

Frequently Asked Questions

Nutrition, agriculture and ICN2

What are today's major nutritional challenges and issues?

Persistently high levels of undernutrition. Some 842 million people go to bed hungry (1 in 8 people) and 2 billion (1 in 3) have some form of micronutrient malnutrition. This is a crime against humanity and a responsibility for us all. At the same time, obesity caused by excessive consumption and changing lifestyles is of growing concern.

What is ICN2 (please mention full name, organizing bodies and overall goal)?

The Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) is an inclusive high level inter-governmental meeting on nutrition. It is jointly organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in cooperation with the High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis (HLTF), IFAD, IFPRI, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, WFP and the WTO.

The ICN2 will be the first global intergovernmental conference to addressing the world's nutrition problems in the 21st century. Its overall goal is to improve diets and raise levels of nutrition through policies that more effectively address today's major nutrition challenges. It also aims to enhance international cooperation on these challenges.

Why is the international conference going to be so important? What concrete steps can be taken to improve people's lives?

Only an intergovernmental conference can provide the mandate and obligations for governments to act decisively to address the persistently high levels of malnutrition.

Nutrition is everyone's business. Since the causes of malnutrition involve all sectors, all sectors are needed to improve nutrition, including food and agriculture, trade, health, education and social welfare. This conference will bring together senior national policymakers from agriculture, health and other relevant ministries and agencies, with leaders of United Nations agencies and other intergovernmental organizations, researchers and academics, the private sector and civil society, including non-governmental organizations and consumer associations. By acting together, we can ensure that better policies are put in place to defeat hunger and malnutrition.

While the ICN2 will be global, and address all forms of malnutrition, there will be a special focus on nutrition challenges in developing countries. Today, we have good examples of how the right conditions can be put in place to make better diets and nutrition accessible for households and communities that are poor, socially excluded, economically marginalized, food insecure and vulnerable - especially women, infants and young children in such conditions. The idea is to help countries to access or develop the tools, guidelines and knowledge to develop solutions that work for them.

For example, we have seen that a “food-based” approach can result in sustained reduction of malnutrition. Within agriculture, food-based approaches promote interventions which encourage production and consumption of micronutrient-rich foods such as animal source foods, legumes, and some vegetables and fruits. Food-based approaches also include promotion of forest foods and aquaculture. Regardless of intervention, the objective is to increase availability and consumption of a range of foods necessary for a healthy diet. Nutrition education is considered an essential complement to food-based approaches, especially for women, who bear so much of the responsibility for family diets.

In Bangladesh an NGO-run programme is helping families to build “nutritional self-sufficiency” with homestead gardens and poultry raising schemes managed mainly by women. As of 2011, the programme had reached at least 900,000 households and benefited up to 4.5 million people, leading to an increased intake of protein and iron-rich foods and a decline in anaemia in women and children.

In Mozambique production of biofortified sweet potato combined with nutrition education has helped reduce vitamin A deficiency among children by up to 60 percent. Biofortification uses transgenic and conventional methods to breed staple food crops with higher micronutrient levels. This provides a practical way of reaching malnourished populations with limited access to markets. Marketed surpluses of biofortified crops may also make their way into retail outlets, reaching consumers in rural and eventually urban areas.

Why is a technical preparatory meeting needed, one full year ahead of the international conference?

The Preparatory Technical Meeting allows for an exchange of information and ideas to underpin the political process leading up to the 2014 event. It will review progress made towards improving nutrition since 1992 and reflect on nutrition problems that remain, and to point out new challenges to, and opportunities for, improving nutrition, as presented by changes in the global economy, in food systems, and by advances in science and technology. The aim is to identify policy options for improving nutrition over the next five to ten years.

Can we expect the technical meeting to shed new light on the link between nutrition and agriculture?

As nutrition is an outcome of multiple causative factors, the technical meeting provides an opportunity to explore how agriculture, health, education, social welfare and other sectors can better work together to address this multiple

burden of malnutrition. This will provide the basis for the building the political momentum which is key if nutrition of the poorest segments of society are to really benefit.