

Nordic nations make dietary guidelines environmentally friendly

By Audrey Quicke

Nordic nations are integrating sustainability criteria into their 2022 dietary guidelines to promote both nutrition and environmental sustainability, and hope to inspire countries outside the Nordic region to follow suit. Australia is currently updating its own dietary guidelines for the first time in ten years.¹

The food system is a major driver of environmental impacts and climate change. Food production generates approximately a third of global greenhouse gas emissions.² Dietary changes, particularly in high-income countries, can reduce environmental resource use and climate impacts as well as reducing dietary risk factors and lowering healthcare costs.³ However, most dietary guidelines provided by national governments are not compatible with the Paris Climate Agreement or the Sustainable Development Goals.⁴ What constitutes a healthy and sustainable diet varies – but is generally a diet rich in plant-based foods such as vegetables, nuts and legumes, with fewer amounts of animal source foods, processed foods and added sugar.⁵

The Nordic Nutrition Recommendations (NNR) were first established in 1980 and form the scientific basis of the dietary reference values (DRV) and food-based dietary guidelines (FBDG) implemented in each Nordic country and some Baltic countries.⁶ The NNR are being updated for 2022, and will incorporate sustainability criteria – in what has been described as “a unique example of regional collaboration targeted at improving the health of citizens as well as the planet.”⁷

The Nordic Council of Ministers has requested that the updated NNRs integrate sustainability. Although some Nordic nations’ FBDGs already aim to achieve sustainability to varying extents,⁸ the upcoming NNRs will integrate sustainability throughout rather than treating it as a distinct chapter or concept.⁹

Nordic countries are encouraging other countries to implement similar approaches. World Health Organisations (WHO) experts and the Nordic Council of Ministers held a webinar in late 2021 showcasing their plan to incorporate sustainability, and how the Nordic approach can serve as inspiration to other countries seeking to transform food systems.¹⁰ In collaboration with Chatham House in London, the Nordic Council of Ministers are developing scientific background papers to inform the integration of environmental sustainability into the FBDGs and for publication in scientific journals.¹¹

In Australia, Government advice about amount and type of foods that should be eaten for health and wellbeing is provided through the Australian Dietary Guidelines (ADG), reviewed every ten years. The current iteration is the 2013 ADG.¹² These are currently under review by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), with new guidelines to be released in the second quarter of 2024.¹³ The ADG do not currently include a sustainability framework, despite Australia having the highest per capita food-related greenhouse gas emissions of all G20 countries.¹⁴

Submissions to the NHMRC from Australian health groups including the Public Health Association of Australia and Dietitians Australia support the inclusion of a sustainability focus in the upcoming iteration of the Dietary Guidelines.¹⁵ Dietitians Australia state that “to promote human and planetary health, the population needs to adopt healthy and sustainable diets, alongside complete food system transformation”.¹⁶

However, attempts to include sustainability guidance in the 2013 ADG were met by strong backlash. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, there was a “strong public campaign in the media opposing the incorporation of sustainability”. This was led by the food industry, farmers and fisheries groups who argued that environmental concerns were not within the mandate of dietary guidelines.¹⁷

Indeed, the current update process has already drawn the ire of the red meat industry,¹⁸ which has called for the removal of Dr Evangeline Mantzioris – a member of the expert committee leading the Guideline review – due to her publication of articles ‘which provide information on how to get the nutrients you need without eating as much red meat’.¹⁹ Dr Mantzioris’ appointment remains unchanged and the risk of a conflict of interest was assessed as low.²⁰

If history is any indication, Australian regulators may face resistance to the inclusion of a sustainability framework in the updated dietary guidelines. However, the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations demonstrate that it can be done successfully. The Nordic approach provides an example of how to develop dietary guidelines that bring health and the environment together – encouraging healthy and sustainable eating habits. The timing of Australia’s current guideline update process provides a real opportunity for collaboration with and learning from the Nordic nations.



Image source: Australian dietary Guidelines, p 40

¹ Australian Government National Health and Medical Research Council (2022) *Timeline*, <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/nutrition/australian-dietary-guidelines-review/timeline>

² Xu and Jain (2021) *Food production generates more than a third of manmade greenhouse gas emissions – a new framework tells us how much comes from crops, countries and regions*, <https://theconversation.com/food-production-generates-more-than-a-third-of-manmade-greenhouse-gas-emissions-a-new-framework-tells-us-how-much-comes-from-crops-countries-and-regions-167623>

³ Springmann et al. (2020) *The healthiness and sustainability of national and global food based dietary guidelines: modelling study*, British Medical Journal, <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m2322>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ EAT-Lancet Commission (2019) *Summary Report of the EAT-Lancet Commission*, https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet_Commission_Summary_Report.pdf

⁶ Christensen et al (2020) *The Nordic Nutrition Recommendations 2022 – principles and methodologies*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7307430/>

⁷ Nordic Co-operation (2021) *From science and guidelines to food system transformation*, <https://www.norden.org/en/event/science-and-guidelines-food-system-transformation>

⁸ Meltzer (2019) *Environmental Sustainability Perspectives of the Nordic Diet*, Nutrients, <https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/11/9/2248/htm>

⁹ Helsedirektoratet (2022) *Nordic Nutrition Recommendations 2022*, <https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/english/nordic-nutrition-recommendations-2022#integratingsustainabilityaspects>

¹⁰ Nordic Co-operation (2021) *From science and guidelines to food system transformation*, <https://www.norden.org/en/event/science-and-guidelines-food-system-transformation>

¹¹ Helsedirektoratet (2022) *Nordic nutrition Recommendations 2022*, <https://www.helsedirektoratet.no/english/nordic-nutrition-recommendations-2022#integratingsustainability>

¹² Australian Government National Health and Medical Research Council (2013) *Australian Dietary Guidelines*, https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/the_guidelines/n55_australian_dietary_guidelines.pdf

¹³ Australian Government National Health and Medical Research Council (2022) *Timeline*, <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/nutrition/australian-dietary-guidelines-review/timeline>

¹⁴ EAT (2020) *Diets for a Better Future*, p 26, https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2020/07/Diets-for-a-Better-Future_G20_National-Dietary-Guidelines.pdf

¹⁵ Public Health Association of Australia (2021) *Public Health Association of Australia submission on Review of the Australian Dietary Guidelines – Stakeholder Scoping*, p 5, <https://www.phaa.net.au/documents/item/5090>

¹⁶ Dietitians Australia (2021) *Australian Dietary Guidelines Scoping Survey*, p 3, https://dietitiansaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/202103-Submission-ADGsScopingSurvey_Mar2021.pdf

¹⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2016) *Plates, pyramids, planet: Developments in national healthy and sustainable dietary guidelines: a state of play assessment*, P 36, <https://www.fao.org/3/I5640E/i5640e.pdf>

¹⁸ Goodwin (2021) *Outcry over anti livestock influence in dietary guideline review*, <https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/7442960/outcry-over-anti-livestock-influence-in-dietary-guideline-review/>

¹⁹ Australian Government National Health and Medical Research Council (2022) *Communications log: Review of the 2013 Australian Dietary Guidelines*, <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/nutrition/australian-dietary-guidelines-review/communicating>

²⁰ Ibid.