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# FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR EUROPE

## Thirty-first Session

**Voronezh, Russian Federation, 16-18 May 2018**

**Outcome of the Regional Symposium on "Sustainable Food Systems for  
Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia"**

## Executive Summary

- The Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia, held in December 2017 in Budapest, Hungary, was organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP).<sup>1</sup>
- The regional symposium provided follow-up to the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), its Rome Declaration, and its Framework for Action (FfA). The symposium also contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025) and brought into sharp focus the challenges and efforts towards the elimination of all forms of malnutrition at the regional and national levels.
- The symposium highlighted the major regional challenges for food security and nutrition and the roles of all relevant governmental sectors, food and agriculture, health, education, social protection, as well as of non-state actors in improving diets and nutrition. It promoted policy

<sup>1</sup> The symposium has been supported by the FAO project GCP/GLO/674/RUS "Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia," funded by the Russian Federation.

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coherence and multisectoral collaboration, adoption, and application of holistic food systems<sup>2</sup> perspectives in policies, programmes, and investments for nutrition and presented examples of successful initiatives on engaging in the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition.

- This document summarizes the outcomes of the symposium’s deliberations.
- The technical recommendations of the Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems are made available to policy-makers and formulators by informing the 2018 FAO Regional Conference for Europe (ERC), the governing bodies of WHO, UNICEF, and WFP, and the governments of member countries.

### **Matters to be brought to the attention of the Regional Conference**

The ERC is invited to:

- 1) recommend to governments that they take advantage of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition and that they upscale and enhance the implementation of national commitments related to the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with increased intersectoral collaboration, policy coherence and adequate investments for nutrition; and to
- 2) adopt and use the symposium’s key messages in the elaboration of nutrition-sensitive national policies, programmes, and investments for addressing country-specific malnutrition and food insecurity challenges and for transforming food systems to become more sustainable.

## **I. Background to the Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia**

1. Considering that sustainable food systems are featured in ICN2 and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition as long-term solutions for eradicating hunger and all forms of malnutrition, the FAO Director-General initiated the organization of regional symposia to allow discussion and reflection on challenges and opportunities in regional, national, and local contexts.

2. The main objectives of the Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia<sup>3</sup> were to (i) support countries in their efforts to enhance the implementation of ICN2 - FfA for achieving the SDG targets and nutrition-related national priorities; (ii) engage all relevant stakeholders more actively in the process launched by ICN2 and in the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition; and (iii) facilitate the transformation of food systems to provide healthy diets and improved nutrition in a multisectoral, collaborative, and coherent manner.

3. The symposium was attended by 260 delegates from 41 countries, representing various stakeholders, government officials, civil society, farmers, private sector, as well as research and academic institutions and specialized United Nations agencies including FAO, WHO, UNICEF, WFP,

<sup>2</sup> **Food system** gathers all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes (HLPE, 2017. Nutrition and food systems. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome 2017, <http://www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-hlpe/en/>)

<sup>3</sup> For more information, programme, presentations, book of abstracts, and full report of the *Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia*, see <http://www.fao.org/europe/events/detail-events/en/c/1034293/>

the Committee on World Food Security, and the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition.

## II. Rationale of the Regional Symposium

4. Recent reports on food insecurity and nutrition in Europe and Central Asia (ECA)<sup>4,5</sup> indicate that malnutrition in various forms persists and co-exists in various proportions with noticeable differences among countries in the region.

5. While overweight and obesity are prevalent among children, adolescents, and adults across the region, millions are still suffering from deficiencies of micronutrients, especially from iron, iodine, zinc, and vitamins A and D. The prevalence of chronic undernutrition, measured by stunting in children under the age of five, is still high in some countries in Central Asia.

6. In the ECA region, the rate of exclusive breastfeeding is only 27 percent, the lowest among all regions globally.

7. The ECA region is the most severely affected by non-communicable diseases, with unhealthy diets as the major risk factor.<sup>6</sup>

8. Lower-income households are usually associated with unhealthy nutritional practices that can result in different forms of malnutrition. For example, low diet quality and diversity including the inadequate consumption of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains may increase the risk of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiency, while increased consumption of highly processed, energy-dense foods may increase the risk of overweight and obesity.

9. Transformative change in food systems, from merely supplying enough food to providing sustainable, high-quality diets for all, is key to improving nutrition and preventing malnutrition in all its forms.<sup>7</sup>

10. The symposium's delegates received the latest updates on the regional overview of food security and nutrition.<sup>8</sup>

## III. Key messages from the Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia

11. The symposium discussed sustainable food systems along four thematic areas:

- ii) nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food systems;
- iii) food demand and food environments;

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<sup>4</sup> FAO. 2017. Europe and Central Asia regional overview of food insecurity 2016. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i6877e.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> FAO. 2015. European Commission on Agriculture, Thirty-ninth Session. Addressing social and economic burden of malnutrition through nutrition-sensitive agricultural and food policies in the region of Europe. Budapest, Hungary, 22 and 23 September 2015. (ECA/39/15/5). FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-mo398e.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> WHO, Better food and nutrition in Europe: a progress report monitoring policy implementation in the WHO European Region, 2017 [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/355973/ENP\\_eng.pdf?ua=1](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/355973/ENP_eng.pdf?ua=1)

<sup>7</sup> Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition. 2016. Food systems and diets: Facing the challenges of the 21st century. London, United Kingdom. <http://glopan.org/sites/default/files/ForesightReport.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> FAO. 2017. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia. <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/I8194RU>

- iv) improving nutrition of children; and
- v) governance, leadership, and accountability for nutrition.

12. The important highlights that emerged from the symposium's deliberations are addressed to major key actors and refer to governance for follow-up by the FAO ERC and partners.<sup>9</sup>

### **A. Symposium's key messages addressed to governments**

13. Governments, as major actors responsible for driving changes to food systems, should formulate country-specific SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) commitments for action towards eradication and prevention of all forms of malnutrition at the country level, including improvements in diets through sustainable and resilient food systems for meeting the SDGs and national commitments to ICN2.

14. Governments should define and formulate specific policies, including on educating consumers on healthy diets and on shifts in investment priorities to ensure that diverse, nutritious, and safe foods, that meet local requirements based on cultural preferences and taste, are available and affordable to all in a sustainable manner.

15. Governments should ensure, wherever possible, that actions to address malnutrition in all its forms are "double duty", meaning that they contribute simultaneously to the prevention of both undernutrition and overweight/ obesity. Inspired by some of the leading examples from the region, the symposium made several recommendations to governments such as:

- a) adopt food system legislative regulations, norms, and standards in order to facilitate delivering healthy diets and ensuring healthy food environments;
- b) promote and apply the principles of agroecology and the broader One Health concept (plant, animal, humans, environment) to reconnect agriculture, food, environment, and health for sustainable food systems;<sup>10</sup>
- c) leverage the potential of food systems to cater for the increasing food supply needs of urban areas;
- d) support scientific research and innovation towards safer foods and healthier diets and develop and support food, nutrition, and health research infrastructure capable of creating an up-to-date, trustworthy base of evidence for policies;
- e) promote climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies by crop diversification and changes to supply chain models, by increasing the production of local, seasonal, and underutilized fruits and vegetables, and by advocating for decreased meat and dairy consumption;
- f) assess the magnitude of food losses related to production, processing and transport, and waste at the consumption stage and consider reducing food waste through recovery and redistribution;
- g) pursue and promote a multistakeholder agenda in achieving collective outcomes on nutrition through nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes and extending coverage and increasing the adequacy of child- and family-related cash benefits to rapidly reduce child poverty and vulnerability;
- h) provide a holistic set of interventions, linking cash with essential services to better address the social and economic vulnerabilities related to poverty; and

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<sup>9</sup> Many participants expressed the need for global guidelines to help countries strengthen food systems for healthier diets, building on the learned experiences and key messages of the Regional Symposium. This will be one of the issues the Committee on World Food Security will be addressing in 2018, in the context of the UN Decade for Action on Nutrition, to develop terms of reference for a policy convergence process leading to voluntary guidelines for food systems and nutrition.

<sup>10</sup> See also the details on agroecology and sustainable agriculture and food systems in the document ERC/18/2

- i) link approaches through the integration of databases and the establishment of “single window” service centres with integrated malnutrition and case management.

16. Governments should involve non-state actors, private sector (producers, processors, professional associations, etc.), civil society, academia, consumers, in policy dialogues on agricultural, food, and nutrition-related issues in capacity development, awareness raising, and advocacy actions.<sup>11</sup>

17. Governments should take action to ensure that adequate capacities of national statistical services are developed for the monitoring of SDG indicators and to strengthen data collection and analysis for evidence-based policy, including food consumption and nutrition data, surveillance of child growth and nutritional status of the population, food composition data of commonly available local foods, data on food contaminants, etc.

### **B. Symposium’s key messages addressed to non-state actors**

18. Non-state actors can effectively contribute to the positive transformation of food sector and to the development of sustainable food systems. In particular,

- the private sector should ensure the diverse and affordable supply of nutritious and safe food;
- the research sector should undertake more (independent) research to support the transformation of (local) food systems and explore options for supporting and enhancing the biodiversity and ecosystem services and to communicate science to the public, academia, researchers, and consumers, ensuring the mutual interaction of the science community and society for scientific breakthroughs and food chain innovations;
- education initiatives should support and create an enabling environment for effective action on nutrition, boost the development of leadership and influence skills among nutrition professionals, and facilitate collaboration among different stakeholders.

### **C. Symposium’s key messages on nutrition governance and capacity development in the region**

19. The symposium also urged for good governance, leadership, and accountability for nutrition. To that end, governments are requested to:

- establish high-level national cooperation mechanisms for nutrition-related planning, coordination, and accountability; create platforms for multisectoral consultations and expert advice, knowledge-sharing, decision-making, and prioritization in food security, nutrition, and food systems;
- identify nutrition targets and indicators during the SDG nationalization process;
- involve the food and agriculture sector in nutrition governance; and
- increase resource allocation for nutrition in each relevant ministry.

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<sup>11</sup> However, governments are also encouraged to develop risk assessment, disclosure, and management tools to safeguard against possible conflicts of interest in developing guidelines and providing guidance on the implementation of nutrition programmes that is not aligned with core public health goals and, in certain processes, may seek to exert an undue influence on the normative work of governments and in policy development.

20. The symposium stressed the need to enhance capacity development in nutrition and food systems, promote networking and collaboration, appropriately train the workforce, and update training programmes to cover new developments in understanding foods and food systems in addition to the wider ecological context. Modules on sustainable food systems for healthy diets and improved nutrition should be integrated into extension services and delivered to actors involved in all elements of food systems.

21. The symposium welcomed countries' initiative to jointly create a functional Nutrition Capacity Development Network and Partnership Platform for Central Asia and Caucasus, with lead support from UNICEF, aiming to address the current capacity gaps in the area of food and nutrition in subregions in close collaboration with other experienced capacity development networks in nutrition in the region.

22. The outcomes of the Regional Symposium will contribute to the identification of regional programme priorities and support mainstreaming food and nutrition security across the regional initiatives, strategic programmes, food and agriculture investments, and activities.