UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016–2025: priority actions on nutrition for the next five years

About this online consultation

This document summarizes the online consultation UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016–2025: priority actions on nutrition for the next five years held on the FAO Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) from 20 May to 21 June 2021. The consultation was facilitated by Stineke Oenema from UN Nutrition.

The consultation was organized in the context of the midterm review process of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (“Nutrition Decade”), focusing on the plan forward for the Nutrition Decade for the period 2021–2025 as presented in a foresight paper prepared by the joint FAO/WHO Secretariat of the Nutrition Decade. Participants welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback on the suggested plan forward, commenting on the proposed focus areas for priority action for each of the Action Areas of the Nutrition Decade. Furthermore, they discussed cross-cutting actions that would facilitate interlinkages and synergies between the Action Areas, as well as issues that hamper the achievement of the global nutrition targets, and ways to address them.

Over the 4.5 weeks of discussion, 24 participants from 17 countries provided 28 contributions. All information on the online consultation is available on the web page in six UN languages: www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/consultations/decade-nutrition-priority-actions

In parallel with the online consultation, an online survey was organized by UN Nutrition to gather feedback on the proposed action plan. The survey received 185 responses. The main suggestions from the survey respondents are reflected on this summary. More complete outcomes of the survey will be presented later this year and made also available on the FSN Forum website: www.fao.org/fsnforum

The table below shows statistics on the affiliation and geographic distribution of the consultation and survey participants.
Several participants argued that human rights should become the Nutrition Decade’s main framework and that those suffering violations of the right to food and nutrition should be given a stronger voice. This requires identifying duty bearers and right holders and their roles and responsibilities as well as the adoption of a systems approach, which considers the interlinked and social determinants of malnutrition. Furthermore, participants stressed that agroecology, which is grounded in human rights and encompasses food, equity, and human and planetary health, is key to improving nutrition and should be central to the Nutrition Decade.

Multiple participants stressed the necessity to address the private sector’s influence on nutrition governance by, *inter alia*, critically reviewing trade regimes, public-private partnerships and multistakeholder platforms and adopting rigorous principles of engagement in policymaking. Several participants also stressed that regulatory rather than voluntary measures should be implemented to improve nutrition. In this context, evidence-based recommendations such as the WHO “best buys” should be followed and could be used to complement the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition, as the latter do not fully reflect the recommendations of international organizations and lack full support from civil society.

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**TABLE 1**

Affiliation and geographical representation of participants

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<tr>
<th>AFFILIATION</th>
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<th>SURVEY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academia/research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<table>
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<td>Western Europe and Others Group (WEOG)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizations representing multiple regions</td>
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</tbody>
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* Most of these participants are independent experts.
Participants also highlighted a wide range of topics that need more attention, including: a) food safety, including use of antimicrobials; b) water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) issues; c) violence and discrimination against women and girls; d) breastfeeding and complementary feeding; e) raising awareness of the impact of foods of high energy density and minimal nutritional value; f) nutrition in school curricula; g) systems for screening nutritional status; and h) engagement of dietitians/nutrition scientists in policy development.

Furthermore, food fortification was highlighted. On the one hand, it was argued that mandatory food fortification should be prioritized, and that governments should be supported in implementing the needed changes in this regard. On the other hand, contributors pointed out that food fortification may hamper promotion of diversified food systems based on small-scale production and contribute to an overreliance on a few staple crops and processed foods – and therefore would not be desirable.

Last, it was mentioned that in general, monitoring progress during the Nutrition Decade is crucial and civil society organizations should have a key role in this. Facilitating adequate monitoring requires setting annual benchmarks for processes that are already underway.

Top priority actions for each of the Nutrition Decade’s six Action Areas

Participants discussed what, according to them, should be the top priority actions for each of the six Action Areas for the next five years of the Nutrition Decade.

Action Area 1: Sustainable, resilient food systems for healthy diets

Priorities mentioned include:

- Promote nutritious, whole food diets underpinned by food production adapted to local ecosystems and sociocultural contexts. Food environments should provide equitable food access, dietary guidance, and restrictions on highly processed foods.

- Direct financial and fiscal policy towards ecologically beneficial farming and nutritious indigenous crops, nutritious foods that contribute to healthy diets, and resilient livelihoods.

- Create enabling environments for agroecology and regenerative approaches by adopting a systems approach that focuses on: a) a strong role for local and vulnerable people and protection and expansion of their rights; b) policy coherence and coordinated governance; c) research mobilization; and d) improved infrastructure.

- Leverage technological innovations, ranging from those shaping food demand to those enhancing food system efficiency.

- Support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) financially to develop sustainable and inclusive value chains.

- Restructure agricultural support to deliver positive “public good” outcomes, and prioritize climate-smart agriculture and nutrition goals.

- Scale up the inclusion of nutrition objectives in food and agriculture policies.

- Accelerate food reformulation, including take-away foods.

- Create subsidies for locally and sustainably produced cereals, legumes, vegetables and fruits.

- Improve food quality, with a focus on organic farming.
Action Area 2: Aligned health systems providing universal coverage of essential nutrition actions

Priorities mentioned include:

- Focus on nutrition in the first 1,000 days of life.
- Promote healthy maternal and child nutrition, in particular fostering adequate complementary feeding for children aged 6–35 months, and supporting adequate child feeding during and after illness. This entails supporting women by counselling them on a wide range of topics, including breast- and complementary feeding, dietary quantity and quality, supplementation, food safety, and hygienic practices.
- Conduct research on cost-effective nutrition care services in the context of primary health care.
- Ensure equitable access to national health services, including oral and mental health services.
- Subsidize medicines to guarantee access for poor people.
- Set robust goals and targets for human, ecological and animal health and well-being.

Action Area 3: Social protection and nutrition education

Priorities mentioned include:

- Improve health workers’ capacities in nutrition and increase the number of nutrition professionals, setting minimum standards of nutrition competence at the global level.
- Include nutrition in school curricula.
- Implement dietary recommendations and develop joint educational initiatives.
- Enhance consistency of nutrition textbooks and information materials, ensuring they are science-based.
- Make healthy diets affordable and accessible through social protection (i.e. cash transfer programmes) and income generation policies.
- Establish food as a “public good”.
- Support local supply chains, informal markets, and SMEs by connecting smallholders to new supply chains, improving infrastructure and providing access to financial and technical support.
- Enhance ecological, food/nutrition and health literacy for influencing citizen behaviour. Government interventions should focus on cultural heritage, culinary skills, nutrition and health education, and the linkages between ecosystems, food and health.

Action Area 4: Trade and investment for improved nutrition

Priorities mentioned include:

- Assess health and food safety implications of international trade policies.
- Establish policies that reduce the price of natural and nutritious foods, improve animal welfare standards, regenerate ecosystems and enable shorter supply chains.
- Unlock investment opportunities for sustainable food systems. Financial flows should be redirected away from harmful practices towards initiatives supporting sustainable transformation.
- Mainstream True Cost Accounting in decision-making.
- Set governance principles for multistakeholder platforms. Governments must ensure that private interests do not influence policymakers; guidelines on managing conflicts of interest are also needed.
- Establish regulations on lobbying and standards for public-private partnerships, ensuring respect for ethical, transparency and accountability principles.
Develop international guidance on front-of-pack labelling.

Increase investments in regional food processing, manufacturing and distribution infrastructure.

Reduce global exports of primary produce, such as unprocessed fruit and vegetables.

Action Area 5: Safe and supportive environments for nutrition at all ages

Priorities mentioned include:

- Implement a coherent approach that creates enabling food environments, ensuring access to affordable, culturally relevant and nutritious foods that contribute to healthy diets and restricting marketing of highly processed foods of high energy density and minimal nutritional value.

- Develop food-based sustainable dietary guidelines that take into consideration human, animal and ecological health.

- Put the “precautionary principle” at the heart of the research and innovation agenda.

- Enhance nutrition education, which should include topics such as dietary diversity and quality, locally available and culturally accepted low-cost foods, kitchen gardening, and sanitation.

Improve early detection of malnutrition and related interventions.

Provide nutrition supplementation for vulnerable groups through public programmes.

Ensure legal protection of and support for breastfeeding in public places.

Improve water, sanitation and hygiene.

Increase the usage of regulatory and fiscal tools to improve food environments.

Action Area 6: Strengthened governance and accountability for nutrition

Priorities mentioned include:

- Ensure rights-based approaches to governance are followed at all levels to address inequities. Policy should be built on principles of shared power, ethics, and serving the public interest.

- Evaluate policies to ensure positive health outcomes for people, animals and ecosystems. The focus should be on local priorities and reduction of health inequalities, underpinned by health and nutrition plans and public reporting of progress.

- Set nutrition targets in the context of the Nutrition Decade, to be met by governments.

- Promote collaboration among all stakeholders.

- Tackle injustices in food and health systems. A cross-sectoral approach should focus on marginalized people and address the true cost of food for environmental and human health. Furthermore, universal health coverage that mainstreams nutrition services would save lives and reduce healthcare spending.

- Increase government and donor investments and develop new financing mechanisms to fight both under- and overnutrition, using evidence-based and cost-effective solutions.

- Enhance nutrition equity, which implies prioritizing nutrition in policy agendas, mainstreaming nutrition in all food system elements, and reviewing health systems and finance.

- Address transparency, accountability and corruption issues as a key measure to achieving the Nutrition Decade’s aims.
Missing elements, and comments on the proposed priority actions

Participants were asked to indicate any missing elements in each of the six Action Areas and their proposed priority focus. In one contribution, the need to consider the link between poor diets and negative health effects of COVID–19 was stressed. Another participant highlighted that the concept of “human culinary enjoyment” should be integrated, as nutrition does not merely concern “counting nutrients”. Yet another contributor highlighted two other aspects that have increasingly gained attention. First, “food and nutrition for proactive health” refers to using diet to improve health, rather than focusing on fixing a health problem once it has already occurred. Second, “food, nutrition and mental wellness” recognizes the association between food and emotional wellbeing – i.e. that food is often used to comfort and to socialize.

Below, missing elements as indicated by participants are outlined for each specific Action Area.

Action Area 1: Sustainable, resilient food systems for healthy diets

Participants suggested the inclusion of the following actions:

- Promote cooperative food systems with tangible assistance.
- Manage natural resources at the community level.
- Foster climate-resilient, diverse, and biologically efficient agricultural production.
- Enhance access of smallholders to mechanization and financial and technical support.
- Prevent food waste and make better use of resources and by-products through investments in research and innovation.
• Establish a definition of highly processed foods and methods to control and reduce their production and consumption.
• Reduce the production of genetically modified foods.
• Set common safety, nutritional quality and sustainability standards for all food products.
• Establish UN interorganizational and national liaising units to promote policy harmonization.
• Increase the production and consumption of fortified foods.
• Strengthen the focus on the elimination of trans fats.
• Promote whole foods and sustainable, minimally processed proteins.
• Include nutritional objectives based on specific dietary patterns, such as the Mediterranean diet.
• Focus on the level of food processing and the development of minimally processed foods, instead of reformulating processed foods.
• Implement sodium reduction strategies across the full spectrum of the food industry, supported by consumer awareness campaigns.

**Action Area 2: Aligned health systems providing universal coverage of essential nutrition actions**

Participants suggested the inclusion of the following actions:

• Integrate targets and indicators related to animal and ecological health as key determinants of human health.
• Recognize antimicrobial resistance as an emerging pandemic, requiring stringent regulations in food production and guidance on ecosystem protection.

• Integrate both non-communicable diseases and undernutrition in government responses.
• Adopt life cycle and systems approaches to address the underlying causes of malnutrition.
• Focus on actions that are food-/diet-centred rather than nutrient-centred.
• Reach a broad agreement on which nutrition actions are essential.

**Action Area 3: Social protection and nutrition education**

Some general comments were shared regarding Action Area 3. First, referring to the proposed priority of ensuring coherence between social protection and other sector programmes, one participant stressed that reducing malnutrition is first about social determination and only secondarily about coherence. Second, other participants mentioned that rather than focusing on nutrition-sensitive approaches, social protection and education should be used to promote nutrition as the space of convergence for multiple (health, social, environmental, economic) public objectives to support food systems transformation; the importance of traditional knowledge and territorial markets should be considered here. Third, the need to focus on “food education” rather than “nutrition education” was stressed, as it is the former that pins supply-side solutions together and makes them work for improved nutrition. Fourth, one should recognize that nutrition education is more effective when it is made “practical”, and that nutrition-oriented development actions magnify their impact through some form of food education. Last, it was stressed that school meals are an educational (focusing on retention) rather than a nutritional intervention.
Participants suggested the inclusion of the following actions:

- Implement social protection and educational interventions aimed at resolving the gap in food consumption between the richest and the poorest.
- Develop food-based sustainable dietary guidelines and use them in all public institutions.
- Raise awareness among youth of the impact of highly processed, genetically modified foods, and those high in fat, sugar and/or salt.
- Reach agreement on what constitutes a “healthy diet”.
- Implement curricula dealing with cultural norms regarding the distribution of care work to address gender inequality in terms of food security.
- Train nutritionists and health workers through a bottom-up approach.
- (Re-)introduce basic health and hygiene in school curricula rather than focusing on the use of health personnel to conduct dietary education, in consideration of these individuals’ time constraints.
- Improve labelling (which is only a partial solution that generally does not help rural people) by: a) basing it on the degree of food processing rather than nutritional composition; b) ensuring that nutritional facts of genetically modified food are also presented; and c) complementing it with efforts to promote nutrition knowledge.
- Provide nutrition training to children from an early age, as well as to parents and staff in charge of school canteens.
- Accompany curricula reform with public procurement policies that source school / day care food from local agroecological smallholders.

**Action Area 4: Trade and investment for improved nutrition**

Participants suggested the inclusion of the following actions:

- Support innovation aiming at more sustainable production processes, favouring nutritional quality and the commercialization of products that support healthy diets.
- Provide guidance on how trade policies and international market mechanisms ought not to undermine local and territorial markets.
- Increase investment and regulation to support local and territorial markets.
- Curb large companies’ investments in foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt.
- Invest in holistic prevention rather than reductionist curative treatments.
- Estimate ex ante impact of trade policies prior to negotiations.
**Action Area 5: Safe and supportive environments for nutrition at all ages**

Participants suggested the inclusion of the following actions:

- Ensure public procurement policies are “sustainable”, taking into account the degree of food processing and placing restrictions on highly processed foods.
- Source foods from local small-scale producers for public procurement.
- Apply the NOVA food classification as the preferred alternative.
- Provide lifestyle guidance, and consider the concepts of personalized nutrition and preventive medicine and health.
- Tackle the social determinants of malnutrition.
- Address the penetration of highly processed foods in food environments that lack nutritious foods, such as food deserts and swamps.
- Foster engagement of dietitians/nutritionists in canteens, the catering industry and supermarkets.
- Promote integration of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent resolutions into national legislation, and encourage adequate breastfeeding policies.
- Place restrictions on the provision of highly processed products in and around day care, schools, and health and community centres.
- Impose tariffs on highly processed products and beverages that contain high sugar/sweetener levels and genetically modified foods.
- Tax highly processed products, with the tax rate depending on the level of the product’s hidden costs in terms of human and environmental health.
- Invest tax revenue in programmes to prevent malnutrition and in subsidies for unprocessed/minimally processed foods and organic food.
- Redirect subsidies for foods and additives rich in sugar, salt and/or trans fat towards sustainable and diverse local food production.
- Establish mandatory front-of-package labelling that is evidence-based.
- Restrict the marketing of food and beverages that are energy-dense and high in fat, sugar and/or salt towards children and adolescents.
- Apply the “precautionary principle” to regulatory instruments.

Some participants stated that regulatory actions are not desirable, as: a) different views exist on the impact of such measures; b) taxation has mixed results and can lead to market distortions; and c) it fails to acknowledge the effectiveness of voluntary initiatives. Instead, a priority action should be to scale up reformulation and innovation efforts to promote food choices that help people eat healthy diets, supported by actions to encourage behaviour change.

**Action Area 6: Strengthened governance and accountability for nutrition**

Participants suggested the inclusion of the following actions:

- Promote cross-sectoral dialogue and collaboration to strengthen accountability.
- Ensure inclusive governance with effective participation of right holders.
- Establish safeguards to protect the public policy space from undue influence by powerful economic actors.
- Improve institutional frameworks and consumer protection laws and regulations in developing countries.

Conduct evidence-based planning and programming, implementing robust statistical analysis and monitoring and evaluation systems.

Address the issue of lobbying.

Mobilize right holders, considering the fact that they have never been on equal footing in dialogue with duty bearers.

Scale up investments in national nutrition information systems, bearing in mind that quantifying gaps does not automatically result in informed and effective policies.

Couple data collection with concrete action.

Accelerate global governance and accountability, considering that these need to be transformed due to the influence of the private sector.

Cross-cutting actions to facilitate interlinkages and create synergies between Action Areas

Participants stressed the need to adopt an integrated approach that promotes human, ecological and animal health, as well as a gender relations perspective. The following cross-cutting actions were proposed:

- Encourage dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, establishing an open and transparent dialogue and clarification of the private sector’s contribution to sustainable food systems.

- Support research, development and innovation throughout the value chain by establishing adequate funding systems and financial support.

- Create networks between universities, research institutions and the private sector to facilitate synergies between projects.

- Promote cross-sectoral collaboration, enshrining the sustainable food systems agenda into a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach.

- Mainstream True Cost Accounting, considering environmental, social and health impacts of policies and practices.

- Guarantee use of science- and evidence-based strategies and knowledge sharing, facilitated by a platform for data collection and knowledge transfer.
Top issues hampering the achievement of the global nutrition targets and ways to address them

Participants discussed key issues that, according to them, hamper the achievement of global nutrition targets and, in some cases, suggested ways to overcome them. The full list of issues mentioned is presented below:

- There is too much focus on the quantity of food and calories produced to “feed the world” through export-oriented models, with health impacts being treated as secondary concerns. The focus should rather be on food quality and health.

- Siloed approaches to policymaking: An integrated approach is needed that includes agriculture, environment, water, health, climate, trade, finance, international development, employment, education, and social welfare.

- Influence of multinationals on trade and investment policies: This prioritizes revenue rather than health; rights-based approaches to governance should be ensured to address inequities.

- Major focus on food systems or agrifood companies: This leads to the neglect of socio-economic, cultural and individual health and lifestyle factors that condition food choices.

- There is insufficient public funding to undertake the actions needed to achieve proposed objectives.

- There is a lack of nutrition/food education among the population, which makes behaviour change difficult.

- Unaffordability of healthy diets: Addressing this requires subsidization of locally produced food and taxation of highly processed food.

- Social inequity: Minimum wages should be raised and equitable access to health care provided.

- Lack of nutrition capacity in the health workforce: Building this capacity will help promote behaviour change.

- The priority given to cash crops reduces farmers’ focus on nutritious crops. Instead, governments and the private sector should incentivize the production of nutritious foods.

- Food safety considerations: For example, dry seeds and food should be protected from water by using “dry chain” to avoid the transfer of toxins to food and feed. Minimizing toxins also requires applying integrated pest management and sensitive monitoring.

- Food marketing is an issue, in particular the way that regulations are bypassed by new means of promotion through media platforms. Therefore, public nutrition policy needs to include technology, media and community based organizations.

- There is excessive food consumption, due to standardization of estimated dietary energy requirements and consequent overestimation of energy needs. Diets need to be adapted to personal needs.

- Food fraud: Addressing this requires adequate food quality standards.

Some participants discussed multiple challenges that together require a set of overall solutions:

- Food security linkages: The first issue concerns the linkage between food security and the environment. Pressure on, and inequitable distribution of, natural resources – exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change – affects agricultural production. The second issue is the linkage between food security and society; health, demographic and sociopolitical issues are relevant in this regard. The third issue concerns the linkage between food security and economics; poverty is a major cause of malnutrition, and prevails in rural areas. Addressing these three challenges requires: a) giving food a central position in the international policy agenda; b) promoting economic development and agricultural productivity in developing countries, supporting them in achieving a state of self-reliance; c) adapting production chains to manage price volatility and guarantee safety nets; and d) managing dietary habits – especially considering the “westernization” of diets in developing countries.

- Destruction of land ecosystems, overfishing, and the generation of high amounts of residues: Solutions include implementing agroecology, improving the productivity of aquaculture, and re-valorization of by-products.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The consultation received contributions from the following organizations and individual experts:

Official comments

- FAO Publications
- Global Alliance for the Future of Food, Brazil
- International Food & Beverage Alliance
- Society for International Development
- Spanish Federation of Food and Drink Industries
- World Cancer Research Fund International

Personal comments

- Kameswararao Chiruvolu (private), India
- Peetambar Dahal, University of California – Davis, United States of America
- Tanyaradzwa Dembetembe, Zimbabwe
- Mayara De Paula, NNEdPRO, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- Anthony Fardet, INRA, France
- Edgar Jaimes, Universidad de Los Andes (ULA), Núcleo Universitario “Rafael Rangel” (NURR), Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela
- Uma Koirala, Civil Society Alliance for Nutrition, SUN, Nepal
- Ravinder Kumar, Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- Lal Manavado, Independent analyst/synthesist, Norway
- Suzana Mantovani Cerqueira, Swiss Academic Nutritionists / The Swiss Public Health / NNEdPro / IANE, Switzerland
- Santosh Kumar Mishra (retired), Population Education Resource Centre, Department of Lifelong Learning and Extension (previously known as Department of Continuing and Adult Education and Extension Work), S.N.D.T. Women’s University, Mumbai, India
- Dhananjaya Poudyal, Civil Society Alliance Nutrition (CSANN), Nepal
- Claudio Schuftan, PHM, Viet Nam
- Sadaf Faryal Shah, Pakistan
- Jane Sherman, Nutrition education consultant (ex-FAO), Italy
- Dick Tinsley, Colorado State University, United States of America
- Theodore Tulchinsky, MD MPH (retired), Israel
- Sajeevani Weerasekara, Queensland University of Technology, Sri Lanka