

## Organic food: panacea for health?



For the **European Parliament report** see [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/581922/EPRS\\_STU\(2016\)581922\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/581922/EPRS_STU(2016)581922_EN.pdf)

For the **systematic review on the health benefits of an organic diet** see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22944875>

For the **PARSIFAL study** see <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1398-9995.2005.00939.x/abstract;jsessionid=1EF1A57CBECD750284F815530B8F2EBB.F04t03>

This month's vegetable shortages and price increases in the UK were attributed to bad weather in Spain, outlining how important sustainable agricultural policy is to health with the changing availability of food sources. Organic food is embraced by many as part of a healthy lifestyle. Currently, the European Union accounts for 24% of the world's organic land, with the global organic market expected to increase by 2.5 times to US\$200 billion by 2020. Whether an organic diet is healthier than a non-organic diet was the subject of a recent report commissioned by the European Parliament reviewing epidemiological, *in vitro*, and animal studies.

The report confirms earlier systematic reviews that described a scarcity of studies investigating the potential beneficial health effects of an organic diet. The largest of the epidemiology studies looking at allergies and atopic disease, the PARSIFAL study, studied 14 000 children aged 5–13 years in five European countries. It showed that children on a biodynamic diet in Steiner schools exhibited a lower prevalence of allergic symptoms. However, in all age groups,

it was not possible to identify whether other healthy lifestyle factors related to the preference for organic food accounted for these associations.

One advantage of an organic plant diet is the restricted exposure to synthetic pesticides with potential neurotoxic, endocrine-disrupting, or carcinogenic properties. Exposure to pesticides during pregnancy in three long-term birth cohort studies was associated with negative effects on intelligence quotient and neuro-behavioural development. The report recommends that organic food is beneficial for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Organic food production also restricts the use of antibiotics in farmed animals and results in lower concentrations of crop cadmium. The report includes policy recommendations addressing both of these issues.

Large, prospective, long-term studies are needed as well as deeper examination of agricultural policy and health. Much still rests on the provision of robust multidisciplinary research to guide future food choices for health. ■ *The Lancet*

## Yemen's silent killers



Nearly 2 years of war have devastated Yemen. 14.8 million people currently lack access to basic health care, 7 million people are facing food insecurity, and 2.1 million children are acutely malnourished. On Feb 8, WHO and its health partners released their emergency response plan for Yemen's health sector in 2017, including its funding requirement: US\$321.6 million.

Around 75 people are either killed or injured in the conflict every day. But beyond these casualties, Rick Brennan, Director of WHO's Emergency Operations, notes that "many Yemeni people die in silence" from diseases that are preventable and treatable, but that go unnoticed in reporting of the crisis. The main causes of avoidable deaths are communicable diseases and maternal, perinatal, and nutritional conditions (together responsible for 50% of deaths), and non-communicable diseases (39% of deaths). Lives are being lost because Yemen's health system is under severe strain; chronic shortages of drugs and other medical supplies exist and less than 45% of health facilities are functioning.

In their response plan for 2017, WHO and its health partners are targeting 10.4 million people, mostly women and children, and others in acute need. Their key strategic objectives include providing integrated primary, secondary, and referral health services, surveillance and response, and medical supplies in priority districts; strengthening reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health interventions; and improving health sector coordination and health information systems.

Amid the dire health and humanitarian data for Yemen, it might be easy for some donors to dismiss the crisis as too difficult and large. But they should not. Last year, WHO and its health partners received financial support that, among its achievements, sustained the functionality of 414 health facilities in 145 districts, delivered 541 child health and nutrition interventions in 323 districts, and provided essential medicine and medical supplies to assist an estimated 3 million people. The 2017 emergency response plan is realistic and targeted, focusing on priority accessible districts and interventions for delivery. It deserves to be fully supported. ■ *The Lancet*

For more on the **2017 emergency response plan for Yemen** see <http://www.who.int/emergencies/response-plans/2017/yemen/en/>