

PANORAMA PEOPLE

Interview with Sirpa Sarlio

By Lasse Hemmingsen

Sirpa Sarlio is a ministerial adviser at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland and Adjunct Professor in nutrition at the University of Helsinki. She has contributed for many years to policy discussions in the areas of nutrition and healthy, sustainable diets at the European and global levels, including as an adviser to WHO.



What have been the biggest successes when it comes to nutrition in Finland?

It is an interesting question, because it depends how you look at it. I could pick out one or two areas like salt or saturated fats, but I think that the biggest success is that we have built a system that supports healthy nutrition, with tools to act whenever we find problems.

We have a universal approach system, which is built into the structures of our society and is able to react and adapt. There is dietary guidance in maternity and child health clinics, teaching nutrition and cooking skills at schools, free school meals to all pupils. We have also used many policy tools like warning labels for highly salted food and a “better choice” heart symbol for healthier food and meals, as well as fiscal tools like taxes and subsidies.

In the 1970s Finland was the sick man of Europe: Finland’s cardiovascular mortality rates were in the top three in the world. When we looked at what was going on in the country, we saw that the diet was very high in salt and saturated fats, and that people ate little or no vegetables. We started systematic work and now, for example, salt intake has dropped from 11–13 g per day to 6.5 g for women and 8.9 g for men. Overall, we have managed to bring down premature mortality due to noncommunicable diseases by 80%, while inequalities in dietary habits have decreased.

We are still working with salt, but we are picking up new things too. Vitamin D is one of the latest targets for nutrition policy, since systematic monitoring of the population’s health found very low

levels of vitamin D. The response has been to fortify milk and margarine and to recommend supplements, and from the latest surveys we can see that these policies have worked.

What have been the challenges and lessons learned from working with nutrition in Finland?

When it comes to people’s diet we are aiming at a moving target. Dietary habits change and the content of the foods might also change. So it is really important to have a system that monitors what is happening with people’s diets and their foods.

Instead of using short-term campaigns, we have been trying to build something that has long-lasting effects. Campaigns are very common, and of course they can be quite powerful, but if you rely on that approach, you end up with something short-sighted and expensive. Think about education: if you run a campaign it will cost a lot of money and the effects will wear off, but if you manage to get health, nutrition and physical activity within the structure of early education, it will be cheaper and more effective in the long run.

Nutrition is very cross-sectional, so you have to involve all stakeholders, and that is a major challenge. You have to bring in the private sector and nongovernmental organizations, and you have to influence everybody. Luckily, people are often very keen on dietary matters, simply because we all eat several times a day. So there is room to work with nutrition if you can get people on board. The part I would emphasize is doing things together. You cannot do things alone. You need to look at nutrition in all policy areas:

in agriculture, in education, in the ministry of finance. Everybody benefits from a healthier population, so health is something that needs to be a part of all decision-making. Since dietary factors are behind the biggest burden of disease globally, it is something that should get the attention of decision-makers.

In your view, what will be WHO's most important role in the coming years when it comes to nutrition?

We are a small country, and for small countries it is always very important to have broader shoulders to lean on. So I think that WHO networks and guidelines have been and will continue to be the backbone of work on health and nutrition in many countries. We are doing things at the national level, but it is very much building on things that are happening outside our country. WHO is important, and I think that it could be even more important in the future.

In the past it was sufficient to have a national policy and to act at the national level, but what we are seeing now is that it is difficult to act alone. Food travels, and imports and exports of food are increasing. Coupled with the fact that advertisements and mass media don't respect borders, I think we need more joint and global approaches to nutrition problems.

In Finland we were able to lower salt intake, and the policy was working for the last seven or eight years. Now bread is no longer an exclusively domestic product, and that is causing problems. Bread is the main source of salt in the population's diet and we are increasingly importing frozen bread from other countries, where the nutritional composition is not the same. The salt content is much higher, and there is very little we can do about it. So I think a global organization like WHO could play a much more active role in trying to influence what happens in the global food trade and across countries.

I also think that WHO should be more active in the fields of health, nutrition and sustainability. Sustainability should be incorporated into dietary guidelines given by WHO. The Sustainable Development Goals cover health, nutrition and sustainable consumption, so there is good reason to include the sustainability aspect in nutrition. The ongoing Decade of Action on Nutrition will hopefully push this forward with a move towards healthy, sustainable diets.

It is challenging, but there are a lot of things to gain from it, because what is good for people when it comes to nutrition is quite often also good for the planet. In the big picture, there are opportunities that I would like to see explored better, and I don't think you can escape the concept of sustainability in the future.

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