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Promoting sustainable food systems for healthy diets in Europe and Central Asia: the key role of school food and nutrition programmes

FAO's [Forum on Food Security and Nutrition](#) invites you to express your views and recommendations on national school food and nutrition programmes (SFNP), how to make them more inclusive, better integrated into food systemsⁱ and supporting healthy diets and lifestyles from an early ageⁱⁱ.

The outputs of this online consultation will help to better advocate sustainable healthy food systems by promoting multicomponent approaches to school food and nutrition programmes based on relevant national policy and legislation frameworks.

This online consultation is initiated by the FAO Project "[Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia](#)" (funded by the Russian Federation and led by FAO's Agricultural Development Economics Division) in collaboration with the [FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia](#), the [FAO's Nutrition and Food Systems Division](#), and the [Social and Industrial Food Service Institute \(SIFI\)](#).

Background

The Second FAO/WHO International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025) both highlight the essential role of agriculture and food systems in providing healthy diets and improving nutrition in a sustainable manner. For boosting policy actions, the FAO/WHO International Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutritionⁱⁱⁱ, held at FAO Headquarters in 2016, shared and discussed experiences and practical recommendations for the implementation of nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food systems policies and programmes.

Capitalizing on the positive results from the International Symposium, FAO, in collaboration with other UN agencies and partners, is carrying out regional symposia across five regions. These symposia will focus on food security and nutrition challenges specific to each region and discuss how they can be addressed across sectors from a food-systems perspective, putting a special focus on vulnerable groups.

Nutritional situation in the region and the role of school food and nutrition programmes (SFNP)^{iv}

Despite the overall positive trends regarding food security and nutrition in Europe and Central Asia, different forms of malnutrition still persist and continue to be a problem. For example, although on decline, moderate rates of undernourishment (7 percent) and stunting continue to be seen among children in the Caucasus and Central Asia^v, where the prevalence of iron, vitamin A and zinc deficiencies is also the most severe^{vi}. The prevalence of iodine deficiency is high in children, ranging from 39.1percent in Central Asia to 58.9percent in Northern Europe^{vii}. Overweight and obesity are also highly prevalent among children and adolescents, particularly in southern European countries. The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative estimates that 20-50 percent of all school-aged children are overweight in many countries in the region^{viii}.

Given the detrimental effects of malnutrition on child well-being, learning ability, academic performance and future productivity, promoting healthy diets and improved nutrition should be a high priority on the school development agenda, particularly as schools provide a unique opportunity to coherently address the different causes of malnutrition.

In this context, school food and nutrition programmes are recognized as pertinent nutrition-sensitive interventions to contribute to the eradication of malnutrition and to support physical and intellectual development of schoolchildren. When linked to smallholders' food production, they can also constitute an important instrument to support the local economy.

Expected results of the online consultation

This online consultation is an innovative way to complement the [Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia](#), which will take place in Budapest on 4-5 December 2017.

During the Symposium, the participants will also be invited to an interactive participation in both this important meeting and the online consultation, allowing for more voices to be heard. Views and recommendations for the development and implementation of nutrition-sensitive policies and programmes gathered through this consultation, will help inform policy makers and project implementers on how to improve the availability, access, affordability and desirability of nutritious foods and the promotion of health outlooks and good practices for schoolchildren in Europe and Central Asia.

Through this, the results will contribute to the implementation of the [2014 Rome Declaration on Nutrition](#) and its [Framework for Action](#), the [UN Decade of Action on Nutrition](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), especially [SDG 2 – Zero Hunger](#) and [SDG 12 - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns](#).

To get the most out of this exchange, please express your opinion on the most relevant questions of your field of expertise.

Food security and nutrition policies and governance:

Given the multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder nature of school food and nutrition, related national policies and programmes should be economically, socially and environmentally coherent and supported by well-functioning inter-ministerial coordination.

- What are necessary elements for school food and nutrition programmes to be well aligned with and integrated into national policies relevant to food security and nutrition?
- How to make school food and nutrition programmes more cultural- and context-specific in order to guarantee country ownership and sustainability?
- What elements should be included in an efficient coordination mechanism for school food and nutrition programmes with other sectors' policies?
- What methodologies, guidelines and tools are needed to support decision makers for better design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of school food and nutrition policies and programmes?
- What are the most effective ways of increasing the participation of civil society, private sector and academia in the policy dialogue with the public sector for contributing to healthy food system-oriented actions?
- What should be improve in local food procurement policies in terms of collaboration with local producers and processors to provide healthy foods to schools? On the other hand, what mandatory or voluntary regulations on unhealthy foods (imported/locally produced) are needed to restrict their commercialization?

Awareness, Advocacy and School-based food and nutrition education (SFNE):

Food-related habits and practices are influenced by many factors, from broader food policies, to individual preferences. Hence, in addition to an enabling school food environment, children and their families need the capacities to engage in and maintain healthy food practices. Quality school-based food and nutrition education can support and foster these capacities.

FAO promotes a "[whole school](#)" approach to school-based food and nutrition education in which learning goes beyond the dissemination of information^{ix} and is integrated in the school system (in the national curriculum, extracurricular activities and/or through the SFNP). Learning activities are reinforced by a nutrition- and health- friendly school environment that involves the participation of all school personnel, families and the community.

- How can local food culture and habits be better integrated into nutrition education to foster adoption of healthy and culturally adequate diets?
- What should be done to foster healthier food environments contributing to the prevention of malnutrition, including overweight, of schoolchildren?
- In terms of advocacy and awareness raising, what kind of mechanism and tools should be used to better inform potential beneficiaries (e.g. parents, school students, teachers,

local communities, etc.) and stakeholders about the national programmes, grants and innovations related to school nutrition?

- How can the governmental bodies and other stakeholders raise the priority of SFNE in the school system and enhance the programmes' impact on children's food-related practices (e. g. funding, hours dedicated, investing in capacity development of teachers, quality control, support by parents, communities and the private sector)?
- In which part of the school activities (e.g. science or health classes; school food procurement system, extracurricular activities such as school gardening) should a systemic learning approach be introduced to better support the adoption and practice of healthy diets?
- What are effective ways to ensure the implementation and evaluation of school food and nutrition standards (school meals based on dietary guidelines, canteens, vendors, vending machines, etc)?

Role of private sector in supplying healthy and diversified nutritious foods:

Private sector entities, spanning from small commercial farming operations to big international food companies, have a particularly important role to play in the supply of school food. SFNP have been identified as a potential entry point in the food system for the agri-food private sector to contribute to better food security and nutrition outcomes.

- How can the private sector be further encouraged to meet food safety and quality requirements and the demand for healthy foods arising from schools?
- What actions are needed to integrate small-scale producers better into school food and nutrition programmes in order to supply locally produced healthy foods?
- What should be done to make the private sector (agricultural producers, processors and traders) consider schools as an attractive market and to feel more responsible for supplying safe and nutritious food to schools (e.g. reliable information, efficient coordination, friendly payment mechanism, adequate regulations, reasonable assurance, tax advantages, others)?

We look forward to an interesting and fruitful dialogue!

Sincerely yours,

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ⁱ A food system gathers all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the outputs of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes. FAO (2017) Nutrition and food systems. The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS)

http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/hlpe_documents/HLPE_Reports/HLPE-Report-12_EN.pdf

ⁱⁱ FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2015. Addressing social and economic burden of malnutrition through nutrition-sensitive agricultural and food policies in the region of Europe and Central Asia. In: 39th Session European Commission on Agriculture, FAO REU. Budapest, Hungary, 22 and 23 September 2015.

<http://www.fao.org/3/a-mo398e.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/sustainable-food-systems-nutrition-symposium/en/>
<https://glopan.org/news/building-momentum-transforming-food-systems-healthy-diets-and-improved-nutrition>

^{iv} School food and nutrition programmes (SFNP) are also referred to: homegrown school meal programmes, multicomponent school meal programmes, school nutrition programmes.

^v Building More Inclusive, Sustainable and Prosperous Societies in Europe and Central Asia: A common UN vision for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, UNDG, 2017, <https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2017-Regional-Advocacy-Paper-FINAL-19-June-2017.pdf>

^{vi} Regional Overview of Food Insecurity in Europe and Central Asia, FAO, 2016, <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i6877e.pdf>

^{vii} Addressing social and economic burden of malnutrition through nutrition sensitive agricultural and food policies in the region of Europe and Central Asia, European Commission on Agriculture report, 2015

<http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/2551f6bf-34ac-4a8e-88b6-03e03feb9b0f/>

^{viii} WHO European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative: body mass index and level of overweight among 6–9-year-old children from school year 2007/2008 to school year 2009/2010, WHO, 2014

<https://bmcpublikehealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-14-806>

^{ix} Aims at impacting long-term outlooks and practices, through hands-on, experience-based, and context specific approaches that are based on understanding of the situation.