



CFS REGIONAL CONSULTATION FOR NEAR EAST ON THE PREPARATION OF THE VOLUNTARY GUIDELINES ON FOOD SYSTEMS AND NUTRITION

CAIRO, 25-26 SEPTEMBER 2019

CHAIR'S SUMMARY

There were 53 participants at the meeting representing governments¹, civil society and indigenous people organizations, private sector, international organizations², and research and other relevant institutions³.

The CFS Secretariat was represented by Mr Emilio Colonnelli.

The meeting was chaired by Dr Liliane Ortega, Chair of the CFS Open-Ended Working Group on Food Systems and Nutrition.

The meeting was opened by Dr Sherine Assem, Deputy of Agricultural Research Center, Ministry of Agriculture of Egypt, Mr. Abdessalam Ould Ahmed, FAO Assistant Director-General for Near East, Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, Regional Adviser for Nutrition (WHO), and Dr Liliane Ortega. During the second day, a short statement was delivered by Dr Jaffar Hussein, Acting Regional Director of WHO.

The following comments and proposals were provided by participants during the discussion

¹ Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kyrgikistan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisa, Yemen.

² FAO, WFP, WHO, and UNICEF.

³ The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (IFPRI) and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA).

Comments and proposals on Chapter 1 of the Zero Draft of the Voluntary Guidelines

Participants suggested the inclusion of several issues in Chapter 1:

Conflicts and long lasting political crisis are important causes of malnutrition in several countries in the Near East. They endanger food security and are a major cause of hunger and poverty. Political crises undermine food production levels and increase the risk of food aid dependency.

Forced migration is creating new pockets of poverty across the region, preventing access and availability to nutritious food.

It is necessary to be more explicit on the direct linkages between malnutrition and non-communicable diseases and the resulting cost and social burdens for the societies affected (paragraph 5).

The impact of commercial/trade agreements has to be mentioned among the causal factors associated with consumption of unhealthy diets. Changes in food consumption habits, especially among youth, partly due to the rapid expansion of fast food retail options largely influenced by foreign companies, is linked to increases in overweight and obesity, particularly in urban settings.

Social pressure and social food consumption habits should also be mentioned as a causal factor of malnutrition, especially overweight and obesity.

It was recommended to further develop text related to the human social dimensions of food systems and the factors leading to increased malnutrition.

The role of women is key as they are the main agent of change for the consumption of healthy diets. Largely responsible for the domestic economy of families, they play an essential role in promoting food knowledge within the family and thereby re-shaping food consumption habits.

Paragraph 26.d should be more specific and mention the variety of private sector actors whose roles should be addressed by the Voluntary Guidelines. For example, investors in food chains should be identified as implicated in this topic and solutions for addressing negative public health trends. Similarly, media should be recognized for their impact and influence on food consumption patterns,

Comments and proposals on Chapter 2 of the Zero Draft of the Voluntary Guidelines

It was suggested to further elaborate the definition of food systems (para 27) to highlight the social and ecological aspects related to this concept.

The definition of healthy diets (i.e., paragraph 32) was considered too prescriptive. It should include the sustainability dimension and be more human-centered, and reference the critical importance of maternal health.

The guiding principle related to women's equality and empowerment should be further developed by referring to women's active role in care, education, health promotion, and food consumption.

It was suggested to add text and guiding principles on food sovereignty, on youth (need to create employment opportunities), and human rights (beyond the right to adequate food, considering the indivisibility of universal human rights).

Comments and proposals on Chapter 3 of the Zero Draft of the Voluntary Guidelines

Several comments were made to reiterate the importance of nutrition education at all levels (also for policy makers and investors). Nutrition education, together with information and awareness raising, should be an essential area of focus, as an important tool to inform the population of unbiased, science-based facts related to the links between food consumption and health. Civil society and producer associations can collaborate with governments to design public awareness campaigns aimed at improving public health linked to diet. The relevance of food balance sheets was also highlighted.

Many interventions stressed the importance of **effective, transparent governance of food systems**. In this regards, multistakeholder dialogue platforms are essential to enable all parties, including consumers, food producers, local food industries and governments, to design national socio-economic strategies with safe, healthy food and improved nutrition at their core. Governments should establish coordination mechanisms to harmonize sectoral policies and reduce silos.

In this context, attention should be paid to food imports and their influence on food habits and consumption patterns.

National agriculture policies are an essential entry point to promote nutrition-sensitive food production, taking advantage of local food diversity (local fruit and cereal species and varieties). Participants also stressed the importance of promoting the diversification of food production at national level, fostering short value chains, the work of national food producers, and the protection of the agroecosystems, in the context of climate change, water scarcity, land degradation and even desertification..

The importance of ensuring stable access to water and land, and consistent implementation of climate change adaptation strategies, should be considered in Chapter 3.

Reference should also be made to the dietary value of indigenous and under-utilized species, with an eye toward biodiversity protection and human socio-economic value development.

Affordability is a key factor. The text should speak more to the relevance and importance of full-cost accounting and food pricing as major impact factors in guiding retailers and consumer choices.

International development organizations have an important role to play in coordinating programmes that integrate goals related to food safety, nutrition-sensitive production, health and education that assist and support governments' efforts to harmonize actions across sectors.

The role of the World Trade Organization (WTO) was raised, including whether it can/should consider nutrition outcomes in the trade-related instruments and tools it develops, and whether trade agreements should factor nutrition and health outcomes of food-related trade among its considerations.

Food safety was identified as a key policy area to consider along the food value chain (not only in the context of storage and distribution), particularly the issue of pesticide residues in food and their impact on human dietary health.

Furthermore, it was suggested that consistency is emphasized between food safety standards at local level and markets, with those at the international level.

Transboundary diseases and anti-microbial resistance were highlighted as relevant problems for food safety policy-making and human health protection. Policies and coordination mechanisms between national and regional authorities should be put in place to address these issue.

The importance of reducing and eliminating **food loss and waste** was raised, including discussion of options for food recycling.

The role and **impact of conflict and humanitarian crisis** on food systems should be further highlighted in Chapter 3. In this regard, it was mentioned that humanitarian interventions should be designed to avoid disrupting and/or undermining local established markets and food supply chains, to minimize longer-term dependency creation among local populations. With such interventions, nutrition and dietary impacts must be a core focus of any longer-term intervention.

Evolving food habits have been identified as an important policy area to address with a view to establishing regulations to prevent the increased consumption of unhealthy, less-nutritious foods.

Labelling represents a critically-important tool, provided labels are consistent and easy to understand by consumers, to have their desired impact.

It was mentioned that social protection programmes should be more clearly spelt out in this chapter along with the need for such programmes to promote nutrition and healthy diets. In this context, the relevance of public food procurement policies and strategies was mentioned.

Finally, comments were made on directing more attention to the importance of utilization of new technologies and investing more in agricultural research.

Comments and proposals on Chapter 4 of the Zero Draft of the Voluntary Guidelines

The Voluntary Guidelines may facilitate the establishment of multistakeholder and multisectoral national councils to foster dialogue between different actors to agree upon coordinated actions.

Role of media is key for dissemination to raise awareness among different components of the society.

The key role of UN agencies, and especially the Rome-based Agencies, was highlighted for the dissemination, promotion and implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines.

The development of user-friendly technical guides, following the endorsement of the Voluntary Guidelines, would represent a key tool to promote their implementation on the ground.