



## Food-based Approaches for Improving Diets and Raising Levels of Nutrition



### CONCEPT NOTE

#### International Symposium on Food and Nutrition Security: Food-Based Approaches for Improving Diets and Raising Levels of Nutrition

FAO, Rome, 7-9 December 2010

#### Background

Hunger and all forms of malnutrition continue to cause widespread suffering throughout the world. Malnutrition in children commonly leads to poor growth and poor physical and mental development, increased morbidity and, all too often, death. Among adults, malnutrition leads to lethargy, frequent illness and poor health, reduced physical capacity to do work, poor pregnancy outcomes among women, decreased cognitive function and a loss of learning potential and productivity. Widespread hunger and malnutrition also serve as severe impediments to social and economic development at both community and national levels. After years of steady progress, recent setbacks in the fight against hunger and malnutrition arising from the combined effects of high food prices and the global economic downturn coupled with the continuing problems of underdevelopment, civil strife, inadequate food supplies, social discrimination and environmental stress, jeopardize the earlier hopes for achieving the poverty, hunger and nutrition-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

According to FAO, there were 105 million more hungry people in 2009 than in the previous year and the number of malnourished people now stands at 1.02 billion. In the worst-affected countries, individual productivity losses due to malnutrition are equivalent to 10% of lifetime earnings, resulting in gross domestic product (GDP) losses of up to 3%. Around the world close to 10 million children die before their fifth birthday every year, over one-third of which are associated with under nutrition. One in three developing-country children under the age of five - 178 million children - are stunted due to chronic under nutrition and poor health, and some 148 million children are underweight. Micronutrient deficiencies or "hidden hunger" affects around 2 billion people worldwide or about one third of the world's population. These vitamin and mineral deficiencies, especially of iron, iodine, zinc and vitamin A, lead to poor physical growth and development, lowered mental capacities, reduced productivity, impaired immune systems, blindness and death - all of which are preventable.

Malnutrition, in all its forms, places an intolerable burden not only on individuals and national health systems but on the entire cultural, social and economic fabric of nations, and constitutes one of the greatest - and most preventable - impediments to the fulfilment of human potential. While the cost of treating and dealing with the effects of malnutrition, whether in fiscal, economic or human terms, is high, the prevention of malnutrition is much less. Investing in nutrition, therefore, not only is a moral imperative, but also makes economic sense as it reduces health care costs, improves productivity and economic growth and promotes education, intellectual capacity and social development.

#### Rationale

The importance of food-based approaches for overcoming malnutrition and improving nutrition in general is fully recognized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). 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.





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Nutrition-sensitive, food-based approaches focus on food, whether natural foods or processed foods including those that are fortified, for improving the quality of the diet and for overcoming and preventing malnutrition. The approach recognizes the essential role food has for good nutrition as well as the importance of the food and the agriculture sector for supporting rural livelihoods. It also supports the right-to-food approach in preventing hunger and ensuring health and well-being.

Malnutrition is usually caused by a combination of inadequacies in food, health and care. Even in conditions when food availability and purchasing power may be sufficient, poor monotonous diets low in quantity, quality and variety or dietary diversity of foods is often a major contributing factor. Narrowing the nutrition gap - the gap between what foods are grown and available and what foods are needed for better nutrition - means increasing the availability, access and actual consumption of a diverse range of foods necessary for a healthy diet. FAO advocates for nutrition-sensitive, food-based approaches that increase access, availability and consumption of a variety and diversity of safe, good quality foods, including food fortification, as a sustainable strategy for improving the nutritional status of populations. In addition to its intrinsic nutritional value, food has social and economic significance which, for many people, especially those living in developing countries, is commonly mediated through agriculture and agriculture-related activities that provide employment and sustain rural livelihoods. The multiple social, economic and health benefits associated with successful food-based approaches that lead to year-round availability, access to and consumption of nutritionally adequate amounts and varieties of foods are clear. The nutritional well-being and health of individuals is promoted, incomes and livelihoods supported, and community and national wealth created and protected.

Progress in promoting and implementing food-based strategies to achieve sustainable improvements in nutritional status has been slow. They were overlooked in the past as governments, researchers, the donor community and health-oriented organizations sought approaches for overcoming malnutrition that had rapid start-up times and produced quick and measurable results. For example although supplementation has saved many lives and much suffering has been avoided as a result of these efforts, and while supplementation remains necessary for groups at high risk and as a short-term emergency measure, it fails to recognize the root causes of malnutrition and to assist communities and households to feed and nourish themselves adequately. Supplementation simply cannot provide the overall long-term economic benefits and sustainability that food-based approaches can deliver. More recently, many developing countries, international agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors are beginning to realize that food-based strategies are viable, cost-effective, long-term and sustainable solutions for improving diets and raising levels of nutrition. This Symposium builds on this trend.

However, to be successfully promoted, nutrition-sensitive, food-based approaches need to be built on firm evidence that demonstrates their effectiveness. This should be based on practical experiences in nutrition and related agricultural sciences including horticulture, agronomy, animal science and food marketing; information, education and communication; food technology related to preservation, processing and fortification; and in problem assessment, programme management, monitoring and evaluation.





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### The Symposium

The Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division (AGN) of FAO will convene an *International Symposium on Food and Nutrition Security: Food-Based Approaches for Improving Diets and Raising Levels of Nutrition* to collect and better document evidence that demonstrates the impact and effectiveness of nutrition-sensitive, food-based approaches for improving diets and raising levels of nutrition. This event will serve as the basis for future dialogue, debate and information exchange and facilitate wider support for an international movement committed to the implementation of effective, sustainable and long-term nutrition-sensitive, food-based solutions to hunger and malnutrition.

To further encourage and promote attention, importance and investment in food-based approaches, AGN has prepared the publication *Combating Micronutrient Deficiencies: Food-based Approaches* which will be launched during the Symposium. The publication brings together available knowledge and case studies on country level activities and lessons learned that document the benefits of food-based approaches, particularly of dietary improvement and diversification interventions. It provides information policy makers and others need to better understand, promote, support and implement food-based strategies to combat micronutrient deficiencies at country level.

### Purpose

The purpose of the Symposium is to increase awareness of policy makers and programme planners and implementers of the benefits of nutrition-sensitive, food-based approaches for improving diets and raising levels of nutrition. More specifically the aim is to:

- document evidence-based results that clearly demonstrate the benefits of:
  - food-based approaches for combating micronutrient deficiencies, improving diets and raising levels of nutrition; and
  - incorporating nutrition objectives and considerations into agriculture, food security and economic policies and programmes;
- identify the opportunities and challenges and the way forward for:
  - promoting nutrition-sensitive development and food-based approaches; and
  - enhancing and monitoring their impact on food and nutrition in terms of food quality and safety, food consumption and diets;
- discuss the role of FAO and others in promoting nutrition-sensitive development and food-based approaches for raising levels of nutrition, and explore opportunities for better integrating such approaches into policies and programmes.

### Process

Abstracts will be invited from individuals and organizations involved in policy making, research and field programmes from all regions of the world. An *invitation to submit abstracts* will be announced and a Scientific Advisory Committee coordinated by the FAO Secretariat will select abstracts for further development and presentation during the Symposium. Preference will be given to abstracts that:

- document the effectiveness of nutrition-sensitive food-based approaches for overcoming nutritional problems both at policy and programme level;





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- discuss the policy, strategic, methodological, technical and programmatic issues associated with such approaches;
- propose and justify “best practices” pertaining to the design, targeting, implementation and evaluation of specific nutrition-sensitive, food-based interventions, recognising the particular need for improved methodologies for evaluating their efficacy and cost-effectiveness;
- draw practical “lessons-learned” and the way forward for advancing nutrition-sensitive food-based approaches for improving nutrition at policy and programme level.

Submissions may be reviews, specific case-studies, meta-analyses or cross-sectional or longitudinal studies, and may be based on official reports, previous studies or on original research. Topics could relate to, among others: a) initiatives to expand availability and accessibility of plant and animal food in adequate quality and quantity; b) changes of food habits and choices towards more diverse and nutritious diets; c) food processing, preservation and storage at household and community level; d) improved nutrition education and health service delivery; and e) capacity building at community, national and regional levels for improving food and nutrition security and addressing specific nutrient deficiencies. These could be elements within efforts to improve targeting to reduce poverty, gender bias, economic and political exclusion and social marginalization and to promote community action planning.

A Secretariat chaired by the Director of AGN will provide overall policy direction and a Scientific Advisory Committee will be formed to oversee the scientific and technical aspects of the Symposium and provide guidance on the themes, participants and materials of the event.

### Participants

Participants will include presenters, including experts and policy makers from Ministries of Agriculture and Planning, and other additional experts who will be asked to critically appraise the contributions and give useful inputs for the improvement and refinement of the presentations.

Other participants may include: officers from AGN, officers from other FAO Divisions dealing with nutrition-related activities, professionals from other UN System agencies, representatives from CGIAR Research Centres, International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), academia and the private sector.

### Expected outputs

After the Symposium, the presentations will be available online. On the basis of the discussions carried out during the Symposium and issues raised, authors will further develop their papers and submit them within three months. A draft of the proceedings containing the papers will then be compiled by AGN. Once finalised, the proceedings will be translated into French and Spanish and published in three languages, both electronically and in hard copy for online and personal distribution. Finally, a booklet containing the abstracts of the papers with key words will be produced. The booklet will be translated into Spanish and French and published in the three languages.





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### **Expected impact**

The findings of the Symposium will be used to provide practical guidance to FAO, and ultimately, to its Member Countries, for future work utilizing nutrition-sensitive, food-based approaches for improving food and nutrition security and for overcoming specific nutrient deficiencies in the medium and long-term, taking into account FAO's mandate and comparative advantages, as well as its Core Functions and Strategic Objectives. The Symposium is envisaged as part of the preparatory activities of the ICN+20, the second International Conference on Nutrition twenty years after the holding of the first ICN in 1992.

### **Timing**

The Symposium will take place over three full days 7-9 December 2010.

### **Venue**

FAO Headquarters, Rome, Italy.

### **Partners**

While AGN will be fully responsible for the development and implementation of this activity both at policy and technical level, it is contacting potential partners to co-sponsor the Symposium.

### **Contacts**

For more information on the Symposium, please contact AGN's Secretariat: Brian Thompson e-mail: [Brian.Thompson@fao.org](mailto:Brian.Thompson@fao.org) and Leslie Amoroso e-mail: [Leslie.Amoroso@fao.org](mailto:Leslie.Amoroso@fao.org)

