

# conference

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FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS ROME

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## Twenty-fifth Session

Rome, 11-30 November 1989

### INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NUTRITION

#### I. BACKGROUND

1. The FAO Council, at its 95th Session, noted a proposal made by the Sub-Committee on Nutrition of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC/SCN) at its 15th Session in New York in February 1989 that an International Conference on Nutrition be convened in order to mobilize efforts and resources to combat malnutrition.

2. The Council expressed concern that malnutrition was still very widespread and had worsened in many countries during the 1980s and that it was likely to remain as a major problem in the 1990s and probably beyond. It welcomed in general the proposal to convene an International Conference on Nutrition and considered that FAO, in view of its mandate and expertise, should take the lead in convening it in the biennium 1992-93, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and other interested agencies of the UN system. The Council also noted with satisfaction that a detailed document would be presented to the Conference in November 1989 so as to enable it to take a decision on the convening of the International Conference on Nutrition in the 1992-93 biennium.

3. Following the meeting of the Council, the Director-General met with the Director-General of WHO in early July in Geneva and discussed with him the modalities for convening an International Conference on Nutrition. Both Directors-General, Heads of the two specialized agencies of the UN system most concerned with nutrition, agreed that the Conference should be jointly co-sponsored by FAO and WHO and that a suitable formula for enlisting the participation of other interested agencies in the UN system should be worked out. This document has been prepared in close consultation with WHO.

#### II. RATIONALE

4. Despite considerable progress made in global food production during the 1980s, the acute problem of malnutrition has affected hundreds of millions of people in developing countries. The number of malnourished people <sup>1/</sup> has continued to increase at the same pace as the

<sup>1/</sup> The Fifth World Food Survey, FAO, 1987.

world population, especially because of inequitable income distribution and poor performance of the food and agriculture sector with consequent adverse impact on food security in several countries, especially in Africa.

5. According to FAO projections until the year 2000 <sup>2/</sup>, one of the major issues facing the world in the 1990s is the persistence of low consumption and undernutrition amidst the potential global plenty. It can even be predicted that this will be a constant parameter in the policy debate over the next 15 years and the need for direct interventions both by national and internationally supported means, will continue to be acute. Public expenditure on health has declined in many developing countries, especially in the context of structural adjustment programmes, leading to an alarming situation where malnutrition continues to massively affect the poorest people and especially the young. Special efforts by the governments of the countries concerned, with adequate technical and financial support of the international community, are needed to reverse these disquieting trends and to safeguard food security.

6. The developed world itself is not exempt from malnutrition which persists mainly at the periphery and in some areas of large cities. In general terms, in industrialized countries, the principal nutrition problems are currently caused by overnutrition and by inappropriate eating patterns. <sup>3/</sup> Moreover, decreased age-specific mortality, and a marked increase in life expectancy coupled with more sedentary lifestyles, have created the conditions worldwide for increased premature disability and death arising from diet-related health conditions. As shown in the FAO Fifth World Food Survey, average dietary energy intakes have increased to very high levels in developed countries, while important changes in consumption patterns have also taken place in the last two or three decades. The consumption of traditional staples with a natural high fiber content has declined, while industrially processed food with excessive levels of sugar and saturated fats, as well as animal products, are increasingly consumed. As a result, incidence of diet-related diseases such as cardio-vascular diseases and cancer is rising and leading to an alarming rate in premature death among men and women below the age of 65 years. There is also worrying evidence that a similar trend is emerging in the middle-to-high-income class of urbanized population in developing countries. Such conditions are preventable through coherent nutrition policies which would stimulate intersectoral action for the production of healthier foods by the food industries and a better education and protection of the consumers.

7. Nutrition is a fundamental need for human well-being. Malnutrition leads to sickness and deaths, particularly in children, lowers educational performance, and reduces productivity. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies cause blindness, mental retardation and physical exhaustion. It is now generally recognised that malnutrition, including micro-nutrient deficiencies, can be dramatically reduced through

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<sup>2/</sup> Agriculture: Toward 2000 (Revised Version 1987), FAO, C 87/27.

<sup>3/</sup> Healthy Nutrition: preventing nutrition-related diseases in Europe, WHO Regional Publications, European Series No. 24, 1988.

vigorous and sustained efforts. Considerable knowledge has been accumulated in the last decades and effective technologies have been successfully tested in the field. While major global economic and social issues such as population, habitat, women, fisheries, forestry, etc., have been the focus of attention of special international conferences, nutrition so far has not received the attention that it deserves from the international community as a whole, despite the growing recognition of the need to attack the problem of malnutrition in both developing and developed countries.

8. The convening of an International Conference on Nutrition will be a very important step forward in initiating vigorous and sustained efforts that are needed to impart a nutrition focus to the development strategy. In this context, it may be recalled that the objectives of the International Development Strategy for the U.N. Fourth Development Decade are most likely to focus on human development and to place special emphasis on improving standards of living and especially nutrition and health. An International Conference on Nutrition will provide a unique opportunity to bring together governments, organizations of the U.N. System, including financial institutions, experts and research workers as well as non-governmental organizations to undertake a thorough review of the problem and to agree on concerted remedial actions to eliminate chronic malnutrition and to stimulate the mobilization of additional resources.

9. The ingredients for bringing about a major lasting improvement in the world nutrition situation are at hand: adequate scientific knowledge, inexpensive and effective technology, and accumulated practical experience. But this improvement can occur only if the international development community is able to muster the political will necessary to ensure the appropriate level and concentration of human and financial resources. It is thus reassuring to note that the present social and political climates appear particularly favourable to an international conference on nutrition that would serve as a "new beginning" for addressing fundamental global nutrition concerns.

### **III. OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE**

10. The objectives of the International Conference on Nutrition, taking into account the discussion at the 15th Session of the ACC/SCN, are proposed to be as follows:

- a) Identify the problems of malnutrition and related disease factors, their magnitude and geographical distribution, their causes and impact on the population and measures to overcome them at world, regional and national levels;
- b) develop and adopt a strategy and proposals for action to reach agreed nutrition and dietary goals;
- c) mobilize additional financial resources for concentrated efforts by governments, non-governmental organizations and international organizations to implement the strategy through immediate and long-term proposals for broad-based national and international action;
- d) increase awareness of the magnitude, causes and consequences of malnutrition and of the benefit of sound nutritional status in order to create momentum behind actions for a human nutrition focus within the Fourth Development Decade; and

- e) establish a global system of collecting and disseminating information on year-to-year changes in nutrition status of the populations with particular reference to the vulnerable groups.

#### **IV. ORGANIZATION OF THE CONFERENCE**

11. It is proposed that the International Conference on Nutrition should be an intergovernmental meeting and will have a duration of seven working days. The date and place of the Conference will need to be decided after taking into account a number of relevant factors. In this connection, it may be recalled that the Italian Government, at the 95th Session of the Council, has indicated its readiness to host the Conference in Rome. In view of this offer, the extensive food and nutrition bibliographic data and staff resources of FAO, and the location of the Secretariats of the World Food Council, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and the World Food Programme, Rome would offer many advantages as the venue for this Conference.

12. As regards the dates, it may be mentioned that a U.N. Conference on the Environment is to be held in mid-1992 which will make it very difficult to hold another international conference in the same year. Mid-1993 will therefore appear to be a better time for the Conference on Nutrition. This will also allow for sufficient time to prepare for this important Conference.

13. As an intergovernmental meeting, the Conference will be open to all Member Governments of FAO and WHO as well as to international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations having established relations with FAO and WHO. The Conference may also be attended by observers from Member Nations and by non-Member Nations.

14. The International Conference on Nutrition can be envisaged to have two technical commissions which will hold sessions simultaneously with the plenary session. The Ministers and the Heads of delegations will make their general statements at the plenary session, while discussions on the technical matters, including consideration of draft resolutions, will take place in the two technical commissions.

#### **V. COOPERATION WITH OTHER AGENCIES**

15. The Conference will be jointly co-sponsored by FAO and WHO in cooperation with other interested international agencies. As recommended by the Council, all interested UN organizations and specialized agencies, members of the ACC/SCN as well as major international financial organizations and bilateral aid agencies concerned with world food and nutrition problems will be actively associated with the preparations for the Conference. Their involvement will be ensured through Inter-Agency Meetings, utilizing the existing machinery of the ACC/SCN. A specific item labelled "Inter-Agency Meeting" could be placed on the ACC/SCN agenda at its regular annual session, and a convenient time would be allocated to allow for detailed discussions of the various questions regarding the International Conference on Nutrition.

## **VI. ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS**

16. In order to make adequate technical preparations, it is proposed to establish an Advisory Committee of Experts of about ten members to assist FAO, WHO and other cooperating international agencies. The Advisory Committee will advise on the general orientation of the Conference and on main technical issues involved in tackling malnutrition. In this way it will be possible to enlist wider support also from research institutes, universities and non-governmental organizations, as well as to enrich the expertise available for the preparation of the Conference.

17. The first meeting of the Advisory Committee of Experts is envisaged to be held towards the end of 1990 or the beginning of 1991 with a view to giving an early start to the preparation for the Conference. Two more subsequent meetings of the Advisory Committee could be held before the International Conference itself. Representatives of interested cooperating international agencies including the ACC/SCN will also be invited to the meetings of the Advisory Committee of Experts.

18. Existing international non-governmental organizations, for example the International Union of Nutritional Sciences, the International Council for Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders, the International Vitamin A Consultative Group, the International Nutritional Anaemia Consultative Group and the International Food Policy Research Institute will also be requested to contribute to preparing for the Conference in their areas of specific expertise.

## **VII. REGIONAL DISCUSSIONS**

19. It is proposed that the FAO Regional Conferences in 1990 will discuss nutrition issues that are particularly important in each Region, with a view to proposing modalities for action at regional and country levels. The Regional Offices of WHO as well as of cooperating specialized agencies will be invited to participate in the discussions at the Regional Conferences. The following nutrition topics are proposed for discussion at different Regional Conferences to be held in 1990:

- 16th Regional Conference for Africa (June 1990)  
**Strategies for Combatting Malnutrition**
- 20th Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific (April 1990)  
**Action Programmes to Overcome Specific Nutritional Deficiencies**
- 17th Regional Conference for Europe (March 1990)  
**A Balanced Diet - The Way to Good Nutrition**
- 21st Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean  
**Malnutrition in Rural Areas: Prevention and Control**
- 20th Regional Conference for the Near East (March 1990)  
**A Balanced Diet - The Way to Good Nutrition**

## **VIII. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

20. Suitable financial arrangements will be made for the preparation and holding of the Conference. FAO and WHO, as the two co-sponsoring agencies will share the costs on an equal basis. Arrangements will also be made for the other agencies wishing to be associated with the

Conference to make a financial contribution. Such costs will include the establishment of a Conference Secretariat, headed by a Secretary-General, contractual services, travel, the direct meeting costs of the Conference, etc. The resources required for the Conference will be included in the budget proposals for the biennium 1992-93.

21. It is envisaged that a Special Fund from extra-budgetary resources provided by donor governments and cooperating agencies will be established to pay for the travel expenses and per diem of delegations from least developed countries, and to contribute to the preparations for the Conference.

#### **IX. REPORTING TO FAO GOVERNING BODIES AND OTHER INTERESTED BODIES**

22. Progress reports on the preparations for the International Conference on Nutrition will be submitted to the FAO Council in 1990, 1992 and 1993 and to the 26th Session of the Conference in 1991. The recommendations of the International Conference on Nutrition will be submitted for consideration and necessary action to the 27th Session of the FAO Conference in 1993.