The issue

Healthy diets are those diets that are of adequate quantity and quality to achieve optimal growth and development of all individuals and support functioning and physical, mental and social wellbeing at all life stages. They provide adequate calories and nutrients and help to protect against malnutrition in all its forms, including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity as well as diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer. The Region suffers from double burden of malnutrition, with high levels of stunting and moderate levels of wasting and overweight in children under the age of five and a growing burden of diet-related NCDs. According to the latest estimates, 9.2 percent of children under the age of five are suffering from wasting; 22.5 percent are stunted, 9.9 percent are overweight whereas more than one-quarter (27 percent) of the region’s adult population is obese.

During the pandemic, border closures, quarantines, market, supply chain and trade disruptions in the region, have compromised the purchasing power of population in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region and restricted people’s physical access to sufficient, diverse and nutritious sources of food. This may have worsened nutritional status of many, particularly in countries already affected by high levels of food insecurity. Even prior to the pandemic healthy diets were unaffordable for more than half of the region’s population. The challenges were greater for countries in a protracted crisis situation. This situation is compounded by the consumers’ lack of nutrition education and understanding of importance of eating healthy to prevent and combat various symptoms of the disease.

The action

The programme will support inclusive recovery in the short and medium term, while strengthening long-term resilience to multiple shocks and any potential resurgence of the pandemic. The combination of actions will be structured around such key objectives as improving nutrition quality of diets and institutional and policy environment. Specifically, it will:

- Create institutional capacities to contribute to an inter- and intra-sectoral coordination (at regional, national and sub-national levels) processes to address policy fragmentation and to foster coherence across sectors (agriculture, health, environment, education, finance, social protection, gender and trade) for promoting healthy diets and improving nutrition. In particular, support the capacity to monitor indicators of access, affordability and intake of diverse and nutritious food by the population, particularly vulnerable groups. It will also assist to adequately design, implement and
monitor nutrition-sensitive food and agriculture programmes that respond to the evolving food and nutrition situation.

- Enhance nutritional knowledge of population through policy support, by incorporating nutrition in food system related policies, paying special attention to the poorest and most vulnerable to malnutrition. Assist governments with development of technical capacities and human resources on nutrition through participation in nutrition training courses, pre- and in-service trainings, development/ update relevant curricula and generating nutrition champions.
- Support the integration of nutrition education into the agricultural extension staff training to learn how to produce, harvest, process and market better quality and greater variety of safe and nutritious foods, in addition to training on diets, food preparation, preservation, and hygiene.
- Implement nutrition education and promote healthy diets through social and behaviour change communication interventions to positively influence knowledge, attitudes and social norms using various communication channels internet, social media, TV and radio stations, online marketing tools to promote healthy diets (e.g., mobile applications).

**Expected results**

1. Strengthened capacity to promote healthy diets focusing on enhanced monitoring of relevant indicators and nutrition-sensitive approaches across food systems.
2. Improved institutional and policy environment to ensure concerted actions and capacities on nutrition built.
3. Heightened awareness about the linkages between agriculture, diet quality and nutrition by incorporating nutrition into the agriculture extension training curriculum.
4. Healthy diets promoted via different communication channels.

**Programme links**

The programme will be part of the United Nations Decade of Action for Nutrition, supporting the ICN2 Framework of Action on Nutrition, and in line with Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations’ (FAO) corporate strategy and vision on Nutrition. It will link with FAO Regional Initiatives, as well as with the Strategic Priorities of the organization. It will support the countries national priorities and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**Partnerships**

The programme will be implemented in close coordination with UN Agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality (UN Women), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and World Bank. It will also utilize expertise and knowledge of regional and national academia, training and research institutions for supporting studies, conducting trainings and organizing policy dialogues, including documenting good practices, and sharing knowledge and experience.

**Country focus**

Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritania, Palestine, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen. The programme will also have regional aspects in terms of experience sharing, policy dialogues and coordination with various regional programmes of other partners.

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