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Organisation des Nations
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Продовольственная и
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Organización de las
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CONFERENCE

Forty-first Session

Rome, 22-29 June 2019

Biennial Theme 2020-21 - Promoting healthy diets and preventing all forms of malnutrition

Executive Summary

1. Malnutrition remains a global problem affecting all countries; currently one in three people is affected by some form of malnutrition¹ such as hunger, stunting, wasting, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity. Malnutrition costs the world's economies trillions of dollars due to increasing health costs and loss of productivity. Investing in nutrition is therefore both a moral imperative and a sound economic investment.
2. Unhealthy diets are an underlying cause of all forms of malnutrition.
3. A healthy diet meets the nutritional needs of individuals by providing sufficient, safe, and diversified foods to maintain active life and reduce risks of disease. Healthy diets include a variety of nutrient-dense foods from basic food groupings – fruits, vegetables including legumes, nuts, whole grains and animal source foods as needed.
4. Current food systems are challenged to deliver healthy diets needed for optimal health and nutrition for everyone in a way that protects natural resources. Delivering on healthy diet will require coherent policies and comprehensive programmes that address both the supply and demand sides of food, as well as measures to shape the food environment where consumers make their food-related decisions. Policies, programmes and investments need to be “nutrition-sensitive”, which means they must have positive impacts on nutrition.
5. FAO has a leading role in supporting countries to transform their food systems to deliver on healthy diets.

Suggested action by the Conference

The Conference is invited to approve the proposed theme on “Promoting healthy diets and preventing all forms of malnutrition” for Governing Body sessions to be held during the 2020-21 biennium.

Queries on the substantive content of this document may be addressed to:

Máximo Torero Cullen
Assistant Director-General, Economic and Social Development Department
Tel: +3906 5705 0869

¹ Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition. 2016. Food systems and diets: Facing the challenges of the 21st century. London, UK. <http://glopan.org/sites/default/files/ForesightReport.pdf>

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I. Background

1. The world has made significant steps towards improving nutrition over recent decades, but malnutrition still remains a global problem affecting every country in the world. Of 141 countries for which there is sufficient data, 124 experience more than one form of malnutrition.²
2. The number of undernourished people has risen to 821 million in 2017.³ Anaemia in women and obesity in adults are also on the increase – one in three women of reproductive age is anaemic and more than 672 million adults are obese, globally.³ Overweight and obesity are increasing the risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as type 2 diabetes, heart diseases and some forms of cancer.
3. The number of children affected globally by stunting has decreased significantly since 1990, but an estimated 149 million children under five were still stunted in 2018, and over 49 million wasted⁴. At the same time, childhood overweight and obesity are increasing. There are now over 40 million overweight children globally, an increase of 10 million since 2000.⁴
4. The consequences of malnutrition include ill health, and increases in childhood death and future adult disability, as well as enormous economic and social costs. Estimates suggest that malnutrition in all its forms costs society up to USD 3.5 trillion per year, with overweight and obesity alone costing USD 500 billion per year.⁵

II. Biennial Theme 2020-21: Promoting healthy diets and preventing all forms of malnutrition

5. The proposed biennial theme is in line with current global priorities, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025. A healthy diet is critical for meeting most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
6. A healthy diet meets the nutritional needs of individuals by providing sufficient, safe, and diversified foods to maintain active life and reduce risks of disease. Healthy diets include a variety of nutrient dense foods from basic food groupings – fruits, vegetables including legumes, nuts, whole grains and animal source foods as needed.
7. Unhealthy diets are now a major contributor to the global burden of disease. Unhealthy diets are responsible for more adult deaths and disability than alcohol and tobacco use.⁶ In 2017, 11 million deaths⁷ were attributable to dietary risk factors. High intake of sodium, low intake of whole grains, and low intake of fruits and vegetables were the leading dietary risk factors for deaths and disability globally and in many countries.⁸

² Development Initiatives, 2018. 2018 Global Nutrition Report: Shining a light to spur action on nutrition. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives.

³ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2018). The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018. Building Climate Resilience for Food Security and Nutrition, Rome, Italy.

⁴ UNICEF / WHO / World Bank Group, 2019. Levels and trends in child malnutrition. Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates Key findings of the 2019 edition. <https://www.who.int/nutgrowthdb/jme-2019-key-findings.pdf?ua=1>

⁵ Global Panel, 2016. The Cost of Malnutrition: Why Policy Action is Urgent. Available at:

<https://glopan.org/sites/default/files/pictures/CostOfMalnutrition.pdf>

⁶ Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition. 2016. Food systems and diets: Facing the challenges of the 21st century. London, UK

⁷ Disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) Years of healthy life lost to premature death and disability. DALYs are the sum of years of life lost and years lived with disability.

⁸ Global Burden of Disease, 2017. Health effects of dietary risks in 195 countries, 1990–2017: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017. Lancet. 2019 Apr 3.

8. Our food systems (which encompass the entire range of actors and their interlinked activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products) are challenged to provide the healthy diets needed for optimal health and wellbeing for everyone.

9. Food systems worldwide are undergoing rapid transformations, driven by factors such as agricultural industrialization, population growth, urbanization, globalization and climate change. While having positive outcomes like increasing the year-round availability of foods, access to diverse foods, food safety and durability, these food system changes have led to lower diet quality in many countries. For example, energy-dense, highly processed foods which are often low in micronutrients, are readily available, often cheaper and more convenient to consume than more nutrient-rich fresh foods.⁹

10. Current food systems perpetuate economic and social inequities and inequalities, which affect both producers and consumers of food. Our food systems are also harmful to the environment. The fundamental changes needed in the way food is produced and consumed are recognized by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This implies that SDG 12 “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” and other relevant SDGs, including SDG 2 “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture” need to be taken together.

11. At the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2),¹⁰ jointly organized by FAO and WHO in November 2014, countries committed to enhance sustainable food systems by developing coherent public policies from production to consumption and across relevant sectors to provide year-round access to food that meets people’s nutrition and promote safe and diversified healthy diets.

12. Delivering on healthy diets will require actions across entire food systems: coherent policies and programmes to promote production of nutrient-dense crops, processing methods that retain nutrients, policies to ensure nutritious foods are affordable, accessible and safe, reducing food loss and waste, empowering consumers to make healthy food choices, use of metrics to monitor diet quality and data to guide effective policies on making healthy diets available to all and developing national food-based dietary guidelines to give guidance on healthy eating.

13. The FAO Council has approved the update of the “Strategy and vision for FAO’s work in nutrition”¹¹ to be anchored in a “Food systems for healthy diets” approach. To ensure that FAO’s five strategic objectives contribute to positive nutrition outcomes, nutrition has been established as a cross-cutting theme in the Organization.

14. FAO is committed to supporting countries to transform their food systems to deliver on healthy diets.

⁹ Monteiro CA., Moubarac JC., Cannon G., Ng SW., Popkin BM. 2013. Ultra-processed products are becoming dominant in the global food system. *Obesity Reviews*, 2013 Nov;14 Suppl 2:21-8. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24102801

¹⁰ Second International Conference on Nutrition. Conference Outcome Document: Framework for Action. 2014. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-mm215e.pdf>

¹¹ FAO, 2014. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4185e.pdf>