

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS FOR HEALTHY DIETS AND IMPROVED NUTRITION: KEY MESSAGES

UNITED NATIONS DECADE OF
ACTION ON NUTRITION
2016-2025



Food and Agriculture
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United Nations



World Health
Organization



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IN SUMMARY

These key messages are the culmination of three days of discussions, sharing of experience and reflection by over 600 people who participated in the International Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition co-convened by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in December 2016. Participants included delegates from 90 FAO Member States, and representatives of intergovernmental organizations, private-sector entities, civil society organizations, academia, research organizations and producer organizations.

These key messages should now be used to formulate better-informed and accelerated specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) policy actions that implement the recommendations of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2)¹ for food-system reform at national, regional and global level. In this era of the Decade of Action on Nutrition and the Sustainable Development Goals, such action is imperative not only to achieve the shared goal of ending malnutrition by 2030, but also to inform the broader scope of human development goals, each of which is underpinned by the fundamental right to adequate and healthy food.

¹ Second International Conference on Nutrition, co-convened by FAO and WHO and hosted at FAO headquarters, Rome, in November 2014. www.fao.org/about/meetings/icn2





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INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS FOR HEALTHY DIETS AND IMPROVED NUTRITION

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BACKGROUND

Today, nearly one in three people suffers from at least one form of malnutrition. By 2025, projections indicate the number will be one in two, unless current trends are halted or reversed.

Poor diet quality is a contributor to all forms of malnutrition, whether overweight, obesity or undernutrition, including the 'hidden hunger' of micronutrient deficiency. Diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are now associated with more premature deaths among adults worldwide than any other risk factor.

In many of today's food systems, nutritious foods that constitute a healthy diet are not available or affordable for many people. Additionally, the agricultural production practices that comprise a central part of current food systems are major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions and consequent global warming.

The ICN2 acknowledged these challenges as urgent and of the highest priority, and addressed them in the ICN2 Framework for Action¹ through a series of normative policy recommendations to countries seeking to increase the nutritional and environmental viability of their food systems.

INTRODUCTION

Against this background, FAO and WHO convened an international symposium on the theme *Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition*. Held at FAO headquarters in Rome in December 2016², the symposium aimed at increasing awareness of today's food and nutrition challenges, and provided a forum to discuss strategies for food-system reform. Nine parallel sessions comprising expert presentations and country case studies were organized under three sub-themes:

- *Supply-side measures for diversifying food production and for increasing availability and affordability of healthy diets;*
- *Demand-side measures for increasing access and empowering consumers to choose healthy diets;*
- *Measures to strengthen accountability, resilience and equity within food systems.*

The symposium also included a session for students, several special events and a session entitled *Next steps for the Second International Conference on Nutrition: Work programme of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition in the era of the Sustainable Development Goals*. This session, which closed the symposium, took stock of issues addressed in previous sessions. Jointly moderated by WHO and FAO, it called for new ways of working together and expressions of SMART policy commitments by countries and other key stakeholders to realize the opportunity presented by the Decade of Action on Nutrition.

This summary document presents key messages from the symposium, organized by sub-theme and informed by presentations and dialogue from the symposium as a whole.

¹ Conference Outcome Document: Framework for Action, available at: www.fao.org/3/a-mm215e.pdf

² Video recordings of the symposium's sessions are available at: www.fao.org/about/meetings/sustainable-food-systems-nutrition-symposium/webcast

SUB-THEME 1

Supply-side measures for diversifying food production and for increasing availability and affordability of healthy diets

Sub-theme 1 highlighted the fundamental misalignment between supply-side agrifood policies and nutrition goals that characterize many of today's food systems.

In recent decades, heavy public-sector investment in a narrow range of staple crops has made grains and starchy staples cheaper and more abundant than nutrient-rich non-staples such as fruits and vegetables, contributing to a lack of diversity in the global food supply. Currently, demand for diversified diets is increasing, but the supply response has been slow, due in part to this imbalance in investment and related poor incentive structures for producers. Nutritious non-staple foods – fruits, vegetables, nuts, animal-source foods and pulses – are not readily available or affordable for many people.

At the same time, highly processed foods that are high in saturated fats, salt and sugar, such as soft drinks, instant foods and packaged sweet and salty snacks, have become more readily available in many countries. The rise in consumption of these ultra-processed foods reflects the abundant global supply of starchy cereals and oils, which are their main ingredients.

Today's food systems are also taking a heavy toll on the environment. Agricultural practices with high carbon and water footprints, and pesticide and fertilizer pollution pose major global ecological challenges whose urgency is compounded by climate change.

Three parallel sessions presented current country-level strategies for improving availability and affordability of environmentally sustainable, nutritious foods:

- *Session 1.1: Sustainable agricultural production and diversification for healthy diets*
- *Session 1.2: Maintaining and improving nutritional value and food safety along the value chain*
- *Session 1.3: Leveraging market opportunities for promoting healthy diets*



KEY MESSAGES ON SUPPLY-SIDE MEASURES (SUB-THEME 1)

- The kind of food that is most available, affordable and convenient is a major determinant of people's diets. There is a misalignment between supply-side agrifood policies and investments, and nutrition goals.
- Availability, price, safety and quality of foods are influenced by many economic and agronomic supply-side factors (e.g. investment systems, agricultural subsidies, regulatory standards, seed supply, yield, pest resistance and perishability). Both public-sector and private-sector agricultural research and investment agendas need to address these factors if they are to improve productivity, profitability and availability of nutrient-dense non-staple foods.
- A systems approach is needed to increase the diversification of production and supply of vegetables, fruits, pulses and sustainably produced animal-source foods. This approach must include changes in agricultural systems to increase crop diversity and must also extend along the whole value chain to improve storage, transport, transformation, marketing and retail activities, while ensuring high levels of food safety and taking environmental sustainability into account every step of the way.

SUB-THEME 2

Demand-side measures for increasing access and empowering consumers to choose healthy diets

Sub-theme 2 recognized that the greater availability, marketing and consumption of convenient, inexpensive, highly processed food products, coupled with reduced physical activity, has contributed to the growing global burden of overweight, obesity and diet-related NCDs. The dramatic global rise in incidence of overweight and obesity in children is particularly alarming. At the same time, undernutrition, notably multiple micronutrient deficiencies, persists in many populations.

Parallel sessions under this sub-theme highlighted country experiences in implementing food and nutrition policies that address these challenges. The focus was on supporting food environments³ in which the consumer can access a high-quality diet and make well-informed, healthier choices for all family members, including infants and young children:

- *Session 2.1: Regulations, awareness and advocacy for better-informed food choices*
- *Session 2.2: Information and education for healthy food behaviours*
- *Session 2.3: Increasing access to healthy diets through social protection and income-generation strategies*

³ 'Food environment' refers to the kinds of foods that are available, affordable, convenient and desirable to people in the settings in which they go about their daily lives. For more on the food environment, see:

- **FAO.** 2016. *Influencing food environments for healthy diets*. Rome, FAO. (also available at: <http://www.fao.org/policy-support/resources/resources-details/en/c/459821/>).
- **Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition.** 2016. *Food systems and diets: Facing the challenges of the 21st century*. London, UK. (also available at: <https://www.glopan.org/foresight>).
- **Turner, C., Kadiyala, S., Aggarwal, A., Coates, J., Drewnowski, A., Hawkes, C., Herforth, A., Kalamatianou, S. & Walls, H.** 2017. *Concepts and methods for food environment research in low and middle income countries*. Agriculture, Nutrition and Health Academy Food Environments Working Group (ANH-FEWG). Innovative Methods and Metrics for Agriculture and Nutrition Actions (IMMANA) programme. London, UK, ANH-FEWG. Available at: http://anh-academy.org/sites/default/files/FEWG_TechnicalBrief_low.pdf

KEY MESSAGES ON DEMAND-SIDE MEASURES (SUB-THEME 2)

- Empowering consumers to make healthy food choices is essential to addressing both undernutrition and overnutrition, as a healthy diet helps prevent all forms of malnutrition and diet-related NCDs. People are much more likely to make healthy diet choices when nutritious food is readily available, recognizable and affordable. Governments should prioritize food and nutrition policies that focus on improving the food environment.
- Food marketing and advertisements must be regulated to ensure that claims are not misleading and nutrition labelling is clear. Fiscal (dis)incentives such as taxes and subsidies, legislative mandates such as nutrition standards in government institutions, and nutrition education that starts with the very young are essential for creating consumer demand for nutritious foods. Together, they exert pressure on the food industry to improve food environments.
- Additional measures for empowering consumers include nutrition education and awareness-raising to enhance knowledge and motivation to select and prepare nutritious foods and to promote healthy dietary behaviour. Delivery platforms for these measures include nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes such as school food and nutrition schemes.
- There is huge potential for synergies between all these types of measures, with national or regional food-based dietary guidelines playing a critical role by anchoring the entire range of actions within the same implementation framework.
- It is possible for the private sector to play a constructive, positive role in these efforts. Government regulations and fiscal disincentives should be supported by the active collaboration of the food industry.



SUB-THEME 3

Measures to strengthen accountability, resilience and equity within food systems

The policy agendas described in sub-themes 1 and 2 propose significant changes to the status quo. On the supply side, there is an urgent need to better align agrifood policies with nutrition goals to improve availability and affordability of nutrient-dense non-staple foods. On the demand side, there is an equally urgent need for regulations and measures that create healthy food environments and that empower consumers to make healthy diet choices.

Sub-theme 3 comprised parallel sessions of presentations on three approaches for galvanizing these changes:

- *Session 3.1: Designing, implementing and monitoring evidence-based policies effectively with multiple actors*
- *Session 3.2: Enhancing food-system resilience in areas affected by climate change and other crises*
- *Session 3.3: Empowering women as key drivers of food-system change*



KEY MESSAGES ON ACCOUNTABILITY, RESILIENCE AND EQUITY (SUB-THEME 3)

- Governments have the responsibility to enact food-system policies that positively influence what people eat. All food-system stakeholders (including public and private actors) should be active participants in the food-system reform process. At a practical level, reforms must be implemented through evidence-based policies, informed by data on food prices, food intake, diet quality and related metrics.
- Climate change and related crises are threatening populations around the world, many of which are vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition. However, these populations are also often custodians of knowledge and practices for healthy food systems. Strengthening food-system resilience in these populations calls for a paradigm shift that makes explicit investments in indigenous and local agricultural knowledge and food cultures.
- Women are gatekeepers for health and nutrition because it is most often women who care for infants and children and who set household diet rules. As such, women hold enormous potential to become empowered consumers who demand healthy food systems. In many countries, women also have the potential to become empowered producers who increase the availability and affordability of nutritious foods. Unlocking this potential requires increased gender equity and equality in agriculture and other productive sectors, together with continued investment in nutrition education and awareness-raising.



Notes

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