

1. INTRODUCTION

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have promoted the concept of food-based dietary guidelines (FBDG) since the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN), which was convened in 1992 by FAO and WHO. At this conference, strategies and actions to improve nutritional well-being and food consumption throughout the world were identified. The World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition, signed by 159 states, included a section on “promoting appropriate diets and healthy lifestyles.” The ICN Plan of Action emphasized that individual countries should develop their guidelines based on their greatest public health concerns. Governments were encouraged to create and disseminate simple dietary guidelines that were relevant for people of different ages, lifestyles and cultures.

FBDG are intended to provide nutrition education and dietary guidance for healthy individuals in terms that are understandable to most consumers. In 1995, FAO and WHO sponsored an Expert Consultation in Cyprus on the Preparation and Use of Food-Based Dietary Guidelines. The consultation produced a publication of the same title, published as a technical bulletin by WHO (1998). Since the Cyprus report was published, FAO and WHO have held a series of regional meetings to promote the development and implementation of dietary guidelines. The 2002 FAO/WHO joint Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases identified imbalanced dietary intake and inadequate physical activity as major factors in the causation of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes and obesity. These are rapidly increasing worldwide and may become a major social and economic burden in developing countries.

FAO and WHO recognize that there is an urgent need to strengthen the capacity in countries to provide appropriate dietary guidance and nutrition education in order to address problems of malnutrition. The WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, endorsed by the World Health Assembly in 2004 (WHA57.17), calls upon WHO, in cooperation with FAO and other organizations of the United Nations system, to provide assistance to Member States in updating, drafting and implementing FBDG.

In May 2004, FAO and WHO decided to organize a series of joint technical consultations to continue to strengthen the capacity of countries to develop FBDG and implement nutrition education activities. Considering that the FAO Near East and WHO Eastern Mediterranean Regions have one of the fastest growing rates of obesity worldwide,

and that so far few countries in the Region have initiated the development of dietary guidelines, it was considered timely to hold a joint FAO/WHO technical consultation in the Region¹.

A regional technical consultation on National Food Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDG) was held in Cairo, Egypt, 6–9 December 2004. The consultation was organized jointly by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Regional Office for the Near East in close collaboration with WHO and FAO Headquarters.

Experts from multiple disciplines, such as health, nutrition, and agriculture, participated from the following countries: Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, and the Syrian Arab Republic. In addition, international experts from Thailand, India and the United States were invited as resource persons to share their expertise and enrich the discussions and outcomes.

The objectives of the technical consultation were to:

- review the status of FBDG in countries of the Region;
- identify gaps and resources involved in setting up national FBDG;
- formulate a framework to assist Member States in developing and implementing FBDG..

Opening Session

The meeting was opened by Dr Mohamed Abdi Jama, Deputy Regional Director, WHO/EMRO, who welcomed the participants and delivered a message on behalf of Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. In his message, Dr Gezairy noted that establishing national FBDG was not an easy task, as different population groups had diverse nutritional needs and different lifestyles may require adjustments in dietary intake. Furthermore, nutritional status was affected not only by the food that was eaten but also by the way it was prepared and handled, and by the patterns of food consumption. He said that the national FBDG were a practical way of reaching the nutritional goals of a population, taking into account customary dietary patterns and providing guidance on those aspects of dietary intake that need modification. Subsequently, healthy diets should be promoted through sustainable food-based approaches that encouraged dietary diversification and the consumption of a healthy diet.

¹Except where otherwise indicated, the Region refers to the common countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO and the Near East Region of FAO (see Annex 6).

Dr Jama closed by emphasizing that for national FBDG to be successful, they needed to express the principles of nutrition education mostly as

foods and to use simple language that avoided technical terms to the extent possible, as the guidelines were intended for use by the general public.

On behalf of the FAO Assistant Director General/Regional Representative for the Near East, Dr. Mohamad Albraithen, Mr Abdellatif Tabet, FAO Representative in Cairo/Deputy to the Regional Representative, delivered a welcome message in which he commended the collaboration between WHO and FAO in planning and organizing the consultation. Mr Tabet emphasized the need to address nutrition as a cornerstone in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and highlighted that developing effective national FBDG required identifying the major public health issues related to food and dietary patterns. This required evaluating food availability and intake patterns that were pertinent to a country, and developing a process that was multidisciplinary and multisectoral.

He noted that a key element in the preparation of national FBDG was the availability of sufficient data to make possible a reasonable evaluation of the population's dietary patterns and nutritional status. Thus, research was essential in the process, including research on public health issues, food consumption patterns, and consumer testing of messages, to ensure that the public understood the messages. Finally, it was important to evaluate the guidelines to test their effectiveness among target audiences.

Workshop Organization

The consultation consisted of two parts: plenary technical presentations by experts in different disciplines; and group discussions on technical issues, constraints and gaps, and requirements for developing FBDG. Group discussions and findings were presented and discussed further in the plenary sessions and are included in this report.

Chairs were appointed for the four days of the meeting: Dr Mohamed El Guindi, first day; Professor Nahla Houalla, second day; Professor Parveen Liaqat, third day; Professor Seema Puri, fourth day. Ms Arine Valstar and Ms Lilas Tomeh were appointed as Rapporteurs. The objectives and mechanics of the consultation were elaborated by Dr Kunal Bagchi, Nutrition Regional Adviser, WHO/EMRO.

The programme and list of participants are given in Annexes 1 and 2 respectively. Annex 3 contains a list of publications distributed during the FBDG consultation, Annex 4 provides the suggested checklist for working group discussions, Annex 5 furnishes information on the Mediterranean diet, and Annex 6 lists countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO and the Near East Region of FAO.