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BRIEF ⑤

NUTRITION, FOOD SAFETY AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

Prepared by
Kerstin Mechlem, Legal Officer, Development Law Service, FAO
Ellen Muehlhoff, Senior Officer, Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division, FAO
Franz Simmersbach, Consultant on the Right to Food and Nutrition

Today, there are approximately 852 million people who are undernourished and many more who do not receive enough vitamins and minerals to ensure proper growth and development and to maintain basic health. Millions more are deprived of secure access to safe food and water, and adequate health services. Dirty water and lack of sanitation, unsafe food and inadequate feeding practices, especially of infants and young children, are major causes of diarrhoeal diseases that contribute to undernutrition and can result in death.



Photo: E. Muehlhoff

In contrast to undernutrition, millions of adults suffer from chronic diseases related to obesity, including heart disease, diabetes and some cancers. Dietary changes associated with urbanization, such as increased consumption of sugars and fats and declining levels of physical activity, have led to a significant rise in obesity-related diseases worldwide. Contrary to popular belief, obesity and chronic diseases have become problems of poor countries and poor people, putting an additional strain on health care budgets.

A right-to-food approach requires that states recognize their obligation to ensure that safe, nutritionally adequate and culturally acceptable food is available; to respect and protect consumers; and to promote good nutrition for all. The Voluntary Guidelines (VGs), in particular Guidelines 9 (Food safety and consumer protection) and 10 (Nutrition), can guide states in the establishment and maintenance of sound food and nutrition policies and programmes, thereby increasing the protection of the poor and vulnerable from unsafe food and inadequate diets while helping to combat overweight and obesity.

A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO FOOD AND NUTRITION

Officials and programme planners working in the areas of food safety, consumer protection and nutrition need to identify ways in which policies and programmes can be changed or designed to secure a rights-based approach to the progressive realization of the right to food.

Human rights standards require that states fulfil the right to food by providing all people with sufficient access to production resources, income or support so that they may feed and sustain themselves in a dignified manner. To comply with this obligation, the VGs recommend that states institute a rights-based approach to food. Resources can be used to build and maintain sustainable food systems, and policies and standards can be designed to ensure safe food and to enable healthy eating habits. In addition the VGs emphasize that states empower citizens with the necessary knowledge and skills to secure their right to food. States must be held accountable for measures taken to meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the right to adequate food. Procedures for claiming the right to food must be transparent. When individuals may have been denied benefits unjustly, they should have

access to judicial and non-judicial recourse mechanisms.

A rights-based approach to food and nutrition also requires that policies and programmes specifically protect and promote the rights of the marginalized and most vulnerable (e.g. children, women, indigenous people, the disabled, people living with HIV/AIDS), while also providing all people with opportunities to participate in the design and implementation of decisions that will affect them. When all relevant stakeholders are included in policy-making decisions, public confidence in policies and programmes is increased, thereby improving the likelihood that implementation will be successful. Norway is one country leading the way in efforts to increase consumer participation in national food policy (see Example 1).



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IMPROVING FOOD SAFETY AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

The VGs advocate that states establish comprehensive food control systems to reduce the risk of food-borne diseases and to ensure that all food, whether produced locally or obtained through trade or food aid, is safe and consistent with national food safety standards. States are encouraged to adopt scientifically based food safety standards that comply with maximum permitted levels for pathogens, contaminants from agricultural and industrial processes, residues from veterinary drugs and growth promoters and naturally occurring toxins. Food should remain safe at all times including during its production, processing, storage, transport, distribution, handling and sale.

The VGs also recommend that national food safety standards take into consideration international standards, in particular, Codex Alimentarius. While protecting the health of consumers, such standards should not be used as unjustified barriers to trade. The VGs encourage state cooperation with all stakeholders, including consumer organizations and the private sector, when establishing food safety systems

EXAMPLE 1

Consumer participation in national food policy in Norway

In 2003, Norway established food policy consumer panels in 7 of 19 counties to incorporate citizen opinions and preferences into the formulation of food policy and to increase state knowledge of consumer opinions, attitudes and behaviour in relation to the food market. Each panel consists of nine people representing both genders, and various ages and social and educational backgrounds. The panels are scheduled to meet at least twice a year. Reports on panel findings and recommendations are published and presented to responsible cabinet ministers at biannual meetings, which are open to stakeholders and the media.



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to ensure the provision of safe and good quality food. When states do not have sufficient capacity to implement agreed-upon food safety standards or to build effective food safety systems, developed countries and international organizations are encouraged to provide technical assistance.

Given that most food is commercially produced, regulations and standards should protect consumers against deception and misrepresentation in the packaging, labelling, advertising and sale of food. Individuals should be protected against harm caused by unsafe or adulterated food, including food offered by street vendors. Food packaging and labelling should provide consumers with accurate information that is sufficient to enable them to make well-informed food choices. States also need to provide consumers with information and education on safe storage, handling and utilization of food, as well as ways to prevent food-borne diseases.

In addition to promoting corporate social responsibility and industry self-controls, states are encouraged to consider regulations for the marketing and sale of food to children and adolescents in order to protect against unbalanced diets and the growing problem of obesity (see Example 2).

STRENGTHENING NUTRITION PROGRAMMES

Good nutrition and health depend, in large part, on the consumption of adequate amounts of good quality, safe food. The VGs recommend that states maintain or strengthen dietary diversity (e.g. through the production of nutritious and culturally appropriate foodstuffs, including indigenous varieties); take measures to ensure the fair distribution of food within communities and households; and

promote safe food preparation and healthy eating habits, including appropriate infant- and breastfeeding practices.

The VGs also encourage states to provide people with access to reliable nutrition information through education, information and labelling regulations. Consumers should be able to choose foods that are appropriate for their individual health needs and to prevent insufficient or unbalanced diets that can lead to undernutrition, obesity or chronic diseases. States may also need to address the issue of food advertising aimed at children.

Food and nutrition programmes should be guided by a rights-based approach and include all vulnerable individuals and groups on a non-discriminatory basis. Programmes should be aimed at improving the production and/or consumption of a variety of nutritious foods, and include

EXAMPLE 2

Protecting children from marketing and sale of low-nutrition foods in the United States of America and the United Kingdom

United States of America: Legislation banning or restricting advertisement and sale of fatty and sugary foods and soft drinks to children in schools have been enacted or are under way in various states.

United Kingdom: The Children's Food Bill Campaign calls for a ban on marketing and vending-machine sale of junk foods and fizzy drinks at schools, for mandatory quality guidelines regarding school meals, and for providing food and nutrition education.

home and school gardens, combined with nutrition education and the provision of healthy school meals. Food-based approaches contribute to household food security and to the prevention and control of micronutrient deficiency diseases. The fortification of foods with iodine, iron and vitamin A – another food-based approach – requires government regulation. Special attention should be given to the chronically vulnerable, including people suffering from HIV/AIDS. The VGs also encourage states to include all relevant stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of these programmes to ensure that

vulnerable people benefit from them (see Example 3).

For infants, breastmilk is the cheapest and most nutritionally valuable food, facilitating good physical and mental development. Protection of breastfeeding and attention to the special needs of pregnant and breastfeeding women are crucial to realize the right to food for infants. States should take measures to promote and encourage breastfeeding in line with the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and World Health Organization recommendations on infant and child feeding.

Recognizing that nutritional status is influenced by a wide range of factors, the VGs suggest that states take parallel action to improve health, education and hygiene infrastructures, and promote intersectoral collaboration to ensure optimal nutritional outcomes. In efforts to address and prevent problems of malnutrition, priority attention must be given to the most vulnerable groups in society. States should take particular care to overcome gender disparities and discriminatory practices against women and girls. Empowering women is key to achieving food security and ensuring adequate nutrition within households.

EXAMPLE 3

School meal councils promote schoolchildren's right to adequate food in Brazil

The National School Meal Programme provides meals for 37 million children. A major component of the programme is that civil society participate as a partner in guaranteeing its adequate execution. For example, through the School Meals Council, elected citizens ensure that school meals meet required nutritional standards and reach all children from preschool to 14 years.

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