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Westernization of Asian diets and the transformation of food systems: Implications for research and policy

Prabhu Pingali ¹ 

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Abstract

Rapid economic and income growth, urbanization, and globalization are leading to a dramatic shift of Asian diets away from staples and increasingly towards livestock and dairy products, vegetables and fruit, and fats and oils. While the diversification of diets away from the traditional dominance of rice with rising incomes is expected and observed, current food consumption patterns are showing signs of convergence towards a Western diet. The diet transition is characterized by increased consumption of: wheat; temperate fruit and vegetables and high protein and energy dense food. Globalization and the consequent global interconnectedness of the urban middle class, is the driving force behind the convergence of diets. The rapid spread of global supermarket chains and fast food restaurants is reinforcing the above trends.

The growing demand for diet diversity cannot be met solely by the traditional food supply chain. It requires the modernisation of the food retail sector, and the vertical integration of the food supply chain, in effect linking the consumers' plate to the farmers' plow. As a consequence, Asian agriculture is on an irreversible path leading away from its traditional pre-occupation with cereal crop production, especially rice, towards a production system that is becoming increasingly commercialized and diversified.

This paper describes the determinants and trends in the diversification and Westernization of Asian diets. Implications of the evolving demand trends for food supply and retail systems are presented. The paper discusses the prospects for small farmer participation in the emerging food supply system, with a particular emphasis on Asian rice production systems. Finally, the paper considers emerging challenges for food policy, small holder welfare, and agricultural research and development priorities.



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Keywords

Diet transition; Westernization; Globalization; Food systems; Vertical integration; Asian rice systems

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