

# Unintended Consequences for Health of Fifty Years of the Common Agricultural Policy

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Obesity and noncommunicable disease rates are rapidly growing. Nearly two-thirds of UK adults, 69% of US adults, and over one-third of adults worldwide are estimated to be overweight or obese, with minority and the lowest socioeconomic groups disproportionately affected.(1-4) Noncommunicable diseases are by far the leading cause of death in high-income countries including the UK.(5, 6)

It has long been recognised that agricultural policy, through its effect on price and availability of foods, is an important determinant of health.(13-20) Yet surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the role the European Union Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has played in creating the modern food system and in shaping European diets and health over the past fifty years.

Enacted in 1962, CAP is the broad policy that governs and funds agricultural production in Europe. It is negotiated at the European level and implemented domestically by Member States. It is one of the earliest EU policies and has taken various forms, each of which has impacted food availability, pricing, consumption, and health outcomes.(9-11)

This paper examines how by meeting its original post-World War II objectives, CAP unintentionally contributed to the formation of the obesogenic food system in Europe. For forty years, CAP oriented European production toward a set of artificially profitable, energy-dense, unhealthier commodities (such as sugar, red meats, and dairy) while conspicuously excluding healthier crops such as fruits and vegetables. Simply removing these policies, as CAP has sought to do since the 1990s, has been insufficient to create a pro-health policy. To understand why—and to move toward making CAP pro-health—it is necessary to understand the history of CAP and the manner in which it has entrenched certain industries, increased unhealthy production, and impacted the price and availability of certain foods.