



Assisting the food and agriculture sector in addressing malnutrition

FAO's mandate is "to raise levels of nutrition and ensure humanity's freedom from hunger". It does this by promoting sustainable agricultural and rural development.

With agriculture being the source of income and livelihood for 70 to 80% of people suffering from hunger in developing countries, it is clear that sustainable reductions in poverty, food insecurity and undernutrition cannot be obtained without special attention to the development of the agriculture sector in these countries.

Focusing on the distinctive relationship between agriculture, food and nutrition, FAO works to protect, promote and improve food-based systems to ensure sustainable food and nutrition security, improve diets, combat micronutrient deficiencies, and raise levels of nutrition, and in so doing, achieve the nutrition-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Malnutrition remains a major problem worldwide: about one person in seven is undernourished and more than one-third of infant mortality is attributable to undernutrition. Diets deficient in energy and low in protein and micronutrients impede children's growth and mental development, make them more vulnerable to illness, inhibit their learning capacity and decrease their life expectancy.

Malnourished children and women live in families who do not have the ability, and/or the knowledge and skills to provide the food they need. This is often due to the fact that poor families do not have the resources to produce or they lack sufficient income to purchase sufficient amounts of the right kinds of food, a situation that may be made worse by a combination of poor feeding practices and high levels of illness and disease.

Agriculture and rural development are critically important in alleviating all forms of malnutrition due to their impact on diversity of output, impact on food prices (levels, relative prices, fluctuations and spatial variation) and levels of incomes. The food and agriculture sector therefore has a major role to play in:

- protecting and strengthening livelihoods of food insecure households, so they can produce and purchase the diversity of foods they need for an active and healthy life, and are more resilient to shocks such as increasing food prices and recurrent natural disasters;
- ensuring year round availability at local level of the combination of safe and affordable foods needed for a healthy and sustainable diet;
- providing appropriate information to consumers and in particular to poor households so that they can make the best use of locally available foods and cover their nutritional requirements, particularly of small children and women.

FAO is committed to assisting countries to develop a rights-based approach to food and nutrition security and assists member states at all levels, be it policy assistance, capacity building of local institutions or support to field interventions:

- understanding food consumption and dietary practices (in particular for mother and child feeding) of key livelihood groups and their determinants;
- identifying gaps in food availability at local level in different seasons;
- identifying and designing realistic solutions to address constraints, together with local institutions and communities, in particular women and members of minority groups;

- mainstreaming nutrition considerations into relevant policies and programmes, thus contributing to long-term nutrition-sensitive development;
- ensuring food safety and quality through the establishment of effective quality control systems at all stages of the food chain
- strengthening the capacity of institutions at all levels to address food and nutrition issues;
- monitoring the situation and assessing the impact of policies and interventions on food consumption and nutrition of vulnerable groups.

FAO, through its member states and partner organisations, also provides direct support to vulnerable households, which complements the health based interventions geared to malnourished individuals. Such food-based interventions include diversification of homestead food production; improved food storage and processing to increase the shelf life of foods produced and facilitate preparation and consumption; reliable access to bio-energy for cooking; and/or time and labour-saving interventions to allow women carry out both their productive and reproductive tasks.

Surplus homestead production can also be commercialised locally or bartered, thus generating household income for additional food purchase on the one hand and facilitating access of local consumers to nutritious foods on the other. Micronutrient-rich foods, such as animal source foods, fruits and vegetables, and also oils and fats in areas where the energy density of the food is insufficient, are particularly important.

Food-based interventions must be systematically combined with appropriate nutrition education at community level and capacity building of local institutions, in order to improve dietary habits and feeding practices, especially of infants and young children, and ensure appropriate and safe handling and preparation of foods. This is also essential to influence local production systems and enhance their contribution to sustainable

diets. Schools are a key entry point for improved food and nutrition at local level.

At its High-level meeting in November 2009, the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition acknowledged that the sustainable alleviation of malnutrition required the integration of food security, social protection and health. The food and agriculture sector therefore needs to join forces with other development sectors to address malnutrition.

FAO is therefore an active partner of the REACH (Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger) initiative at country level, that was endorsed in 2008 by the heads of agencies of FAO, WHO, UNICEF and WFP. FAO also welcomes the increase in UN Joint Programming which allows the UN systems to build on existing efforts and experience and accelerate progress towards the MDGs.

Good governance is essential to ensure policy guidance and accountability. The reform of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) will be essential in strengthening its role in monitoring the global food security and nutrition situation and progress towards achieving the MDGs, in exchanging experiences and good practices, and in ensuring accountability.

FAO in collaboration with WHO are to convene an International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) in Rome, in October 2012, twenty years after the 1992 ICN. The ICN+20 will be an opportunity for nutrition scientists, policy makers and other concerned stakeholders to assess progress made since 1992 and make recommendations for further concerted actions to address all forms of malnutrition.

For further information on FAO's programme in nutrition please contact:

nutrition@fao.org

or visit the website of the Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division at:

<http://www.fao.org/ag/agn/>