

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FOOD-BASED DIETARY GUIDELINES

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FBDG are a tool for communication and education to create demand for healthy diets and desirable eating patterns leading to nutritional well-being and prevention of diet related diseases. FBDG can be viewed as tools for communicating with the general public through the media, as well as materials for nutrition educators working in health, schools and other educational settings. They can help policy makers to identify priority areas in food and nutrition within their countries and may influence food and agricultural policies.

The development and implementation of FBDG is a comprehensive process involving multiple stakeholders. This process leads to information and dietary advice for the public, which should be easy to understand, remember and use. Although FBDG look simple, they are based on scientific evidence about nutrition and health.

To be effective, FBDG should be well-suited to a country's environment and social, economic and cultural context. FBDG must reflect the dietary patterns, lifestyles and income of the consumers whom the nutrition educators wish to reach. Qualitative messages and food guides are developed and tested. The FBDG are disseminated through a wide range of activities and communication channels.

While nutrition education has always been important in public health, the need to inform and educate the public has become crucial as the world is rapidly changing. Different foods are entering local markets and lifestyles are changing; factors which lead to new dietary patterns. While these changes can provide opportunities to improve nutrition, they can also present risks. Guidance is necessary to ensure that health is protected and diseases are prevented.

Countries face a number of nutrition challenges. There are still millions of people who are chronically hungry. Billions of people do not get all the vitamins and minerals they need. Obesity and related diseases such as diabetes and coronary diseases are becoming serious burdens in the developing world.

FAO and WHO have provided and updated recommendations on energy, protein and nutrient requirements since the 1950s and they continue to do so. However, the information about nutrient requirements is too technical for the average person to understand. The public does not know how to use this information for making decisions about foods.

Following the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition, FAO and WHO embarked on a series of activities to promote the development of dietary guidelines for the public. The work began with an expert consultation held in Cyprus in 1995. Since then, FAO and WHO have supported workshops in all regions. A number of countries especially in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe have developed their FBDG.

FBDG promote the idea of a diverse and balanced diet. One of the challenges of promoting FBDG in developing countries is that the foods may not be available or affordable to everyone. By raising public awareness of the need to consume a variety of foods, it is hoped that demand for more diversity will increase and that food producers will respond to new consumer expectations by providing more diverse foods.

Accomplishing these objectives requires a multidisciplinary approach and the commitment of participants in a number of sectors. Mobilization of different actors is an important step in the process of developing and disseminating FBDG. Key partnerships within the government, food industry and consumer organizations can be important during this process. The government can influence the public to make changes in their consumption patterns through influencing foods provided in institutional settings like schools. The food industry can support the goals of FBDG through product development and promotional activities.

Another challenge in developing dietary guidelines for the general public is that nutrition needs change during the lifecycle. Most FBDG are developed for the general adult population. However, there is a need to develop and promote specific guidelines for other population groups. Some countries have guidelines for infants and young children in which breastfeeding, complementary feeding and growth monitoring is addressed. FBDG may be needed for other target groups such as pregnant and lactating women, adolescents and the elderly.

Some essential aspects of the FBDG process should be emphasized: the importance of building a multisectoral team, commitment and leadership. Monitoring and evaluation, including research to assess the impact of the FBDG, are important areas to consider. FBDG are not only a tool for communication and education, but are rather part of an integrated strategy to improve nutrition and health and should be linked to education, agriculture and food policies.