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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-sixth Session

10-13 January 2022 and 7-8 February 2022

Update on FAO's work in nutrition

Executive Summary

FAO Strategic Framework 2022-2031 outlines the Organization's commitment to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life – leaving no one behind. These four betters are the aspirations of FAO, and the organizing principles of our work for the coming decade. They demonstrate a commitment to better nutrition, while linking sustainable production and decent livelihoods with the urgent need to protect and regenerate our environment.

In 2021, FAO Members approved the 2021-2025 Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition, to provide guidance and accountability for leveraging all entry points across agrifood systems to enable healthy diets, for better nutrition and beyond. This note provides a summary of the new strategy and implications for the N(NENA) region.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference calls upon Members to:

- a) Take note of progress made toward mainstreaming nutrition in FAO's work globally and in the region.
- b) Encourage countries to address malnutrition in a holistic and integrated manner through closer and better coordination and collaboration between sectors and various actors of agrifood systems.
- c) Urge stakeholders to tackle all forms of malnutrition by transforming agrifood systems to make them inclusive, sustainable and nutrition-sensitive.

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Nutrition and healthy diets

1. Better nutrition offers one of the greatest developmental opportunities in the world today. Reducing wasting, stunting, underweight, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases will contribute to reaching all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, no single country is on track to meet the global nutrition targets. One in nine people is hungry, one in three is overweight or obese, almost a quarter of children under five are stunted, and 45 million children under five are wasted.
2. A major challenge to improving nutrition is the inadequacy of current diets. Across geographies and populations, people are eating diets with deficiencies, excesses and imbalances of energy and nutrients, impairing their health, growth and development, and leading to all forms of malnutrition and premature death.
3. While good nutrition requires improvements in many other areas (for example hygiene and sanitation, livelihoods, poverty reduction, women's empowerment), healthy diets are the cornerstone. Healthy diets are adequate, safe, diverse and balanced in terms of both quantity and quality. They can be composed in different ways depending on age, geography, gender, health status and cultural preference. Regardless of specific dietary needs, healthy diets limit the level of agents that cause food-borne diseases and provide the nutrients and energy necessary for individuals to live a healthy life. Access to clean drinking water is also a fundamental component of healthy diets.

Diets and agrifood systems

4. Agrifood systems have a vital role in enabling healthy diets for all. An agrifood system covers the journey of food from farm to table – including when it is grown, fished, harvested, processed, packaged, transported, distributed, traded, bought, prepared, eaten and disposed of. It also encompasses non-food products that also constitute livelihoods and all of the people as well as the activities, investments and choices that play a part in getting us these food and agricultural products.¹

5. However, agrifood systems are not working optimally to enable healthy diets. Existing national agrifood system policies, strategies and investment plans often do not have explicitly stated goals and targets for achieving nutrition for all at individual, household, community, subnational and national levels, including appropriate and relevant indicators. Often they have not been translated to operational plans and programmes, which specify roles and responsibilities; capacity needs and technical competencies required; with adequate national budget allocation.

6. National agrifood system policies and strategies do not comprehensively address malnutrition in all its forms. In many countries, agrifood system policies and strategies do not include any nutrition objectives and actions to address relevant nutrition issues. Many agrifood system policies and investments are not designed to contribute to positive nutritional outcomes. Evidence of multisectoral actions is generally limited in the region, with agrifood system, education, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), health systems and social protection strategies and programmes generally failing to consider the nutritional needs of all. Moreover, most multisectoral actions do not reflect the importance of healthy diets for improved nutrition. There is a need to change the architecture of

FAO Members have called for more action in agrifood systems for healthy diets:

- **2014**, the **Rome Declaration on Nutrition** acknowledges that current agrifood systems are increasingly challenged to provide safe, diversified and nutrient rich food for all.
- **2016**, the **UN Decade of Action on Nutrition**'s first activity is to improve diets through agrifood systems.
- **2021**, the **Committee on World Food Security** adopts **Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition**
- **2021**, the **UN Food Systems Summit** places healthy diets at the forefront of its work.
- **2021**, the **Nutrition for Growth Summit** identifies food systems as one of three core areas for commitments.

¹ www.fao.org/3/nf693en/nf693en.pdf

agrifood systems to enhance its impact on nutrition and deliver healthy diets that are available, accessible and affordable for all.

7. An agrifood systems approach to enabling healthy diets considers agrifood systems in their entirety. It takes all the different elements of agrifood systems into account, as well as their interconnected relationship and related effects. It prioritizes the system's sustainability, inclusiveness and resilience to deliver better health, social, economic and environmental outcomes.

I. FAO's work in nutrition

8. The Vision and Strategy for FAO's Work in Nutrition aims at achieving the corporate goal of reducing malnutrition through efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems, as part of the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-2031. The Nutrition Strategy seeks to tackle malnutrition in all its forms by accelerating policies and actions across agriculture and food systems to enable healthy diets for everyone. Through this mission, and with key partners such as WHO, UNICEF and WTO, among others, FAO is contributing to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, leaving no one behind.

Guiding principles

For systems to enable healthy diets at scale:

- People must be placed at the centre
- Adaptation to local, national and regional context is vital
- No one can be left behind
- Gender equality is critical
- Efforts should build upon the right to adequate food
- Innovation is urgently needed
- Agrifood systems must be sustainable, inclusive, resilient

9. To deliver this vision, FAO's mission in nutrition is to tackle malnutrition in all its forms by accelerating impactful policies and actions across agrifood systems, to enable healthy diets for all. Through this mission, FAO will contribute to the achievement of targets across the SDGs particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals).

Action areas, outcomes and accountability

10. FAO's work in nutrition benefits from a pathway to impact framework. This framework illustrates how FAO will realize its mission in nutrition to enable healthy diets for all through sustainable, inclusive and resilient agrifood systems. FAO's work in nutrition comprises five interdependent action areas, which each contain three specific actions. The action areas are broad enough to accommodate a diversity of activities driven by country context, yet specific enough to inform prioritization of activities for greatest impact.

Action Area 1: Using data for impact

11. Actions:

- generate, collate, visualize, share and communicate data and metrics on people's diets and agrifood systems, with a focus on people in rural communities whose livelihoods depend on the agrifood system; marginalized urban populations; women and young children; youth; indigenous peoples; migrants; persons with disabilities; and people experiencing humanitarian crises, conflict and fragility;
- provide guidance and technical assistance to global, regional, national and local stakeholders on data collection (including collection of age and sex disaggregated data), analysis and

reporting; and how to understand, use and communicate data to inform policies and actions to enable healthy diets;

- monitor SDGs indicators relevant to nutrition to inform decision-making and track progress towards SDGs targets.

12. Outcome 1:

- Decision-makers use more and better data to guide the selection, design and implementation of impactful policies & actions across agrifood systems for healthy diets.

Action Area 2: Using evidence on healthy diets

13. Actions:

- generate, collate, share and communicate options for policies and actions that will impact agrifood systems to achieve healthy diets, including knowledge, innovations and practices which will make agrifood systems more sustainable, inclusive and resilient; reduce food loss and waste; increase product diversity; and increase consumer demand for healthy diets;
- generate and communicate evidence on trade-offs and synergies between policies and actions for healthy diets with those for social, economic and environmental outcomes of agrifood systems;
- facilitate the generation of evidence on policies and actions to inform the design and implementation of future options which enable healthy diets.

14. Outcome 2:

- decision-makers use a larger body of evidence to design and implement impactful and coherent policies across agrifood systems for healthy diets.

Action Area 3: Catalysing policy coherence and collective action

15. Actions:

- convene and participate in multistakeholder dialogues, at all levels, enhancing coherence between policies and actions to enable healthy diets and other social, economic and environmental outcomes; discuss how to tackle controversial trade-offs;
- engage with private-sector actors, and financial and investment institutions, in innovative ways to achieve healthy diets from sustainable, inclusive and resilient agrifood systems, through new business models, entrepreneurship, financing opportunities for small- and medium-sized enterprises, and partnerships, while always avoiding conflicts of interest; engage with representatives of civil society, women groups and indigenous peoples, as well as other stakeholders, in global, regional and national collective action on food-based approaches and healthy diets, alongside other ways to tackle malnutrition in all its forms.

16. Outcome 3:

Greater coherence exists between policies designed to achieve nutrition, social, economic and environmental outcomes of agrifood systems, and there is greater collective action on healthy diets.

Action Area 4: Building greater capacity

17. Actions:

- provide policy and technical assistance to all decision-makers and implementing actors to design, implement and scale up policies and actions across agrifood systems to enable healthy diets and other outcomes;

- provide training materials, guidance, toolkits, innovative learning modalities and standards for governmental decision makers, to diagnose problems and identify solutions across agrifood systems to enable healthy diets;
- strengthen the capacity of civil society, academia, rural advisory and agricultural extension services, farmers' associations, indigenous peoples' groups, youth groups and schools to develop, implement and evaluate awareness-raising interventions on the role of agriculture, value chains, food environments, gender equality, climate change, natural resource management and consumer behaviour to enable healthy diets.

18. Outcome 4:

- FAO Members, and global, regional, national and local stakeholders, implement policies, laws, investments and innovative actions at scale across agrifood systems to enable healthy diets.

Action Area 5: Advocating and securing commitment to healthy diets

19. Actions:

- promote the incorporation of healthy diets as a goal for policies and actions across agrifood systems into relevant global, regional and national agreements, laws, Codex Alimentarius Commission standards, investments and funding mechanisms, multistakeholder processes and country-level guidance;
- continue to support, promote and contribute to effective nutrition governance at global and national levels through engagement with UN Nutrition, the Committee on World Food Security, the Scaling Up Nutrition movement, and other coordination mechanisms, platforms and partnerships;
- align FAO's work in nutrition with new corporate initiatives, including the Hand-in-Hand Initiative, the FAO Strategic Framework, FAO's Medium Term Plan, new FAO policies and the workplans of existing FAO policies and strategies.

20. Outcome 5:

- global, regional and national bodies have a stronger commitment to healthy diets.

Implementation

21. FAO has designed a dedicated Accountability Framework to monitor progress. Each action will be measured against output indicators to ensure that FAO holds itself accountable for contributing to its mission in nutrition. In addition, to complete its ambitious work in nutrition, FAO has developed an implementation plan which outlines the enabling factors that FAO will foster or develop.

II. Implementing FAO's Vision and Strategy for Nutrition in the NENA region

22. The Near East and North Africa (NENA) region is not on track to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) target of Zero Hunger. The number of people affected by hunger will surpass 75 million by 2030. The impact of Covid-19 on the region economy will further complicate the challenge of achieving the SDG 2.1 target to eliminate hunger.

23. According to the most recent Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in the Near East and North Africa, in 2019, 22.5 percent of children under five years of age were stunted, 9.2 percent wasted and 9.9 percent were overweight.² Undernutrition remains one of the most serious health problems among preschool and school children (6 to 11 years) and adolescents (12 to 18 years),

and the single main contributor to child mortality in many low and middle-income countries in the region. Children and adolescents are particularly affected, and their education disrupted. It is estimated that one in every four children (almost 23 million) in the region are either out of school or at risk of dropping out. A majority of out-of-school children in the region are in crisis-affected countries and girls are more likely to be excluded from education. A significant proportion of children are undernourished, and over a third of the population in the region suffers from micronutrient deficiencies. At the same time, rapid increase in overweight and obesity in children is worrisome.

24. The regional obesity and overweight prevalence rates are well above the global average. With 27 percent of the adult population obese, the region ranked second in the world for obesity and there is an estimated rate of 35 percent of anaemia in women of reproductive age (15 to 49), which should be treated as a moderate public health issue in most countries of the region. In addition, no country in the region is on track to meet the World Health Assembly 2025 target for anaemia in women of reproductive age (reducing it by half) or for adult obesity (halt its rise).

25. High rates of childhood overweight in the region are particular of concern. Children under the age of five are already overweight at 9.9 percent. It's well documented that obesity is associated with several chronic illness such as diabetes, hypertension, heart diseases and cancers. Hence, the school feeding programmes and nutrition education are key to tackle childhood malnutrition.

26. To achieve national socio-economic development, it is imperative that nutrition goals, targets and indicators are explicitly mainstreamed into national agrifood system policies, strategies and programmes across NENA countries. Moreover, nutrition sensitive investment planning becomes imperative. Good governance characterized by political leadership and shared vision of raising levels of nutrition for all is likewise needed, including accountability mechanisms and tools for monitoring and evaluation.

27. The Sustainable Development Goals related to zero hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition recognize the importance of agriculture, forestry and fisheries in providing nutrition for all. To accomplish these goals, there has got to be a profound change in the architecture of the region's agrifood systems to make nutrition central to agrifood system development. There is need to work with NENA governments in the region to formulate and implement coherent, well-coordinated, context-specific, gender-sensitive and inclusive policies and programmes and foster responsible investment in agrifood system that delivers healthy diets for all.

28. Agrifood systems need to join forces with other sectors (health, education, finance, trade, social welfare, etc.) to address the challenges on nutrition at both country and regional level. This calls for better engagement and closer collaboration of different stakeholders including government institutions, civil society organizations, private sector, academia and training institutions, as well as multilateral and bilateral development partners and UN agencies.

29. South-South, North-South and Triangular Cooperation can help countries to learn, share and upscale innovative solutions to improve nutrition. Countries should support and develop evidence-based dietary guidelines and implementing nutrition education, behaviour change and communication for the transformation of food systems and to encourage healthy eating behaviour for all.