustainable eating? Take a look

Mridula Ramesh



What exactly is sustainable eating? Eating is about food, but the term “sustainable” has grown to mean everything and hence nothing. It’s an unaccountable word, a ne’er-do-well accomplice for virtue-signallers and a welcome shield for climate sinners.

To unpack this term, let us explore its origins: “Sustain” comes from the Latin “sustinere”, which is a combination of “sub” (up from below) and “tenere” (or hold). Sustainable therefore refers to something that can keep going.

Over time, shades have been added, and others scrubbed away to arrive at a modern holdall term of all that is good. For the purposes of this exploration, let us define sustainable food as something that keeps us and the planet going without tipping either over the edge. With this definition, let us explore food from the lens of the person, the planet, and what path the food travels from planet to person.

Person

At the level of a person, a sustainable food system ensures no one goes hungry and no one is overweight either. The good news from the most recent National Family Health Survey is that fewer Indians are going hungry. Given that women tend to have last dibs on a family’s food, it is encouraging to see that the percentage of women who are underweight has fallen from about 23% in 2015-16 to under 19% in 2019-21.

Other measures of hunger, such as children who are too short for their age, or too skinny for their height, show similar trends. But averages obscure the way forward. So, while averages are falling, the stark differences between states show us where we need to act. Moreover, the trend for overweight/obesity data is troubling. For the first time in records, more Indian women are overweight than underweight, a dubious distinction; one that shows that our challenge in making food “sustainable” from a human angle has changed from “more food” to “different food, targeted better”.

Let us now turn our attention to our gut biome, the microbial ecosystem in our gut that is now known to affect everything from sleep to emotions, immunity and well-being. Our current diet, high in processed food and pesticides, is doing it no favours.

Would going organic help? Many of the synthetic fertilisers and pesticides used to grow food harm farmers, the planet, us and our microbiome. But they are useful.

For most of human history, crop production rose only when forest or grassland gave way to farms. But over the past few decades, food production has nearly tripled, even though cropland area has risen by a mere 10%. More crop has been squeezed out of every acre of land by using more-productive

seeds, six times more fertiliser, more pesticides, more mechanisation. More.

The benefits are immense: spared forests and grasslands, and food security for billions. The cons take the form of depleted soils, a brutal blow on biosphere health, rising greenhouse-gas emissions and an unprecedented emptying of the world’s groundwater reserves. Unsurprisingly, from the comfort of a full stomach, there has been a call to return to simpler times. So, is going organic sustainable?

Sri Lanka’s experience makes us pause. In recent decades, that country had become almost self-sufficient in rice. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)’s data shows that tea exports soared to over \$1 billion dollars a year from 2008 on, from about half that in the preceding decade. But in 2018, Sri Lanka slipped into a constitutional crisis, with a change of guard in leadership. On Easter Sunday in 2019, a series of bomb blasts rocked churches and hotels in Colombo. Tourism, a bulwark of the island nation’s economy, floundered and then evaporated altogether with Covid.

In 2021, against the advice of some of its most distinguished agronomists and scientists, the Sri Lankan government banned the import of synthetic fertiliser. Going organic would save hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign exchange in fertiliser import and subsidies, went the thinking. But rice output, as the experts had warned, fell by a fifth, and tea exports, a major source of foreign exchange, plummeted.

Sri Lanka lurched into crisis. Millions slid into poverty, and the lines for food snaking across the country released a rage that toppled the government. But, the confidence of pundits who whispered Sri Lanka down the primrose path to organic nirvana remains unshaken. Look at Cuba, they say.

Cuba depended on imported food and fertiliser in 1990, when suddenly the collapse of the Soviet Union and US embargo cut off fertiliser and food imports almost overnight. Cuba, a country that once provided sugar for the communist world and had proudly eliminated hunger, was soon flirting with starvation.

The country adapted by growing crops in small, urban community gardens, scaling up compost factories, reducing food waste and tightening their belts (there was no democratic government to listen to the people’s woes, and no free press to reveal how tight the belt was pulled).

Is going organic sustainable? In 2021, the Sri Lankan government banned the import of synthetic fertiliser. But rice output fell by a fifth, and tea exports, a major source of foreign exchange, plummeted. Sri Lanka lurched into crisis



READ:
Trade-Offs:
The introduction
to Mridula
Ramesh’s
monthly column
in HT Wknd

Deprived of synthetic pesticides, Cuba turned to biological pest control. They bred insects to eat other insects. Slowly, Cuba, thinner but resilient, survived. Fast-forward to today. Cuba still imports much of its food and much of Cuban farmland is not organic.

My conversations with organic food companies and personal experience with organic farms suggests that it takes time, handholding, trial and error to increase yield in organic farming. Can we go half-way? “Natural” farming, which eschews synthetic pesticides, is less verifiable but more resilient than organic. But with customers willing to pay a steep premium, greenwashing makes us question whether natural farming is either real or “sustainable”. Moreover, to transition nationally to natural farming needs enormous quantities of cheap, natural fertiliser and pesticides — a daunting ask, to say the least.

The clincher is national security: current organic yields are too low to keep India food-secure. To wit, imagine how the recent fracas with Canada would be playing out if India was dependent on Canadian wheat for its rotis.

So what can we do? To understand the path to success, goes the Chinese proverb, ask those coming back. Cuba’s success with the biological control of pests deserves further study, but Sri Lanka’s experience tells us to be wary of going organic wholesale. Instead, consider that India may spend more than Rs 1.75 lakh crore on fertiliser subsidies in 2023-24 — a fortune by any

reckoning. This can be better targeted, using the under-tapped gold mine of the soil health card scheme. Available data confirms that Indian farms sorely need more organic content, which will not be met by subsidising synthetic fertiliser. Cutting and targeting the subsidy could smoothen the transition to a more sustainable way of growing food. But such moves are stonewalled by the reflexive chorus of “anti-farmer”. Hmmm.

Planet

Concerns of planetary health reinforce the need to eat and grow food differently.

If food production were a country, it would eclipse China as the leading carbon polluter of the planet. Growing and transporting food from farm to our fingers generates roughly a third of humanity’s annual greenhouse-gas emissions. Worse, about a third of food is wasted. Think. How many of us have been outraged by the carbon pollution of a coal plant? Yet all of India’s coal plants — together — emit a sliver of global food waste emissions.

There is also a matter of philosophy. Coal plants, climate-unfriendly as they are, generate steady electricity that a fast-growing economy like India needs. Food waste, which faces far-less-organised outrage, is a worse climate villain, smirking in the shadows as coal takes the heat. India’s food waste alone, depending on which data set one considers, emits far more greenhouse gases than all the coal plants in South India

put together. And yet, where is the outrage? The protests? The torrents of virtuously angry words that can beget action?

The rage against coal helped India install hundreds of gigawatts of renewable power. We waste food because we can afford to, underscoring again that India’s food challenge has changed from “more food” to “food targeted better”.

Talking about food emissions brings us to the bovine in the room. Methane is released when ruminant animals (such as buffaloes) belch or pass gas. Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas, about 28 times as potent as carbon dioxide in terms of the warming it can cause over 100 years. But when we shrink our horizon to 20 years, a period more relatable to us, methane becomes 80 times as powerful as CO2.

Our relative indifference to livestock (and rice field) emissions looks a lot less defensible in this shorter horizon. Of course, reducing emissions is only one consideration in the trade-offs we must negotiate while looking at livestock. Dairy products and eggs provide cold, hard daily cash to the rural economy in a way nothing else does (although MGNREGA and the PM-Kisan scheme are beginning to address this). Livestock also provide income when crops fail (crop insurance could help). Can we club these schemes into a Kamadhenu bucket, providing all the financial benefits of livestock (cash, counter-cyclical income) without the emissions? Worth considering.

Livestock has transformed global biodi-

HT IMAGING:
PUNEET KUMAR

