Toward sustainable diets: exploring environmental and social costs of consumption

Seminar presented by Dr. Nicole Tichenor Blackstone, Tufts University.

The global food system is a major driver of climate change, freshwater consumption, land use change, biodiversity loss, and biogeochemical flow (N and P) disruption. The food system is also an essential, though currently inequitable, provider of basic human needs through nourishment and livelihoods. While the impacts and benefits of the food system can be viewed through many lenses, the embodied consumption perspective is particularly powerful. Quantifying the sustainability impacts embedded in diets provides consumers and policy makers an accounting of the true cost of consumption. Using multiple modeling approaches, we estimate the environmental and social impacts of current and recommended diets in the United States. Analyzing current consumption, we find that higher quality diets are associated with higher rates of food waste and waste of embedded agricultural resources. Turning to recommended diets, we find starkly different environmental impacts across the three healthy eating patterns recommended by the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Finally, we explore the forced and child labor risks associated with recommended eating patterns. Cumulatively, our work points to the need for an integrated agenda to develop solutions that promote human health, protect the environment, and cultivate prosperity.
Bio: Nicole Tichenor Blackstone is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Agriculture, Food, and Environment at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Dr. Blackstone’s research focuses on developing and evaluating strategies to improve food system sustainability. Her work fuses industrial ecology, nutrition, and social science methods. To date, her research has explored the environmental and social implications of livestock agriculture, human diets, food waste management, and regional food systems. She teaches graduate courses on U.S. agriculture, environmental life cycle assessment, and corporate social responsibility in the food industry. Dr. Blackstone holds a Ph.D. and M.S. in Nutrition from Tufts University and a B.A. in Philosophy and Religious Studies from the University of Kansas. She is committed to collaborating across disciplines and with stakeholders to bring about transformative change in the food system.

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