

BETTER NUTRITION – BETTER LIVES

ADDRESSING TODAY'S MAJOR NUTRITION CHALLENGES



José Graziano da Silva, Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), addresses today's major nutrition challenges and highlights the need for enhanced international cooperation to tackle malnutrition.

Malnutrition in all its forms (undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overnutrition), poses one of the greatest threats to people's health and well-being. Malnutrition imposes unacceptably high social and economic costs on individuals, especially for women, children and the elderly, and on families and societies. It seriously affects productivity and economic growth, restricts the attainment of human potential, negatively impacts human physical and cognitive development, compromises immunity and increases susceptibility to disease. Malnutrition is responsible for about half of all child deaths under five years of age, causing over three million deaths every year. High-level political commitment, as well as improved governance and international cooperation, are essential to sustainably improve nutrition.

Notwithstanding significant efforts and achievements made by many countries and the positive steps forward made by new initiatives such as the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, the last 20 years have seen modest and uneven progress in reducing malnutrition as measured by the targets set by the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition, the World Food Summits of 1996, 2002 and 2009 and the Millennium Development Goals.

FAO's most recent estimate indicates 842 million people – 12 per cent of the world's population or one in eight people – are undernourished, unable to meet their dietary energy requirements. An estimated 162 million children under five years old are stunted or chronically malnourished, 51 million wasted or acutely malnourished, and 2 billion people suffer one or more micronutrient deficiencies. At the same time, 500 million people are obese.

As a global community, we must collectively strive for nothing less than the end of hunger and the eradication of malnutrition and food and nutrition insecurity.

The global picture

The various forms of malnutrition often overlap and can coexist within the same country and within the same household. For example, the Commonwealth countries of the Solomon Islands, South Africa, Swaziland and

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Vanuatu all have the three forms of malnutrition as a problem of public health significance. Significant levels of undernutrition together with multiple micronutrient deficiencies may be found in Bangladesh, Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, Guyana, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Maldives, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia. For a number of countries, obesity levels are rising while undernutrition remains a problem (Dominica, Jamaica, Samoa, Trinidad and Tobago, and Tuvalu), and in the more developed countries of Australia, Canada, Cyprus, Malta, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, rising obesity levels are a major concern.

Exposure to food and nutritional risk factors occurs in all countries and in all socioeconomic groups. However, for those suffering undernutrition largely due to poverty, year round availability of, and physical and economic access to food, in terms of both calories and adequate variety, nutritional content and safety, remain key determinants. In addition, for such groups, undernutrition is often aggravated, in a vicious cycle, by health related factors such as non-potable water, poor sanitation, and food borne and parasitic infections, and by social and economic factors that result in social exclusion and economic marginalisation, poor education, and a lack of appropriate social welfare mechanisms, all of which need to be addressed thoroughly if malnutrition is to be eradicated.

National nutrition policies

As nutrition is an outcome of multiple factors, comprehensive solutions are needed. Thus appropriate policy

Women having their children checked for malnutrition at a feeding clinic in Dasheq, Kenya.



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The Second International Conference on Nutrition

Global problems require global solutions. The FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with UN agencies and other stakeholders, are organising the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2). It will be an inclusive high-level inter-governmental meeting to be held at FAO Headquarters, Rome, 19–21 November 2014. The conference will address the major nutrition challenges of the next decades and enhance international cooperation for implementing a Framework for Action for nutrition. All countries have been invited to engage in the process leading up to the ICN2 and to participate in the conference, which will set the stage for improving nutrition in the decades to come.

The ICN2 forms part of a worldwide effort to refocus attention on nutrition. Only a high-level inter-governmental conference can provide the mandate and the obligations for governments and other stakeholders to act decisively to address the problem and ensure commitment at high levels.

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The ICN2 will explore new policy options and mobilise political will and resources, identifying concrete steps to improve nutrition for all, in the near and medium term, by bringing food, agriculture, health and other sectors together to encourage greater political and policy coherence, alignment, coordination and cooperation to improve nutrition. It will review progress made since 1992 and reflect on the existing and the new challenges and opportunities presented by changes in the global economy and the food systems, which are diverse and changing rapidly.

Case studies and inter-sector country nutrition papers have been developed, looking at what has worked and what has not, policy frameworks and implementation mechanisms analysed to distil policy lessons and best practices, and regional and sub-regional meetings held to identify priorities for each region. A series of online discussions have been organised on specific topics, including social protection to protect and promote nutrition; nutrition-enhancing agriculture; and contributions of the private sector and civil society to improve nutrition. A Preparatory Technical Meeting (PTM) was held in November 2013. All these preparations allow the exchange of information and ideas on how best to address global nutrition challenges and underpin the political process required for the high-level event.

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packages across sectors are needed to adequately tackle the multiple burdens of malnutrition in different situations; and food and nutrition security objectives need to be considered across all relevant sectors, with attention to gender being a critical consideration. Improving diets and raising levels of nutrition should be an explicit goal of national development policies, including policies to combat poverty.

It is clear that to promote more balanced and diverse dietary patterns, food systems not only need to make more food available, but to make more nutritious and affordable food items, such as animal sourced foods, legumes, and certain vegetables and fruits, more accessible, while avoiding excessive intakes of sugar, fat and salt. Food systems need to provide year-round access to a variety of such nutrient-rich foods that are also safe and culturally acceptable, and can be sustainably made available as part of a healthy and balanced diet.

National nutrition strategies need to involve all relevant ministries and competent authorities in complementary measures and interventions, supported by the necessary financial, human and other resources as appropriate. Governments have the ultimate responsibility for the nutritional welfare of their citizens, but leadership on nutrition is often partial and fragmented. Government responsibility for and leadership on nutrition issues and for identifying sustainable national solutions to improve food systems needs to be supported, and coordination and monitoring mechanisms strengthened at community, national and international levels.

Governments' investment plans should target food systems with the aim of improving the adequacy, availability, accessibility, acceptability and consumption of foods that make up a healthy diet, with research focused on identifying the most efficient local interventions for malnutrition prevention. For this, institutional capacity needs to be built, and effective coordination and monitoring across sectors implemented.

The successful eradication of malnutrition also depends on the active engagement of citizens working with committed, responsible and proactive government, civil society and the private sector through interaction among stakeholders on a common agenda. Collaborative partnerships and engagement by all relevant stakeholders in developing solutions to malnutrition, including responsible investment and research, is important to deliver sustainable improvements.

Promoting global solutions

Investing in nutrition is not only a moral imperative, but it improves productivity and economic growth and reduces



A malnourished infant sleeping in a therapeutic feeding centre for malnourished children in Chad.

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healthcare costs as well as promoting education, intellectual capacity and social development. While the cost of dealing with the effects of malnutrition – whether in fiscal, economic or human terms – is high, the cost of prevention is much less.

One of the main challenges identified for improving food and nutrition security is governance, characterised by a low political commitment, weak institutional arrangements and lack of appropriate coordination/ involvement of multiple stakeholders. Volatile international food prices aggravated by increased dependence on world markets and on food imports, low agricultural productivity accentuated by climate change, and post-harvest losses and food waste have also been identified as key challenges.

High-level political commitment as well as improved governance and accountability for more effective and coordinated action by various key stakeholders across sectors and better international and inter-governmental cooperation are essential to sustainably improve nutrition. The expected outcome of the high-level event will be a

political Declaration endorsed by countries and a technical Framework for Action that will guide the implementation of the Declaration.

José Graziano da Silva has been the Director-General of the FAO since January 2012. He has worked on food security, rural development, and agriculture issues for over 30 years, notably as the architect of Brazil’s Zero Hunger (Fome Zero) programme. He headed the FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean from 2006 to 2011. Graziano da Silva has sharpened the strategic focus as well as the field presence of the FAO. At the international level, he is working to build consensus on food security-related issues. He has also encouraged closer cooperation with development partners, supports South-South cooperation, and has increased collaboration with civil society and private sector entities. As well as degrees in agronomy, rural economics and sociology, Graziano da Silva was awarded a Ph.D. in economic sciences from the State University of Campinas.

The **United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** is a specialised UN agency that focuses in the distinctive relationship between agriculture, food and nutrition, having as its mandate “to raise levels of nutrition, improve agricultural productivity, better the lives of rural populations and contribute to the growth of the world economy”.

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