

## FAO Nutrition Education and Consumer Awareness Group and Hunger-Free Latin America and the Caribbean Initiative Support Project

### REGIONAL MEETING EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### FOOD AND NUTRITION INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION TO PROMOTE FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY (El Salvador, 6-9 December 2011)

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### INTRODUCTION

Latin American and Caribbean countries are facing serious malnutrition problems that have a severe economic and social impact on their development. Yet there are major differences among countries when it comes to hunger and malnutrition. Some countries are experiencing high rates of child malnutrition and nutritional anaemia in children and women of childbearing age. Other countries, although still unable to cope with all illnesses caused by nutrient deficiencies, have seen a rapid rise in the past 20 years in obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer. Addressing this “multiple burden of malnutrition” is a singular challenge for governments because strategies to tackle the problem of undernutrition (for example, increasing access to food) may result in an increased consumption of energy-dense foods and thus in an increase in overweight and obesity, and vice versa. Therefore, people need to be educated and empowered so that they learn how to choose an adequate diet and a healthy lifestyle to tackle both types of malnutrition at the same time thereby helping to improve their food and nutrition security. The right to adequate food can only be exercised if people are informed and given the means to take appropriate decisions. Food and nutrition

education policies thus need to be developed to ensure that actions in the area of food and nutrition information, communication and education (ICEAN by its Spanish acronym) are implemented and institutionalized.

To raise awareness about ICEAN efforts in the region, the Nutrition Education and Consumer Awareness Group, together with the Hunger-Free Latin America and the Caribbean Initiative (HFLACI) Support Project, conducted a study in 2011 in 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries on the best practices in ICEAN programmes, and an analysis of ICEAN training of nutritionists and other health, education and agricultural professionals. The findings of the study prompted the Nutrition and Education and Consumer Awareness Group and the HFLACI Support Project to organize a meeting on the role of ICEAN in promoting food and nutrition security. The study was conducted in line with the commitment made by countries in the region to alleviate hunger under the Hunger Free Latin America and the Caribbean Initiative (HFLACI).

### MEETING

The *Food and Nutrition Information, Communication and Education to Promote Food and Nutrition Security* Meeting held in El Salvador from 6 to 9 December 2011 was composed of a technical workshop, followed



by a political forum. The purpose of the technical workshop was to encourage stakeholders in the region to share experiences and build the capacity of government officials in education, agriculture and health ministries, specialized institutions and civil society to conduct actions in the area of ICEAN that help prevent and combat the double burden of malnutrition. The aim of the political forum was to agree on strategies to prevent and change the trends that have been observed. The meeting was organized by the Nutrition Education and Consumer Awareness Group of the FAO Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division, which coordinated and provided funds for participants attending the technical workshop; and the HFLACI Support Group and the Regional Programme for Food and Nutrition Security for Central America II (PRESANCA II), which organized the political forum and provided funding for government officials of education ministries. The Central American Education and Cultural Coordination (CEEC/SICA) provided support for the political forum.

## TECHNICAL WORKSHOP

The technical workshop brought together over 80 experts working in food and nutrition education, food and nutrition security and school garden programmes in education, social development, health and agriculture ministries; the CECC/SICA; the PRESANCA II; the Regional Programme for Food and Nutritional Security Information Systems (PRESISAN); the Special Program for Food Security (SPFS); the FAO; the Pan American Health Organization (PAH); civil society organizations; and academia, including universities and higher education institutes. Eighteen Latin American countries were officially represented.

A conference and panel discussions on a wide range of topics were held in the technical workshop including a) the current state of malnutrition in the region and its

causes; b) the findings of the study on best practices in ICEAN programmes; c) food and nutrition security policies as a support framework for the implementation of ICEAN programmes; d) ICEAN human resource training; e) programme monitoring and evaluation, etc. Experiences of countries where ICEAN work is being done were also shared, along with those involved in SFPS, the school food and garden programmes in Brazil and El Salvador, the Feeding Minds, Fighting Hunger initiative being implemented in Paraguay and the 5 A DAY scheme in Chile.

## WORKING GROUPS

Working groups were divided up on three topics: a) the implementation of ICEAN best practices at different levels; b) ICEAN human resource training; and c) school food environment and policies and nutrition education. The conclusions and recommendations of this last working group were presented and discussed in the political forum with education ministry representatives.

## Conclusions

1. There is growing interest and concern in the region about food and nutrition issues, which is seen as an opportunity for ICEAN to obtain the recognition and support needed to step up efforts to address nutrition problems and improve food and nutrition security. However, insufficient political support, funds, institutional recognition and properly trained human resources to develop effective and sustainable ICEAN actions are common problems that are not likely to change over the short and medium term.
2. Most programmes that include ICEAN activities in the region deal with plans, policies, strategies, national standards and laws. However, in most



cases they do not play an important role in the programmes. This can be seen in the fact that there are not enough funds allocated for them to be implemented nor evaluations performed that show the specific impact of ICEAN in such programmes. It is also evident that there is a lack of coordination between sectors in the development and implementation of ICEAN initiatives.

3. In countries with the highest prevalence of overweight, obesity and non-communicable diseases, ICEAN efforts are considered to be important, but there are no national nutrition education policies to properly structure initiatives with broad coverage and continuity, or to establish regulations to ensure healthy food environments.
4. To ensure long-term behaviour changes ICEAN programmes require changes in food environments. Some countries in the region are establishing laws, norms and standards to ensure healthy food environments in schools, including regulation of food and beverages and advertisements in school stores and cafeterias. Examples can be found in Mexico, Brazil and Costa Rica.
5. There are successful initiatives in the region that should be institutionalized and/or applied in other countries thereby ensuring that rural areas and the most vulnerable populations are covered. Examples include activities conducted with the technical and financial help of the United Nations, especially the FAO, in the school education sector, with the participation of Ministries of Education. Initiatives have not been taken in other countries because government authorities have not provided adequate support.
6. Nutritionists are the principal human resource implementing ICEAN initiatives in all segments of

the population. ICEAN training is virtually non-existent for the other health, education and agricultural professionals, even though many of them take part in efforts to prevent and control malnutrition. In both cases their training and education is not preparing them to deal effectively with the complex challenge of changing people's eating habits.

### Recommendations

1. Promote more actions to raise awareness, whilst involving society at large, decision-makers and other political actors, about the crucial role ICEAN plays in preventing and tackling malnutrition, and in achieving food and nutrition security in the region.
2. Have the FAO facilitate dialogue and the sharing of ICEAN experience among countries so that they can learn about success stories that can be replicated; and provide systematized information and analysis.
3. Have the FAO provide support for the development of an information, communication and education strategy for food and nutrition security so that the necessary norms and regulations can be adopted and budgets can be allocated.
4. Institutionalize ICEAN topics in the school system, including or enhancing them in the elementary and secondary curriculum and strengthening teacher training and education in food and nutrition security and ICEAN, using appropriate education strategies so that school nutrition education helps lead to healthy eating habits in schools and families. Also, educate students' parents and food handlers in cafeterias and tuck shops.



5. Improve the food environment so that healthy foods are available to all segments of the population. To do so, current international recommendations should be supported and approved by many governments to regulate the advertising of high-calorie low-nutrition foods (for example, those that are high in fat, sugar and salt) targeting children and the most vulnerable segments of the population and prohibit the sale of these foods in school.
6. Disseminate the findings of the study on best practices in ICEAN and the outcome of this regional meeting. It was suggested that technical teams in charge of ICEAN initiatives in Latin America take the necessary steps to publish them, sharing experiences and lessons learned so as to avoid repeating past mistakes and to learn from success stories of groups in the region.
7. Develop programmes that optimize ICEAN training and education of nutritionists and health, education and agricultural professionals with classroom-based courses or distance learning in coordination with universities with experience in the development of appropriate actions regarding these issues. Also, include ICEAN in the curricula of such professionals.

## POLITICAL FORUM

Attending the forum were high-level representatives of Central American and Mexican education ministries, directors and representatives of the institutions that organized the event and participants of the technical workshop.

First, the third working group on the school food environment and policies and and nutrition education presented their conclusions to government officials.

The efforts made by education ministries to promote food and nutrition security in the education community were recognized.

It was explained that, thus far, few countries in the region have: a) strengthened food and nutrition security in school curricula and knowledge about food and nutrition security in the education community; and b) have restricted the spread and sale of low-nutrition foods in schools.

Against this backdrop, experts respectfully asked education ministry government officials to consider making more efforts to strengthen:

- ICEAN legislation, policies and norms in coordination with other sectors, stakeholders and institutions involved, in order to improve the food environment in schools.
- Mechanisms to raise awareness and promote the importance of ICEAN to encourage healthy lifestyles in the education community (children, teachers, school principals, parents and communities).
- Mechanisms to incorporate healthy eating habits and physical activity in daily life that help improve the food and nutrition security of students, their families and the community; and regulate the advertising and sale of foods of low nutritional value in schools.
- The teaching of food security and nutrition and the right to food in schools, and thus facilitating the acquisition of the knowledge and habits necessary to make appropriate decisions regarding their diet.
- Training and lifelong learning of teachers and staff in training centres in aspects related to ICEAN, food and nutrition security and the right to food.
- Education and on-going training of food handlers and vendors in schools (and in the surrounding area) in nutrition, hygiene and food handling.



- Mechanisms to compile, organize and share success stories, methods, educational material and available resources.

Next, Dr. Gilberto Alfaro, representing the CECC/SICA General Secretariat, addressed the meeting. He stressed that the CECC/SICA General Secretariat considers it to be extremely important to include ICEAN and food and nutrition security topics on the agenda for discussion on education. “They not only influence children’s learning conditions, but their overall quality of education as well”. He acknowledged that, thus far, the ICEAN issue has not been on the general agenda of the education ministries and called on them to include this vital issue in academic discussion and discourse when revising their 2012 agenda.

**Ministry officials then discussed** what was actually happening in their countries with regard to the school food environment and policies and nutrition education, emphasizing the needs, challenges and progress achieved to date.

During discussions, participants stressed the importance of nutrition education when it comes to adopting healthy eating habits and the crucial role of schools in teaching students and the rest of the education community how to eat properly, thus ensuring a healthy population.

With respect to the school environment, participants suggested that to ensure sustainable changes, a link should be established between ICEAN and food and nutrition security and the food environment, involving families and the community. They also recognised the need to establish government standards to ensure that high nutritional quality food is served in the cafeterias and school snack shops, thereby improving the food and nutrition security of schools./students

With respect to food school programmes in countries where they are run exclusively by the education

ministry, participants expressed concern about the huge demands of these programmes in terms of resources, logistics and time. They also pointed out that they do not have the technical capacity to effectively implement such programmes or to monitor them. It was suggested that they be implemented by or in collaboration with other government institutions and the private sector.

Ministry officials explained that to have an impact and direct effect on food and nutrition security policies, it is crucial to involve the education environment and the school community in building, implementing and evaluating them. The need to coordinate policies (for example, development plans with education, agriculture and health plans) to raise the profile of programmes, increase the amount of funds allocated to them and enhance their evaluation, was also mentioned.

The political forum discussions and conclusions also produced a **declaration** that was drafted and signed by all participants. It stressed the importance of broad participation in the discussion on food and nutrition education as a means to build food and nutrition security governance and its link with the Committee on World Food Security.

The declaration can be found at:  
<http://www.fao.org/ag/humannutrition/nutritioneducation/icean-sansalvador/es/>

## NEXT STEPS

FAO will consider the recommendations of the technical workshop and the declaration signed in the political forum to continue supporting and making progress in nutrition education activities in the region. Specifically, the Nutrition Education and Consumer Awareness Group and the HFLACI Support Project will:



1. Disseminate the outcome of this Regional Meeting to the countries of the region;
2. Offer technical and financial support to the academic network of experts for ICEAN that emerged at the meeting. This network seeks to coordinate and collaborate with goals to strengthen its members in the theoretical and practical area of ICEAN, and to focus develop approaches in this field for Latin America and the Caribbean;
3. Present in a sub-regional meeting in the Caribbean, the findings of the study on best practices in ICEAN in English-speaking countries in the Caribbean sub-region;
4. Explore in collaboration with other international and regional counterparts, and national academic institutions, the possibility of developing training courses on ICEAN methods to teachers of ICEAN-related subjects in higher education institutions, elementary school teachers and professionals who work in various sectors;
5. Foster with other initiatives a legal framework to strengthen the food environment in schools of the region; and
6. Strengthen alliances with such initiatives as PRESANCA II and CECC/SICA.

The Regional Meeting discussions and conclusions will be part of preparations of the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN+21), scheduled to take place in November 2013 in Rome. Also, they will serve as a basis for discussion in a meeting of experts on nutrition education, planned for the last quarter of 2012.