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



Welcome Address

*Dr Modibo Traoré, Assistant Director-General,
Agriculture and Consumer Protection Department,
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations,
Rome, Italy*

Distinguished Guests, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to Rome and to the Headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization. It is also my great pleasure to welcome you to this important event, the “*International Symposium on Food and Nutrition Security: Food-Based Approaches for Improving Diets and Raising Levels of Nutrition*”. The presence of so many eminent scholars and world-renowned experts testifies to the high level of importance you give to this topic.

FAO's mandate

This International Symposium is the first to be held on the contribution that food and agriculture make to diet, food consumption and nutrition. We believe agriculture is of crucial importance for improving diets and raising levels of nutrition and therefore FAO has a major part to play in improving nutrition. FAO is pleased to host this Symposium as it is the UN specialized agency with the mandate for raising 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.

The Agriculture and Consumer Protection Department is one of FAO's six Technical Departments. It provides advice on agricultural policies and strategies and works on improving the production, management and conservation of crops and livestock, controlling transboundary plant pests and animal diseases, and on the production, processing, distribution and consumption of nutritionally adequate and safe food while safeguarding the natural resource base, ecosystem services and the environment. The Department actively collaborates with the other five Technical Departments (Economic and Social Development; Fisheries and Aquaculture; Forestry; Natural Resources, Management and Environment; and Technical Cooperation) who will, on the second day of this Symposium, be making a presentation on their current activities and how they contribute to improving food and nutrition security.

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





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derive multiple benefits 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, marginalized, food-insecure and malnourished. Consequently, focus needs to be given not only to increasing the production and access to food 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 farms. An undernourished workforce is less able to work, absenteeism and sickness are more frequent and thus poor nutrition acts as a brake to agricultural and economic development. Although they may share goals, professionals in agriculture, nutrition and health rarely have opportunities to discuss areas of mutual interest, exploit synergies and pursue outcomes that are beneficial to society. This we can do over the next three days.

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.





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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.

Promote nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food-based strategies

Food- and agriculture-based strategies 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, recognizing 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 that apparently have 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 marginalized and the neglected have access to good quality, safe and nutritionally adequate food.

Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2)

In order to give new impetus to world-wide efforts on behalf of hungry and malnourished people, the Directors-General of FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO) have decided to convene a Second International Conference on Nutrition at FAO Headquarters, in Rome, from 19 to 21 November 2014. The purpose is to raise both the political will and the financial resources to fight hunger and malnutrition.

Final remarks

I am confident that this International Symposium 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.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and trust that the outcomes of this Symposium will be widely shared to guide the way forward for putting an end to hunger and malnutrition.

Thank you.

