1. What are the key challenges for food systems and nutrition?

Food systems are crucial for addressing problems of food insecurity, malnutrition, and diet-related health problems. Many countries, communities and even households face situations where under-nutrition exists side by side with a fast growing problem of overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases. The problems and their causes are complex and evolving fast. New challenges arising from demographic changes, climate change, and globalization further add to the complexity.

The Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) in 2014 raised awareness about the underlying issues and generated agreement through the ICN2 Framework for Action on a set of recommended policy and programmatic action. Central to this is the need for creating strong partnerships and promoting coordinated action among all food systems actors. The United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025) will facilitate reaching this goal.

With the adoption in 2015 of the 2030 Agenda and in particular Sustainable Development Goal 2 (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture) countries further emphasized the need for a multi-dimensional and multi-stakeholder approach to ending undernutrition and placed a strong emphasis on refocusing food and agriculture systems on health and nutrition outcomes.

Governments have a key role in creating an enabling policy, legal and institutional environment that provides incentives for food system actors to sharpen their focus on helping consumers, and in particular vulnerable groups, with affordable access to nutritious food and knowledge about healthy diets. The private sector, civil society and academia have a key role to play in supporting governments to create healthy food systems.

2. How does FAO help countries to meet these challenges?

FAO takes a comprehensive food systems approach to address issues of malnutrition and diet-related health problems, working in partnership with UN agencies and other relevant partners. The focus of FAO is to help governments and their development partners: i) develop a policy and institutional environment that brings all food systems stakeholders together to engage in evidence-based dialogue; and, ii) agree on a common framework for action to make food systems better focused on producing positive nutrition and health benefits for consumers and in particular for the most vulnerable, including pregnant and lactating women, children during their first 1,000 days of life and adolescent girls.

In an effort to strengthen its support to countries and partnership with other agencies, FAO has established a renewed “Nutrition and Food Systems Division” and is seeking support to further develop and strengthen its support to countries in the following ways:

i. Support the generation and dissemination of evidence about food systems and food system innovations that have proven positive impact on nutrition and health, including the development of metrics and systems for monitoring progress and impact of implementation of food systems innovations on nutrition and health. This involves inter alia development of capacities to collect and analyze currently lacking information about food consumption as part of national surveillance, monitoring and evaluation systems.
ii. Support decision-makers in government and development partners to develop policies, legal framework and programmes to make food systems more nutrition and health-focused and implement related food-systems innovations at scale. This includes the provision of evidence-based policy advice, training, strengthening coordination at national but also at decentralized levels between ministries of agriculture with other ministries (i.e. with health, social affairs, education, women’s affairs, etc.) and also with private sector and civil society organizations.

iii. Promote consumer behaviour change towards healthy diets: This includes inter alia the development of national Food-based Dietary Guidelines to inform food and agriculture policies and nutrition education; the integration of nutrition education and behaviour change strategies in schools; the promotion of nutrient-rich foods and bio-fortified crops with high iron and zinc and vitamin A, work with organizations involved institutional feeding programmes, consumer organizations, etc.

iv. Development of organizational and human resources capacities for implementation of nutrition-sensitive food systems changes. This involves work in partnership with other UN agencies (i.e. UNICEF, WFP, IFAD, WHO, etc.) and local partners to implement actions and up-scale innovations that will contribute to making the food systems more nutrition and health sensitive. This includes work with agricultural extension services, social protection programmes, teacher training colleges, universities, schools, agencies involved in emergency and resilience building programmes, civil society and private sector agencies, etc.

v. Improving stakeholder coordination and food systems governance to bring all relevant food systems stakeholders together in an inclusive and evidence-based dialogue around a common nutrition agenda. Following the example of similar support at global level in the context of for example the Committee on World Food Security, this involves work with national and decentralized food security and nutrition coordination mechanism and platforms, as well as the facilitation of dialogue on specific issues i.e. among parliamentarians, civil society actors, private sector actors, etc. Much of this work takes place in partnership with other UN Agencies and initiatives like SUN and REACH.

vi. Leveraging regional policies and platforms to strengthen and scale up country level efforts. FAO leverages regional policy processes and partnerships with regional organizations to enhance the effectiveness and scaling-up of its country support, for example, by mainstreaming nutrition objectives and interventions in regional food security policies and strategies (e.g. ASEAN, CAADP Results Framework), and by leveraging regional forums to strengthen country capacities.

3. Why FAO, why partner with FAO, what is the organization’s comparative advantage?

FAO has a clear comparative advantage in supporting countries and development partners to make food systems more nutrition and health focused because of: (i) its technical expertise; (ii) its role as a neutral broker with various food systems and nutrition stakeholders; (iii) its ability to capitalize on and share knowledge and experiences across countries and regions; (iv) its presence in countries, its partnership with regional organizations and its role and participation in various global fora; and (v) its role in advocacy and the promotion of inclusive dialogue and partnerships across a broad spectrum of stakeholders.