PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Today, there are approximately 852 million people who are undernourished and many more who do not receive enough vitamins and minerals to ensure proper growth and development and to maintain basic health. Millions more are deprived of secure access to safe food and water, and adequate health services. Dirty water and lack of sanitation, unsafe food and inadequate feeding practices, especially of infants and young children, are major causes of diarrhoeal diseases that contribute to undernutrition and can result in death.

In contrast to undernutrition, millions of adults suffer from chronic diseases related to obesity, including heart disease, diabetes and some cancers. Dietary changes associated with urbanization, such as increased consumption of sugars and fats and declining levels of physical activity, have led to a significant rise in obesity-related diseases worldwide. Contrary to popular belief, obesity and chronic diseases have become problems of poor countries and poor people, putting an additional strain on health care budgets.

A right-to-food approach requires that states recognize their obligation to ensure that safe, nutritionally adequate and culturally acceptable food is available; to respect and protect consumers; and to promote good nutrition for all. The Voluntary Guidelines (VGs), in particular Guidelines 9 (Food safety and consumer protection) and 10 (Nutrition), can guide states in the establishment and maintenance of sound food and nutrition policies and programmes, thereby increasing the protection of the poor and vulnerable from unsafe food and inadequate diets while helping to combat overweight and obesity.
Officials and programme planners working in the areas of food safety, consumer protection and nutrition need to identify ways in which policies and programmes can be changed or designed to secure a rights-based approach to the progressive realization of the right to food.

Human rights standards require that states fulfil the right to food by providing all people with sufficient access to production resources, income or support so that they may feed and sustain themselves in a dignified manner. To comply with this obligation, the VGs recommend that states institute a rights-based approach to food. Resources can be used to build and maintain sustainable food systems, and policies and standards can be designed to ensure safe food and to enable healthy eating habits. In addition the VGs emphasize that states empower citizens with the necessary knowledge and skills to secure their right to food. States must be held accountable for measures taken to meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the right to adequate food. Procedures for claiming the right to food must be transparent. When individuals may have been denied benefits unjustly, they should have access to judicial and non-judicial recourse mechanisms.

A rights-based approach to food and nutrition also requires that policies and programmes specifically protect and promote the rights of the marginalized and most vulnerable (e.g. children, women, indigenous people, the disabled, people living with HIV/AIDS), while also providing all people with opportunities to participate in the design and implementation of decisions that will affect them. When all relevant stakeholders are included in policy-making decisions, public confidence in policies and programmes is increased, thereby improving the likelihood that implementation will be successful. Norway is one country leading the way in efforts to increase consumer participation in national food policy (see Example 1).

**Example 1**

**Consumer participation in national food policy in Norway**

In 2003, Norway established food policy consumer panels in 7 of 19 counties to incorporate citizen opinions and preferences into the formulation of food policy and to increase state knowledge of consumer opinions, attitudes and behaviour in relation to the food market. Each panel consists of nine people representing both genders, and various ages and social and educational backgrounds. The panels are scheduled to meet at least twice a year. Reports on panel findings and recommendations are published and presented to responsible cabinet ministers at biannual meetings, which are open to stakeholders and the media.

The VGs advocate that states establish comprehensive food control systems to reduce the risk of food-borne diseases and to ensure that all food, whether produced locally or obtained through trade or food aid, is safe and consistent with national food safety standards. States are encouraged to adopt scientifically based food safety standards that comply with maximum permitted levels for pathogens, contaminants from agricultural and industrial processes, residues from veterinary drugs and growth promoters and naturally occurring toxins. Food should remain safe at all times including during its production, processing, storage, transport, distribution, handling and sale.

The VGs also recommend that national food safety standards take into consideration international standards, in particular, Codex Alimentarius. While protecting the health of consumers, such standards should not be used as unjustified barriers to trade. The VGs encourage state cooperation with all stakeholders, including consumer organizations and the private sector, when establishing food safety systems.
to ensure the provision of safe and
good quality food. When states do not
have sufficient capacity to implement
agreed-upon food safety standards or
to build effective food safety systems,
developed countries and international
organizations are encouraged to
provide technical assistance.

Given that most food is commercially
produced, regulations and standards
should protect consumers against
deception and misrepresentation in the
packaging, labelling, advertising and sale
of food. Individuals should be protected
against harm caused by unsafe or
adulterated food, including food offered
by street vendors. Food packaging and
labelling should provide consumers with
accurate information that is sufficient to
enable them to make well-informed food
choices. States also need to provide
consumers with information and
education on safe storage, handling and
utilization of food, as well as ways to
prevent food-borne diseases.

In addition to promoting corporate
social responsibility and industry self-
controls, states are encouraged to
consider regulations for the marketing
and sale of food to children and
adolescents in order to protect against
unbalanced diets and the growing
problem of obesity (see Example 2).

**STRENGTHENING NUTRITION PROGRAMMES**

Good nutrition and health depend, in
large part, on the consumption of
adequate amounts of good quality,
safe food. The VGs recommend that
states maintain or strengthen dietary
diversity (e.g. through the production
of nutritious and culturally appropriate
foodstuffs, including indigenous
varieties); take measures to ensure
the fair distribution of food within
communities and households; and
promote safe food preparation
and healthy eating habits, including
appropriate infant- and breastfeeding
practices.

The VGs also encourage states
to provide people with access to
reliable nutrition information through
education, information and labelling
regulations. Consumers should be
able to choose foods that are
appropriate for their individual health
needs and to prevent insufficient
or unbalanced diets that can lead
to undernutrition, obesity or chronic
diseases. States may also need to
address the issue of food advertising
aimed at children.

Food and nutrition programmes
should be guided by a rights-based
approach and include all vulnerable
individuals and groups on a non-
discriminatory basis. Programmes
should be aimed at improving the
production and/or consumption of a
variety of nutritious foods, and include

**EXAMPLE 2**

**United States of America:** Legislation banning or restricting advertisement and sale of
fatty and sugary foods and soft drinks to children in schools have been enacted or are
under way in various states.

**United Kingdom:** The Children’s Food Bill Campaign calls for a ban on marketing and
vending-machine sale of junk foods and fizzy drinks at schools, for mandatory quality
guidelines regarding school meals, and for providing food and nutrition education.
home and school gardens, combined with nutrition education and the provision of healthy school meals. Food-based approaches contribute to household food security and to the prevention and control of micronutrient deficiency diseases. The fortification of foods with iodine, iron and vitamin A – another food-based approach – requires government regulation. Special attention should be given to the chronically vulnerable, including people suffering from HIV/AIDS. The VGs also encourage states to include all relevant stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of these programmes to ensure that vulnerable people benefit from them (see Example 3).

For infants, breastmilk is the cheapest and most nutritionally valuable food, facilitating good physical and mental development. Protection of breastfeeding and attention to the special needs of pregnant and breastfeeding women are crucial to realize the right to food for infants. States should take measures to promote and encourage breastfeeding in line with the International Code of Marketing of Breast milk Substitutes and World Health Organization recommendations on infant and child feeding.

Recognizing that nutritional status is influenced by a wide range of factors, the VGs suggest that states take parallel action to improve health, education and hygiene infrastructures, and promote intersectoral collaboration to ensure optimal nutritional outcomes. In efforts to address and prevent problems of malnutrition, priority attention must be given to the most vulnerable groups in society. States should take particular care to overcome gender disparities and discriminatory practices against women and girls. Empowering women is key to achieving food security and ensuring adequate nutrition within households.

EXAMPLE 3

The National School Meal Programme provides meals for 37 million children. A major component of the programme is that civil society participate as a partner in guaranteeing its adequate execution. For example, through the School Meals Council, elected citizens ensure that school meals meet required nutritional standards and reach all children from preschool to 14 years.

REFERENCES & USEFUL RESOURCES


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