

FOOD SYSTEMS SOLUTIONS DIALOGUES – Summary

Food Systems for Health and Nutrition

Wednesday, 23 November 2022

This Dialogue, led by the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub, drew attention to the need to put health and nutrition at the centre of food systems transformation, highlighting the win-wins at the nexus of climate and nutrition action and identifying opportunities to scale up policy action and multistakeholder collaboration. The plenary session began with a call from Gerda Verburg, Coordinator of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, emphasising the importance of the implementation of national pathways for food systems transformation and ensuring food systems are both nutrition and climate sensitive. She referred to the [Initiative on Climate Action and Nutrition \(I-CAN\)](#) launched at the COP27.

Stineke Oenema, Executive Secretary of the UN Nutrition Secretariat, moderated an impact panel where Dr. Francesco Branca, Director of the WHO Department on Nutrition and Food Safety and his colleague Lina Mahy highlighted a set of effective, evidence-based policy actions to advance food systems transformation for health. They then presented the results of a WHO analysis of the inclusion of those priority nutrition policy actions in national pathways. Two government representatives highlighted their progress and challenges to transform food systems with a nutrition focus (H.E. Dr. Sok Silo, Food Systems national convenor and SUN Focal point for Cambodia and Filipe Da Costa, Food Systems national convenor and SUN Focal point for Timor Leste in the morning – Dr. Carlos Alvarenga, Vice Minister of Health Management and Development, Ministry of Health, El Salvador and Juan Roberto Mendoza, Monitoring and evaluation coordinator of the secretariat of Food and Nutrition Security, SESAN, Guatemala in the afternoon). National convenors and participants were then invited to share their experience in break-out groups as well as plenary. This note summarises the main insights shared by National Convenors during the dialogue.

Nutrition and health in national pathways and policies

There is no country immune to malnutrition. Food insecurity and malnutrition are worsening in many countries. Nutrition plays a key role in many national pathways but there is certainly room for improvement as the analysis shows. Better health and nutrition were identified as essential to the food systems transformation agenda. Pathways or pathway elements are being mainstreamed into food and nutrition security laws and policies and national development plans. In some cases, the pathway has instigated the development of a national food policy or strategy where there was previously none, and increased research on the nutritional aspect of food. Convenors explained their efforts to reduce food insecurity, chronic malnutrition and obesity rates and to improve access to healthy and nutritious food. They emphasised the need for nutrition to be set as a non-partisan political priority by governments to ensure continuity of nutrition action even under changing administrations. This requires heads of government and ministers to appreciate the differences between food security and nutrition security. During this

dialogue, national convenors and convening teams outlined that issues of food insecurity and nutrition are closely related though distinct.

Production for better health and nutrition

In order to address both food and nutrition insecurity in today's global crisis context, convenors reported that national governments are working to promote and invest in the local production of diverse and nutritious foods, thereby reducing import dependency while increasing availability of local nutritious food and export capacity. Emphasis is placed on the quality and safety of food production through capacity building of producers and establishment of storage facilities and food market information systems. Convenors also emphasised the importance of innovation through digitalization, the development of climate-smart agriculture, and the bio-fortification of foods. Local production is viewed as an important opportunity to develop local markets, shorten supply chains, promote family farming, and increase local procurement to promote the consumption of seasonal, local, indigenous, and healthy foods. National governments are revising production targets for animal-sourced protein with a focus on local level intensification of smaller stocks.

Consumption for better health and nutrition

Dialogue participants also identified consumption as a key point to address in the fight against all forms of malnutrition. Governments are promoting better food consumption patterns through awareness raising campaigns and the production of dietary education materials for schools and social media. Many countries are adopting food-based dietary guidelines and laws to regulate the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages and nutrition labelling. A particular emphasis is placed on nutrition for early childhood development, the promotion of breastfeeding, and complementary feeding, and supplementation in case of nutrient deficiency. Convenors highlighted there is no one size fits all approach when it comes to nutrition and mentioned the need for more culturally sensitive local food dietary guidelines promoting fresh, local, indigenous, and nutritious foods.

Access to better health and nutrition

Beyond raising awareness, convenors discussed the need to improve food access and affordability for individuals in urban, suburban, rural, and tribal communities. In many countries, healthy products are subsidised (especially in face of inflation) and unhealthy goods such as sweet drinks are being taxed. Social safety nets such as food banks for marginalised populations and school feeding programmes are being increasingly implemented in countries. Nutrition is also being prioritised in health programmes as a means of disease prevention.

Coordination for better health and nutrition

National nutrition and food security coordinating councils and committees have been set up by governments around the world, many of them chaired by the office of the prime

minister or the presidency to coordinate all related actors and enable the fast-tracking of policy implementation. Cross ministry collaboration, especially between the ministries of agriculture, health, and education, is actively underway and working to sensitise other ministries to the issue of nutrition in their field and at local government level. Technical working groups have been set up at national and sub-national level to support the administration and implementation of policies.

Convenors report multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral platforms at national, provincial, district and sub-district level have been set up to coordinate between government and non-government actors including UN Agencies, development partners, donors, academia, the private sector, and civil society. Public-private partnerships were repeatedly mentioned, especially in the context of school meals. In some countries, coordination around nutrition has built on pre-existing networks. In others, these networks were set up as a result of dialogues held with the support of SUN networks and in preparation of the Food Systems Summit. Dialogues were identified as key to good coordination and collective action and are now mandated in several implementation plans.

Challenges and support needs

Several convenors highlighted the challenge of identifying actions addressing the nexus between environment, climate, food, health, and nutrition. In many cases, government and humanitarian actors do not have a good understanding of food systems and nutrition and are difficult to engage as a result. Many convenors in Africa noted the difficulty for ministries to differentiate between the fight against hunger and the fight against malnutrition, leading to budget allocations and fiscal policies focusing only on food security. Depoliticising the issue of nutrition and raising the awareness of government actors and consumers to act together is a challenge, especially in unstable or conflict contexts. Availability of disaggregated data to monitor different forms of malnutrition and appreciate the impact of interventions on the nutrition status of people remains challenging in most countries. The cost-of-living crisis, increasing inflation rates, and impact of climate change on agricultural production is further affecting access to healthy diets. It was suggested that the Hub could play an important role in ensuring that UN agencies and other development partners work in an integrated way that reflect the connection between health, nutrition and food systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic was repeatedly identified as both a challenge and an opportunity, as the large economic and social support programmes set up for vulnerable populations are still ongoing, and the food supply disruptions led to an increase in local production. Other common challenges faced by Convenors continue to include a lack of funding and human resources and the absence of monitoring frameworks to track and appreciate the impacts of food systems transformation at national and sub-national levels. Cash assistance was identified as essential in the short term. The Hub is expected to continue international advocacy on the critical importance of transforming food and nutrition systems and mobilize continued support from UN agencies to government efforts and initiatives for the development of long-term actions.

Closing remarks

Experts from the Coalition of Action on Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems Professor Corinna Hawkes and Dr. Nancy Aburto reflected on what they had heard, including on the potential of healthy diets being the connector between food systems and health, on the role of the Hub and Ecosystem of Support to make sure lessons on effective coordination are shared between countries (what has enabled success?), to elevate good practices and to assess the capacity needed for delivery. Dr. Stefanos Fotiou, Director of the Food Systems Coordination Hub, reinforced the message for the need for simultaneous climate and nutrition action at the country level and emphasized the crucial role of finance. The Hub will continue to work towards leveraging finance in support of countries and of the Pathway implementation process towards 2030. The Hub intends to support the connection between convenors and coalitions and will soon initiate a survey for Coalitions and other entities to assess and map their concrete offers of support available to countries.

The next series of regional dialogues to discuss the Stocktaking Moment are planned for December 2022.