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Transforming food systems in Europe and Central Asia for improved nutritional outcomes

Executive summary

This background document highlights specific aspects of food systems in Europe and Central Asia in which action is needed to provide healthy and nutritious diets for all. Members are invited to share progress made in adopting sustainable food systems that balance economic, environmental and social dimensions; that reduce poverty and vulnerabilities; that promote and improve resilient livelihoods; and that protect the planet's natural resources.

Demonstrating the linkages between food systems and nutrition, a discussion will be facilitated on how to adopt a holistic food systems approach to provide affordable and accessible healthy diets. In the context of addressing all forms of malnutrition, the importance of consumers' basic right to improved nutrition through the availability of a nutritious, diverse diet and the pivotal role consumers may play in driving sustainability and shaping food systems of the future are outlined.

The importance of sustainable food and agricultural production for better production and the importance of territorial and local development approaches are introduced and further expounded upon in two related background documents.[1] The current agenda item will provide the opportunity to agree on policy recommendations for the region.

[1] The two additional documents are "Better production to increase access to diverse, nutritious foods" (ECA/42/21/4) and "Territorial approaches and community development to drive local change and prevent all forms of malnutrition" (ECA/42/21/5).

I. Introduction

1. Across the Europe and Central Asia region, at a time when the world is facing unprecedented challenges, policy makers and stakeholders are increasingly focused on transforming agrifood systems, recognizing that agriculture, health, nature, people and food are intertwined and interconnected. At the Thirty-second FAO Regional Conference for Europe in 2020, Member Countries affirmed the importance of adopting sustainable, holistic food systems to deliver healthy diets and improve food security and nutrition while maximizing contributions to the three dimensions (environmental, economic and social) of sustainable development (FAO, 2020). The commitment and vision to change builds on the global acceptance that agrifood systems transformation is one of the key levers to unlocking progress towards the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2. In July and September 2021, governments and stakeholders from the Europe and Central Asia region joined the global community at the United Nations Food Systems Pre-Summit and Summit. They outlined tangible actions being undertaken to shape agrifood systems to provide healthy, affordable food for all while addressing climate concerns, keeping the planet from the brink of collapse, and enabling farmers and value chain operators to be custodians of the environment with decent incomes and livelihoods.

3. Awareness is increasing and voices are aligning that "business as usual" models cannot persist if the SDG targets are to be met. The commitment to act is being galvanized by a number of parallel processes taking place in 2021. In addition to the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, COP15) and the Nutrition for Growth Summit – coupled with the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic – are leading to a shift in mindset, generating momentum and a renewed sense of urgency to implement concrete actions now in order to transform food systems.

4. Countries are committed to building a positive outcome from the United Nations Food Systems Summit and pathways beyond as part of the Decade of Action to Deliver the SDGs by 2030. Member States dialogues and Independent Dialogues have focused on actions and solutions and anchored discussions around the five action tracks: (1) ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all; (2) shift to sustainable consumption patterns; (3) boost nature-positive production at sufficient scale; (4) advance equitable livelihoods; and (5) build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress.

5. The UNFSS identified four levels of change – human rights, innovation, finance and gender equality and women's empowerment – and each has the power to bring about significant progress on both food systems transformation and the achievement of all 17 SDGs. Youth empowerment also deserves more support.

6. FAO's new Strategic Framework 2022–2031 firmly focuses and redirects efforts and resources for FAO to deepen partnerships with Member Countries for the transformation 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 (FAO, 2021a).

7. This document discusses holistic approaches for food systems transformation and highlights aspects of agrifood systems in Europe and Central Asia in which action is needed to overcome food and nutrition challenges. The role of stakeholders, including policymakers and consumers, is outlined. Members are invited to share progress made to adopt sustainable food systems, including follow-up to the UNFSS, and to consider the recommendations.

8. This document is structured in four sections. Section 2 introduces context to holistic food systems in the Europe and Central Asia region, highlights the role of the consumer, and describes regional food and nutrition challenges and actions to successfully address all forms of malnutrition. Section 3 outlines FAO's support for the transformation of food systems, including building on the UNFSS processes. Section 4 provides conclusions and recommendations.

II. Transforming food systems through a holistic approach in the Europe and Central Asia region

9. A wide variety of food systems can exist or coexist at local, national, regional and global levels, including traditional, mixed and modern ones (HLPE, 2017). Multiple drivers will further shape and transform all these types of food systems in the Europe and Central Asia region, including economic development at all levels; agrifood chain development for resilient and stable food supplies; overcoming malnutrition challenges, including obesity; natural resources management and climate adaptation (land, soil, water); sustainability and circular economy; and environmental protection (promote organic, use less pesticides, etc.).

10. Historically, policy formulation and policy analysis have tended to deal with parallel objectives and to address specific aspects of food systems such as food production, nutrition and fisheries in isolation. A holistic and integrated food systems approach is precisely to strengthen policy coherence and to ensure that the responsibility for the prevention of environmental degradation and harm to public health is not left to individuals and producers but is proactively embedded in food system activities (Lang and Mason, 2017).

11. The term "food system" covers "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). The food system is an important leverage for a range of issues, such as environmental protection, food and nutrition security, trade, equity and health (European Commission, 2020; IPES-Food, 2019; United Nations, 2019). Using the agrifood systems approach, FAO focuses on profiling agriculture beyond production and macroeconomic purposes to ensure food security and resilient livelihoods, promoting innovations and better catalyzing investment and partnerships. The 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 constitute livelihoods and all the people and activities, investments and choices that play a part in getting us these food and agricultural products (FAO, 2021b).

12. When Member Countries affirmed the importance of adopting sustainable, holistic agrifood systems at the Thirty-second Session of the FAO Conference for Europe, they also highlighted the need to address inequalities in food systems, foster a more people-centred approach, and empower vulnerable and marginalized groups in the context of social sustainability and in order to provide affordable, healthy diets for all. Emphasis was given to supporting smallholders and family farms; investing in value chains (including short value chains and small and medium enterprises); developing local markets to use untapped potential and maximize job creation, prosperity and decent employment opportunities; promoting agroecological and other innovative approaches; reversing biodiversity loss; reducing food loss and waste; and building agrifood systems that are resilient to climate change and other shocks. As

climate risks are predicted to become more common globally, potentially severe impacts on food security and significant increases in food-insecure populations are expected (IPCC, 2021).

13. An agrifood systems approach presupposes a holistic and comprehensive understanding of how the interlinkages among food production, processing, distribution and consumption contribute to a sustainable and healthy diet. Striving for agrifood systems that lead to better production, better nutrition, better environment and a better life emphasizes the need to go beyond the food system as linear and narrow to understand the system as complex and dynamic, including context-specific synergies and trade-offs. Data and evidence are required to maximize synergies and evaluate trade-offs. Deciding on the best course of action needs to involve those with a vested interest, including policymakers and relevant stakeholders. This should lead to increased coordination between policymaking communities and actual policy coherence (OECD, 2021). Sustainable and healthy diets must combine all three dimensions of sustainability, and because of this, there will be unintended consequences or trade-offs from policy or regulatory changes that should be resolved based on specific country situations and goals. Examples of trade-offs and synergies are included in Box 1.

Box 1.
Trade-offs:

- Farm incomes versus consumer food prices (income generation and food security).
- Ruminant livestock are an important source of nutrition and livelihoods but contribute to significant environmental problems, including climate change. Lower livestock numbers can lead to lower protein availability (healthy diets and lower emissions) and lower incomes for producers (at least in the short term).
- Preventing food loss and waste leads to gains for food security and the environment, but it needs to be balanced with reduction in quality and should not compromise food safety.
- Digital technology accelerates advances in food production and trade and connectivity among businesses and between businesses and consumers but requires policies, investment, skills and capacity development to avoid a digital divide.

Synergies:

- School feeding programmes improve childhood nutrition and provide a market and income generation for local food suppliers and smallholders.
- Food recovery and redistribution initiatives to redirect food to vulnerable households lead to improvements in food security and nutrition and reductions in negative environmental impacts.
- Investing in more efficient value chains, including value addition, can result in a more diverse basket of foods available for improved nutrition and can increase income generation and access to technology, infrastructure, logistics and markets while also building circular economy and green approaches into the value chain.

14. A shift to sustainable food systems will require governments to address sustainability challenges as part of initial agenda-setting actions, rather than as add-ons, and this can present challenges to policymakers. While much is already known about which policies can improve agrifood systems, there are often wide gaps between desirable policies and the policies currently adopted in many countries. These may arise due to difficulties in leadership in policy, policy incoherence caused by competing policies, and inadequate investment in identifying and addressing synergies and trade-offs, and they may also reflect diverging interests or disagreements over facts or values (OECD, 2021). Analyzing the hidden costs of unhealthy diets (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2020) provides crucial rationale for evidence-based policy formulation.

15. Transforming food systems will require more innovative governance approaches, built on reliable evidence and data sources, to facilitate an inclusive and new way of conceptualizing problems and solutions (Kugelberg, 2021). It also would require the fostering of greater collaborations among public- and private-sector actors, corporations, investors, universities and start-ups.

2.1 The role of consumers in driving sustainability through choices and actions

16. Healthy diets that contain nutritious foods protect against the effects of malnutrition in all its forms and against non-communicable diseases. The food choices people are faced with and the choices they make are profoundly determined by the food system of which they are part – the so-called food environment, which includes food availability, physical access, affordability, etc. (HLPE, 2017). The UNFSS Regional Independent Dialogue for Europe and Central Asia countries in May 2021 (FAO, 2021a)[2] acknowledged that consumers, especially those younger than 30, can have an incredible power in shaping the food environment. "Generation Z," the first generation to have grown up with access to the internet and portable digital technology from a young age, are becoming more interested and engaged in the food system shift towards sustainability – and in many different roles, not only as consumers.

17. The knowledge generated and held by farmers, fishers, forest dwellers, food industry workers, cooperatives, consumer groups, civil society movements, indigenous populations and a whole range of other actors is one of the greatest untapped resources in the quest to reform food systems. All consumers should be supported and empowered to make more sustainable and better-informed food choices through appropriate food labelling, and they should be protected against food fraud, unfair practices, misleading claims, promotion of foods high in fat, salt and sugar, free refills of sugary soft drinks, etc. Young children rely on others, including primary caregivers and policymakers, for the adequacy of their diet and nutritional intake. By the time they advance from adolescents to adulthood, their food habits will be largely formed, and they should be skilled to make healthy food choices (Consumer International, 2019). Caregivers such as parents and teachers play a crucial role in shaping the sustainable dietary behaviours and physical exercise habits of the youngest and future generations.

18. Already in the Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related Health Issues, the European Commission considered the development of effective partnerships to be the cornerstone of Europe's response to tackling nutrition, overweight and obesity and their related health problems (European Commission, 2007). An example of such a partnership is the European Union Platform for Action. Since 2006, reports have been released describing and assessing the activities undertaken by

[2] FAO, 2021. https://summitdialogues.org/dialogue/17447/official-feedback-17447-en.pdf?t=1627050054

platform members through ongoing commitments, serving as a basis for improving the direction and impact of the platform (Halicka, et al., 2018).

19. Targeted, age-appropriate food literacy and education initiatives are especially important to provide consumers with the skills needed to limit or reorient their food demands, help reduce overconsumption of food, and reorient diets towards more sustainable patterns. Increased consumer awareness has been shown to create demand for certified foods, assuring fair trade, decent working conditions for food producers, addressing animal welfare concerns, and the promotion of "green consumption," which is related to environmentally responsible consumption that considers the environmental impact of purchasing, using and disposing of various products. Research carried out by the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) showed that 57 percent of consumers from 11 European Union Member States want sustainability information to be compulsory on food labels (BEUC, 2020). The formulation of integrated national food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) also should include principles of sustainable diets, such as reducing food waste (FAO/WHO, 2019) (Martini, et al., 2021).

2.2 Overview of regional food and nutrition challenges

20. As outlined in the *Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2020* (FAO, WFP, UNECE, UNICEF, WHO and WMO, 2021), significant challenges need to be overcome to provide affordable and healthy diets for all, including the specific difficulties faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups in the Europe and Central Asia region.

21. Encouragingly, a vast majority of the countries monitored in the region (except Kyrgyzstan and Georgia) managed to keep prevalence of undernourishment (PoU[3]) values below 5 percent in recent years, with the number of hungry people remaining almost unchanged from 2014. In actual numbers, nearly 2 million people in Central Asia and 600 000 in the Caucasus are classified as hungry. Additionally, the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)[4] indicates that around 10.6 percent of the Europe and Central Asia population (about 98.6 million people) were exposed to moderate or severe food insecurity (Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 2.1.2) in 2019, compared to the world average of 25.9 percent.

22. The gender gap in access to food decreased from 2014 to 2019 but remains a concern. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in 2019 was 11 percent higher among women than among men in the region as a whole, and 22 percent higher in the Caucasus. Reducing food insecurity and malnutrition among women is important not only for reaching Zero Hunger, but also for improving gender equality, health and economic outcomes.

23. In addition to food insecurity, many countries in the region continue to be challenged by the burden of all forms of malnutrition. Relative to the world average, the Europe and Central Asia region is in a worse position regarding the prevalence of childhood overweight, exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life, and adult obesity. The region is also not on track to tackle iron deficiency among women aged 15–49 (FAO, WFP, UNECE, UNICEF, WHO and WMO, 2021). All countries in the region (with the exception of Uzbekistan) had increases since 2012 and are not on track to meet the

[3] PoU estimates are derived from national food balance sheet data and are computed based on three parameters: average national dietary energy supply, minimum dietary energy requirements for an average individual, and a measure of the distribution of food within a country.

[4] The FIES measures people's direct responses to questions regarding their access to food of adequate quality and quantity and the regularity of that access.

2025 and 2030 targets. The rates of anaemia were higher in Central Asia and the Caucasus in recent years, but the Europe and Central Asia region overall is 30 percent lower than the world average.

24. Childhood stunting saw large reductions in the region in most countries of concern, and overall – without considering the effects of COVID-19 – the Europe and Central Asia countries are on track to achieve the 2025 and 2030 SDG targets for stunting. This is very significant, as stunted girls are more likely to give birth to undernourished babies, thereby perpetuating the cycle of undernutrition and poverty. A stunted child also has greater propensity for developing obesity and other chronic diseases during adulthood.

25. The adult population obesity rate in the Europe and Central Asia region is higher than the world average (13.1 percent in 2016), having risen from 21.5 percent in 2012 to 23.2 percent in 2016. The rapid growth of obesity rates represents a growing concern, especially in Central Asia, where the 14 percent increase from 2012 to 2016 was higher than the world average increase of 11 percent and the regional average increase of 8 percent. The ECA-15[5] also had a higher increase (11.2 percent) than the regional average. All countries in the European Union had a very high rate of adult obesity, and all were 50 percent above the world average. Five countries had a rate more than double the world average: Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

26. Although data on childhood overweight in the region need updating, it is estimated that the prevalence of overweight among children younger than 5 in the ECA-15 countries is more than double the global level. Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia had the most severe situations, with a prevalence of overweight in children younger than 5 at three to four times the global level.

27. FAO data on food availability for consumption (FAO, WFP, UNECE, UNICEF, WHO and WMO, 2021) evinces a positive development from the points of view of both nutrition and sustainability because of increased per capita availability for consumption of plant-based foods in ECA-15 countries during the past 15 years.

28. However, a large gap in the availability of fruits is found in half of the countries, and there is a significant gap in the availability of pulses in the region. The Europe and Central Asia region has a much higher level of consumption of animal-based foods, on average, than the world at large. In particular, the consumption of animal-based foods in the European Union is more than double the world average, and the aggregate average consumption of red meat and milk is above the standards of optimal intake. The overconsumption of animal-based foods not only has negative impacts on health (in particular on overweight and obesity and the risk of non-communicable diseases), but it also is less efficient in terms of resource use and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions that exacerbate climate change (World Resources Institute, 2016).

29. The *Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2020* report shows that both availability and the cost of a healthy diet also are of growing concern in the Europe and Central Asia region (FAO, WFP, UNECE, UNICEF, WHO and WMO, 2021). In 2020, approximately 18 percent of the population in ECA-14[6] countries could not afford a healthy diet (FAO, WFP, UNECE,

[5] The ECA-15 includes the following countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These are the ECA-18 countries minus the Russian Federation, Turkey and Ukraine, which together account for 70 percent of the total ECA-18 population.

[6] The ECA-14 includes the 14 countries in Europe and Central Asia that are not part of the European Union and for which data were available. They are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan and Turkey.

UNICEF, WHO and WMO, 2021). Healthy diets cost five times more, on average, than diets that cover only the basic energy needs through a starchy staple, based on the analysis of food cost/affordability data from the 14 countries. This calls for structural changes in food production and consumption within current food systems. Appropriate policy measures are needed to reduce food prices and costs and/or to increase incomes for the millions of people who cannot afford a healthy diet.

2.3 Important actions in the Europe and Central Asia region to successfully address all forms of malnutrition

30. Improving the functionality of food systems to deliver sustainable and healthy diets requires context-specific changes not only to agriculture and food policies but also across multiple sectors and policy areas that address, for example, national development priorities, economic policies, and social norms (HLPE, 2017). In 2021, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (VGFSyN) (CFS, 2021)[7] were adopted. They are structured around seven focus areas encapsulating cross-cutting factors that are relevant for improving diets and nutrition: i) transparent, democratic and accountable governance; ii) sustainable food supply chains to achieve healthy diets in the context of economic, social and environmental sustainability, and climate change; iii) equal and equitable access to healthy diets through sustainable food systems; iv) food safety across sustainable food systems; v) people-centred nutrition knowledge, education and information; vi) gender equality and women's empowerment across food systems; and vii) resilient food systems in humanitarian contexts. The VGFSyN Guidelines present a comprehensive, systemic, and science- and evidence-based approach to help countries achieve healthy diets through sustainable food systems while addressing economic, social and environmental sustainability and minimizing policy fragmentation with a special emphasis on the food, agriculture and nutrition sectors.

31. Nutrition can neither be viewed purely from a health perspective, nor solely as the responsibility of the health sector, as it so often is. Actions taken in other parts of the food system, including in agriculture and trade portfolios, can positively and/or negatively affect nutritional outcomes. Robust policy processes are needed to balance diverging interests and to overcome value differences, leading to improved policy coherence, coordination and public–private initiatives. Synergies and trade-offs need to be understood and evaluated, and it is complex when various issues are at stake and when different stakeholders have diverging interests, views and values. Choices have to be made and priorities established in a way that attracts broad support across society, acknowledging that not everyone will be happy with the outcome all of the time. The ultimate goal is to decide on policies and actions that further strengthen all aspects of sustainability in the food system, as a key commitment to achieving multiple SDGs. It is not always possible to have the ideal outcome for every objective, and the intention is to do the least harm and maximize the outcome for all three aspects of sustainability. Decisions should be based on the best possible evidence about the extent and characteristics of problems, their trade-offs and synergies, and the effectiveness and costs and benefits of different possible policy responses, including the status quo.

32. A number of countries in the region[8] are developing food systems profiles to provide a snapshot of the key drivers, status and outcomes of the national food systems, using methodologies and

[7] Informed by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition's (HLPE) Report on Nutrition and Food Systems, additional literature, and an inclusive consultation process.

[8] The Member States of the Organization for the Black Sea Economic Cooperation are listed at http://www.bsec-organization.org/member-states.

assessment tools.[9] Through the process, the strengths and weaknesses in the system are understood, as is the degree of sustainability. The UNFSS Member State dialogues have facilitated important discussions across various ministries, sectors and disciplines, with many countries continuing to build on them.

33. While increased food availability and improved access are necessary conditions for improvements in food security and nutrition, they are not sufficient to guarantee improved nutritional outcomes. As countries develop economically, they typically pass through a "nutrition transition" in which higher incomes translate first into demand for more calories and then into demand for more protein (usually from animal sources) as well as for other nutrients coming from nuts, fruits and vegetables. A parallel trend is for higher consumption of sugar, oils and fats, via processed foods. These become more important as countries become wealthier and more urbanized, and they may contribute to the rising burden of overweight and obesity (OECD, 2021). Such changes should be reversed so that everyday nutrition is based on a variety of unprocessed or minimally processed foods, balanced across food groups, and limited quantities of highly processed food and drink products. Sustainable diets include whole grains, legumes, nuts and an abundance and variety of fruits and vegetables; moderate amounts of eggs, dairy, poultry and fish; and small amounts of red meat. They are good for human and planetary health (FAO and WHO, 2019; Lang and Mason, 2017).

34. Increasing sedentariness is a further factor behind rising obesity trends (Graf and Cecchini, 2017). In countries of the region in which overweight and obesity levels have been increasing dramatically, diets are too reliant on foods with "empty" calories, ready and easy to access food, and lack of diverse foods. The phenomenon of "food deserts" in communities where there is a lack of affordable and healthy food options and/or a high proportion of fast food outlets is a concerning and contributing factor (Beaumont *et al.*, 1995).

35. Creating an "enabling food environment" for consumers is critical – one where diverse, nutritious foods are available at affordable prices and the phenomenon of food deserts is eliminated. An assessment of the strengths of policies influencing food environments and priority actions to create healthy food environments in the European Union was carried out in 2020 by non-government, independent experts (Djojosoeparto *et al.*, 2021). The policy actions identified as the strongest included: bans on trans fats in processed and ultra-processed foods; mandatory, ambitious, comprehensive and time-specific food composition targets for added sugars, salt, and saturated fat for all food categories; a 0 percent VAT exemption for all fresh fruit and vegetables; and reformulation targets for added sugars, salt, and saturated fat for processed and ultra-processed foods and meals sold at quick-service restaurants.

36. Also important are protecting consumers through responsible marketing and advertising and building consumers' skills through food literacy and nutrition education programmes to help them make informed, sustainable food choices. Through schools and families, children should be introduced early on to the interrelations among food, the environment, animals, plants, and human health in order to inform them on actions that they can take to protect their health and respect nature, such as reducing food waste. One such initiative is Do Good: Save Food![10] developed by FAO in close cooperation with the International Food Waste Coalition.

[9] For more information, see https://www.fao.org/support-to-investment/our-work/projects/fsa2021/en/; the 2016 Global Panel Report on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition; and the CFS 2017 High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition report.

[10] For more information, see http://www.fao.org/3/CA1173EN/ca1173en.pdf.

37. The analysis of food availability in the Europe and Central Asia region suggests a need to reorient production and trade systems for prominent food items to shift consumption to within the optimal range of healthy diets. Through the adoption of nutrition-sensitive policies (FAO, 2017; GloPaN, 2020), ministries of agriculture and food can shape food and agriculture production and supply chains, including through value addition, to provide diverse and nutritious foods, leading to better nutrition outcomes. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture is a food-based approach that puts nutritionally rich foods and dietary diversity at the heart of agriculture development policies aiming at overcoming malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies.[11]

38. Unified transformational change and actions should make the best use of technology, innovation (including digital), data (including big data), governance, policy and human capital (referred to by FAO as "accelerators"). Digitalization and e-agriculture in many parts of Europe and Central Asia still suffer from underinvestment, and "losing" more youth from the countryside will constitute a big problem for modernizing agriculture, as the younger generation is the bearer of information technology skills and knowledge. The digital gender divide in the region also remains a reality, with still fewer women than men benefiting from internet use. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), involved in monitoring and changing this situation, has called for more action in building an equal digital future.

39. Technology and innovation, including well-known and emerging technologies, need to be harnessed. When looking at innovation and science as a means to transform, we also should look at traditional and local cultures as we strive for social sustainability and equity in our food systems. Innovation, research and well-functioning agricultural extension services are an important prerequisite not only for technology and knowledge transfer to farmers and small enterprises, but also of the new opportunities that digitalization offers for improving the productivity and sustainability of food systems and increasing transparency for consumers.

40. Additionally, the socio-economic dimensions of agrifood systems strongly affect the ability to address all forms of malnutrition. Many countries in Europe and Central Asia recognize the central role of territorial development, in the context of local community development approaches, in addressing multidimensional issues of food security and nutrition and the growing inequalities among and between countries, regions and communities. Territorial approaches are widely recognized as key for boosting development and local economies and improving policymaking processes at subnational levels, allowing multisectoral and multistakeholder action to address the complexity of interrelated local economic, social and spatial structural transformations.[12]

41. Sustainable school feeding programmes should be supported, and schoolchildren need to be protected against the marketing and sales activities of food companies producing foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS foods). During the Europe and Central Asia Regional Dialogue (FAO, 2021a), young activists from Kazakhstan representing children's rights highlighted that there is a discrepancy between what is "good" food (distributed in schools) and what is desirable and attractive for youngsters (sweets, fast foods, etc.). Nutrition education is compulsory in the national curriculum for primary and/or secondary schools in many countries in the region.

[11] These issues are discussed further in the document ECA/42/21/4.
[12] These issues are discussed further in the document ECA/42/21/5.

III. Support to countries from FAO, and building on the UNFSS process

42. Within the framework of the new FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031 and the organizational principles of better production, better nutrition, better environment and better life, FAO's priorities in Europe and Central Asia for 2022–25 embody the renewed corporate emphasis on the "leaving no one behind" principle, the Hand-in-Hand Initiative, promoting innovative approaches and the use of modern science and technologies, and following a food systems transformation approach that links sectors, actors and countries pertaining to the sustainable use of natural resources, agriculture, food security, nutrition and resilience.

43. More specifically, FAO supports Member Countries on a number of agreed priorities: i) policy formulation for inclusive rural development, including digital innovation; ii) food system transformation and market access through the alignment of trade, food safety and sanitary and phytosanitary policies; iii) sustainable natural resource management, resilience, and climate change mitigation and adaptation; and iv) addressing food insecurity and reducing all forms of malnutrition.

44. The UNFSS and associated dialogues have provided momentum and opportunity for regional and in-country discussions on agrifood systems issues and challenges and have fostered cross-ministerial, multidisciplinary and multistakeholder discussions. Ninety-two Independent Dialogues in the Europe and Central Asia Region have been held,[13] and 22 countries[14] in the Europe and Central Asia region have published their UNFSS national pathways. Countries are committing the pathways into national policy processes to continue the work and deepen the dialogues.

45. Some recurring themes from the Member State Dialogues were a strong focus on the right to food, and in particular the need to ensure that all people can access the range of nutrients needed for them to achieve their full potential in life. This requires that foods be affordable and that policies focus on increasing the production of specific products with a greater emphasis on access to good nutrition. Other prominent themes included food systems resilience, equity and social protection, climate-smart and nature-positive solutions, and the environmental impact of food systems. Although they vary in approach, the Member State Pathway and Independent Dialogues Feedback documents show considerable commonality about the mechanisms that will be required to deliver on the ambitious plans for food system transformation.

46. FAO will work with countries to capitalize on the results of the UNFSS Member State Dialogues and to realize national roadmaps and outcomes of the UNFSS – linked to the action tracks and coalitions. Interventions should be focused on achieving the SDG targets and indicators and the 2030 Agenda, with partnerships central to success.

47. In Europe and Central Asia, the United Nations Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems (IBC-SFS)[15] facilitates coordinated support by the partners – FAO, UNECE, WHO, UNICEF, IFAD, UNDP, WFP and WMO – to support countries in their development of the essential aspects of sustainable agrifood systems in a holistic way, addressing the food security, nutrition and health needs

[13] For more information, see https://summitdialogues.org/explore-dialogues.
[14] As of 23 November 2021, the 22 countries that have published their UNFSS national pathways are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Russian Federation, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Uzbekistan.
[15] For more information, see https://unece.org/issue-based-coalition-sustainable-food-systems.

of all, including the most vulnerable (women and children); climate, environment and preparedness for extreme weather events and shocks; sustainable agriculture and food production with efficient food supply chains; and equitable and economically sustainable food systems that enable improved livelihoods for smallholders and small and medium-sized enterprises. These efforts also should link to ongoing goals and initiatives, including the implementation of the FAO Nutrition Strategy, the follow-up to the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition, the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, and the United Nations Decade of Family Farms.

IV. Conclusions and policy recommendations

48. Improving diets and nutritional status for all, with a focus on the most vulnerable, to reduce all forms of malnutrition – especially reversing the rapidly increasing rates of obesity and reducing anaemia – are important goals of food system transformation in the Europe and Central Asia region. Additionally, the need to protect the environment through reducing food loss and waste, reversing biodiversity loss, and mitigating climate change and extreme weather events is part of transforming agrifood systems.

49. Member Countries and stakeholders across the region are taking action and have invested in UNFSS dialogues to strengthen ownership of the food systems approach and to share information and solutions. Collectively, important momentum has been built, and opportunities for change are emerging. Policy and governance play a leadership role in transforming food systems and enable input and actions by stakeholders. Non-governmental organizations are ideally placed to represent the consumer voice in food policy and practice. They also have an in-depth understanding of the communities and people they represent and can use the cross-cutting nature of their work to collaborate with other actors to maximize the opportunities that technology offers and address problems in order to build a systemic and holistic approach to food.

50. Collecting and analyzing sufficient data and evidence to inform decisions and policies on food systems transformation is a priority, including addressing data gaps. Assessment tools can be useful to provide much-needed evidence at the country level to operationalize synergies and interpret trade-offs. Holistic food systems thinking and approaches also assume that expertise is available, which does warrant capacity development support in certain countries to equip policymakers and other stakeholders.

51. Building back better after the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to build in green solutions, including greener consumer choices and increasing local actions as part of strengthened agrifood systems. With nine years left to achieve the 2030 Agenda, the UNFSS outcomes, including the national pathways, constitute a rich source of information on game-changing and systemic solutions to transform food systems across the five action tracks, incorporating the four levers of change.

52. Recognizing that transforming the way food is produced, processed, distributed, prepared and consumed can improve nutritional outcomes in the region, it is recommended that governments:

1. **Maintain the political will to work coherently on food systems**, including promoting a new dimension of collaboration, creating stakeholder partnerships and including all the "farm to fork" actors, to (re)build sustainable food systems and strong, transparent and accountable institutions and governance.
2. **Support an appropriate enabling food environment for consumers**, including regulating the marketing of foods, and use the CFS Voluntary Guidelines for Food Systems and Nutrition. The promotion of healthy and sustainable diets with other issues of concern, such as climate change and environmental protection, should be harmonized.

3. Continue to **deepen cross-sectoral dialogue among ministries** working on agriculture, health, social issues and employment, environment and trade portfolios.

4. **Address equitability when transforming food systems, including** promoting the livelihoods and nutritional status of the most vulnerable in both urban and rural areas (including smallholders, children, youth and women).

5. **Support livelihoods and community development for inclusive food systems** and promote local and territorial approaches, including landscape, and the recommendations set out in the document ECA/42/21/5.

6. **Leverage accelerators to maximize food systems transformation**, including technology, innovation, data, governance, human capital and institutions. Monitor and take account of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security and nutrition and the livelihoods of those engaged in food production.

7. **Invest in agrifood systems** that make nutrient-rich foods available from diverse sources, at affordable prices, through better production and value addition, following the recommendations in the document ECA/42/21/4.

8. **Improve regional cooperation on important issues that affect food security and nutrition** integral to sustainable food systems, including land and water management, intraregional value chains and food trade, and research and development.

9. **Create a cultural mindset change for a circular economy of food** to achieve economic, environmental and social sustainability.

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