

# How do different sources of evidence contribute to European policy making in the field of food and nutrition?

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## Relevance for society

In Europe, 2 people out of 3 die because of chronic diseases, mainly in the form of cardiovascular diseases and cancers. Chronic diseases are deeply related to our choices and lifestyles, for example in the field **nutrition**: from salt and sugar to vegetables and fish, from fast food to soft drinks, it all has an impact on our body which goes far beyond the meal experience.

People choices on food and nutrition, in turn, are influenced by the environment in which we live, that is shaped by social and cultural norms and values, as well by **policies and regulations**.

Policies and regulations may be analyzed, for instance measuring their costs and their effects, to produce **evidence** to establish what is their value and whether should be seen as good practice, for implementation in other settings.

Therefore, aim of my thesis is to assess: **How different sources of evidence contribute to European policy making in the field of food and nutrition?**

## Relevance for policy makers

Policy makers are well aware of the burden of chronic diseases, in both social and economic terms, and are **concerned** by the deteriorating nutrition standards observed in the most developed settings. Yet, the current set of policies, at national and at European level, is not fully equipped to deal with the health challenges posed by modern food and nutrition habits.

Policymakers have a wide variety of **evidence available**: systematic analyses, economic evaluations, analyses of distributional effects, just to name few.

With these observations in mind, my goal has been threefold. First, I approached the current European food and nutrition policy landscape in a systematic way, through **environmental lenses**, to identify policies that are good for human health and for the environment, too. I found that sustainable dietary guidelines are a low hanging fruit, in the field of nutritional policies with a good impact on environment, too.

Moreover, I assessed whether **economic analyses** can help policy-makers in identifying and implementing those policies which are good value for money. Particularly, I looked at facilitators and barriers in the use of economic analyses in policymaking, to enable a wider use of economic analyses than the status quo. I found that policymakers and researchers have very different views about barriers, the former pointing out the technical difficulties, the latter blaming a consensus-driven way of action.

Third, the scientific community believes that equal societies are healthy societies, and shies away from policies that widen **health inequalities**. Taking this into consideration, I examined the policy landscape with a focus on distributional effects, to make sure that the policies identified

as “best buys” are also those with a beneficial effect on the most disadvantaged ones. I found that reformulation initiatives, with costs bared by the industry, and initiatives aimed at changing the default options might work best in reducing health inequalities at the population level; school interventions were found to be effective in inequalities reduction, too.

## Relevance for researchers

To obtain robust and well-rounded results, I carried out my project with the use of a wide variety of **methodological tools**, including: literature reviews, policy briefs and content analysis.

**Literature reviews** are useful to scrutinize the existing scholarly evidence in the studied field, and to identify gaps in research, conflicting data, and open questions. For such reasons, it was chosen for the assessment of the state of art of public health nutritional policies with respect to environment, in Europe. **Sustainable dietary guidelines** were identified as the way forward, and further research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of the implementation of such guidelines.

Similarly, **policy briefs** contain concise summary of particular issues; moreover, they contain policy options and recommendations, and have an intrinsic sense of urgency, too. In the present thesis, policy briefs were used to describe: the burden of disease related to the current European dietary patterns; the economic costs of chronic diseases in Europe; the existing health-inequalities in nutrition-related determinants in Europe. While research documenting the **health divide** in Europe is abundant, there is rather a paucity of evidence on effective policies in reducing such health divide. In public health nutrition, numerous options are viable, especially in the form of **universal interventions**, in the form of school-based initiatives, reformulation initiatives, and policies aimed at changing our food environment.

On the contrary, **content analysis** is often use to explore and describe complex phenomena, on which the existing literature is not so abundant to allow for secondary research. In the current dissertation, written interviews were performed to experts, from academia and policymaking settings, in the field of public health nutrition as well as in the field of health economics, with the aim to gain further insights on facilitators and barriers to economic analyses of public health policies, especially in the context of public health nutrition. The research found important asymmetries in documenting perceived gaps and barriers, and argues in favor of the **implementation of economic analyses** in decision-making settings, despite their technical limitations.

Finally, I presented a **case study on coffee**, whose health effects on chronic diseases are still controversial. Laying at the interplay of social, economic and environmental aspects, coffee looked like an ideal food to investigate. Our results showed that moderate regular consumption of coffee might be beneficial in preventing certain form of endometrial and breast cancers.

## Dissemination

The creation and dissemination of my findings has been very much facilitated by the **Jean Monnet Module “Development for health: the EU role on health explained to students**

**of health-related professions”**, for which I acted as Coordinator, at University of Milano-Bicocca, years 2016-2019.

The Module was structured on three parallel tiers: the first tier consisted of **lectures** in the field of environmental health (1st year), nutrition (2nd year) and public health (3rd year), whose concepts were delivered by frontal lectures, non-formal learning sessions and practical activities. About one hundred medical students attended the Module in the three years.

The second tier focused on **research**: open data and data collected in literature through systematic searches were analyzed, to address societal questions; results of the present thesis were presented at the European Health Forums Gastein (years 2016, 2017) and at the European Public Health Conferences (years 2017, 2018).

The third tier aimed at fostering connections between the Module participants and the external environment (**research organizations, NGOs and civil society**). Among others, it's worth mentioning the collaboration with the Italian Consumer Health Association Altroconsumo, which worked in a mutual way of exchange: the students participated to workshops organized by Altroconsumo / BEUC and found opportunities to engage with the civil society. On the other hand, I was invited to share some of my results to high-school teachers, in the frame of a lifelong learning programme organized by Altroconsumo itself and our Region, Lombardy.

A dedicated website supported the dissemination of educational materials and key documents, including published open access papers and in-house produced visual material (power points, posters and videos).

Other than the Jean Monnet Module related activities, some results of the present dissertation were transferred into further projects and public health reports, published by the EUPHA and the JRC.

## **Innovation**

The innovation aspect of the present dissertation can be well argued through two different lines of thoughts.

First, the scientific rationale is per se innovative: while academic research might not go beyond academia itself, this work goes far beyond the technical aspects, to equip decision-makers in the field of public health nutrition with strong evidence in favor of comprehensive, equality-driven, and cost-effective policy options.

Second, the dissemination aspect is innovative, too: in Italian academic settings, especially where the course of study is extremely technical (e.g. medicine and healthcare professions), students have often proved to be willing to study and discuss health policies, but often do not have the means to do so. This dissertation, whose findings have been produced and disseminated during the aforementioned Jean Monnet Module, proved to be a useful starting point to facilitate a notion-rich debate in public health among students of medicine and healthcare professions.