

# **FAO's Approach to Nutrition-Sensitive Agricultural Development**

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## **FAO's mandate**

The importance of nutrition-sensitive food and agriculture-based approaches for overcoming malnutrition and improving nutrition in general is fully recognized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). FAO, a specialized UN agency, has as its mandate the raising of levels of nutrition and standards of living and ensuring humanity's freedom from hunger by promoting sustainable agricultural development and alleviating poverty. The Organization offers direct development assistance and policy and planning advice to governments for improving the efficiency of the production, distribution and consumption of food and agricultural products; collects, analyses and disseminates information and acts as an international forum for debate on food, nutrition and agriculture issues.

Focusing on the distinctive relationship between agriculture, food and nutrition, FAO works actively to protect, promote and improve established food-based systems as the sustainable solution to ensure food and nutrition security, combat micronutrient deficiencies, improve diets and raise levels of nutrition, and by doing so, to achieve the nutrition-related MDGs.

## **Situation analysis at global level**

The combined effects of prolonged underinvestment in nutrition and in food and agriculture, together with the recent price instability and the economic downturn and exacerbated by the steady increase in the frequency and severity of natural disasters have led to increased hunger and poverty in developing countries, jeopardizing the progress achieved so far in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). FAO estimates that a total of 925 million people were undernourished in 2010 compared with 1.02 billion in 2009. Ten million children die before their fifth birthday every year, and that a third of these deaths are associated with undernutrition. One in three developing country children under the age of five (178 million children) are stunted due to chronic undernutrition and 148 million children are underweight. Micronutrient malnutrition or "hidden hunger" affects around 2 billion people (over 30% of the world population) with serious public health consequences.

## **Food production matters**

The primary importance of the food and agriculture sector in improving household food security and alleviating and preventing malnutrition is clear. Agriculture is the major source of food, employment and income upon which the majority of mankind relies to provide for and support their livelihood. Large numbers of people, especially the poor, are involved directly or indirectly in agricultural activities and derive multiple benefits arising from its multifunctional character. When agricultural development falters or fails in countries where no other fast growing sectors exist to employ people, the chances of the poor rising above the poverty level to play a full part in the economic development of their country is diminished. Given the high level of dependency of many of the world's poor

and nutritionally vulnerable to the fruits of the earth, this sector offers the greatest potential for achieving sustained improvements in the nutritional status of the rural poor.

At the national level, boosting agricultural production stimulates overall economic growth and development particularly in those countries which have a high economic dependence on agriculture. Thus agricultural and rural development acts as an engine for sustainable economic development making an effective contribution to national economic growth.

At the community level developments in agriculture lead to increased farm productivity, which reduce food deficits, increase food surpluses and raise incomes. With adequate market access, diversification into higher-value products or more capital-intensive forms of agriculture (cash crops, livestock, and aquaculture) provide opportunities to generate cash income and can free up labour either for other productive activities, for meeting social obligations or for leisure. Improved agriculture production thus provides opportunities to sustainably reduce poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition and thereby improve the quality of life.

### **Consumption is key**

Since the purpose of economic growth and agricultural development is to improve living conditions, developments in agriculture must provide sustainable benefits for society as a whole and especially to those communities which depend on the land for their survival and who are resource poor, marginalised, food insecure and malnourished. Consequently, focus needs to be given to not only increasing the production and access to foods but also its consumption, ensuring that the poor have access to adequate quantities of safe, good quality food for a nutritionally adequate diet. This includes not only energy, protein and fats but also micronutrients - the vitamins and minerals and other trace elements so necessary for normal growth and development.

Agricultural policies influence the quantity and quality of foods farmers produce, as well as the range of crops grown and the production methods used. Therefore, agricultural policies can affect human health and nutrition. In turn, health and nutrition policies can affect agriculture by influencing whether farming families are physically able to work their farm. An undernourished workforce is less able to do work, absenteeism and sickness are more frequent and consequently poor nutrition acts as a brake to agricultural and economic development. Yet although they may share common goals, professionals in agriculture, nutrition, and health rarely work collaboratively together and discuss areas of mutual interest, exploit synergies and pursue outcomes together that are beneficial to society.

### **Promote nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food-based strategies**

FAO is advocating that unless more attention is given to food-based interventions that promote dietary diversity and the consumption of nutritionally rich foods, the goal of ending hunger may not be achieved. Food and agriculture-based strategies (including food production, dietary diversification and food fortification), focus on food as the primary tool for improving the quality of the diet and for overcoming and preventing malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies. The approach stresses the multiple benefits derived from

enjoying a variety of foods, recognising the nutritional value of food for good nutrition, and the importance and social significance of the food and agricultural sector for supporting rural livelihoods.

The approach encourages and equips people to consider their total diet in relation to their preferences, individual lifestyle factors, physiological requirements and physical activity levels. Started early, this approach can contribute to physiological, mental and social development, enhance learning potential, reduce nutritional disorders and contribute to the prevention of diet-related diseases later in life. The fact that malnutrition continues to be experienced in countries despite apparently having adequate food supplies, highlights the need to overcome poverty, marginalization and neglect. We need to increase the production and availability of food while at the same time ensuring that the poor, the marginalised and the neglected have access to good quality, safe and nutritionally adequate food.

### **Narrowing the nutrition gap**

Poor monotonous diets low in quantity and quality in terms of nutrient content, variety, diversity and food safety lead to hunger and malnutrition. Food and agriculture-based approaches address this problem by making more foods available for improving diets. Improving food security may be achieved through narrowing the gap between current and potential production yields. Similarly, improving the food and agriculture-based aspects of nutrition security can be thought of in terms of narrowing the “nutrition gap” – the gap between current food intake patterns and intake patterns that are optimal in terms of macro and micronutrient content. Narrowing the nutrition gap means increasing the availability, access and actual consumption of a diverse range of foods. This means first assessing and identifying the nutrition gaps and then taking action to close them including increasing food production and reducing agro-food losses in both physical and economic terms, as well as by increasing the quality of the food supply by safeguarding nutritional quality along the nutrition value chain; making sure the benefits of investments in agriculture are targeted to the marginalised and food insecure and nutritionally vulnerable; and consumer education and awareness raising to improve consumption through informed choices. At each step in the chain from production to consumption there are opportunities for safeguarding nutrition quality. By identifying the critical points in the chain between food production and food consumption, the nutritional value of food can be protected and promoted.

### **Create an enabling environment and increase investments in agriculture**

Creating an enabling environment to fight hunger includes good governance, the absence of conflict and political, economic and social stability combined with an enabling macroeconomic and sector policy environment if hunger and malnutrition are to be eradicated. Resources must be made available for agricultural and rural development at a level that reflects the key role agriculture has in building sustainable livelihoods for the world’s poorest people. It is also necessary for slowing down the rate of rural to urban migration and for preventing a further widening of the rural-urban income gap.

### **Vital role of women in agriculture and rural development**

Economic growth and development are reduced if gender inequalities are not addressed. Gender inequality in education and employment reduces rates of economic growth; similarly, gender inequality in access to productive resources and inputs in agriculture reduces efficiency and rural development. Consequently, it is imperative to enhance the status of women in the rural production system, family and society to attain food security and sustainable agricultural development.

### **International Conference on Nutrition – 20 years later (ICN+20)**

In order to give new impetus to world-wide efforts on behalf of hungry and malnourished people, the Director-General of FAO and of WHO have decided to convene an International Conference on Nutrition in Rome twenty years after the 1992 ICN. One of the objectives of the Conference is to raise, *inter alia*, both the political will and the financial resources necessary for achieving nutrition-related MDGs through a balanced multi-sector approach.