

The Committee on World Food Security Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition: A blueprint for priority action

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Malnutrition in all its forms – including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency, obesity and overweight – is a major global challenge to which no country is immune. Regions and countries are, in many cases, dealing with multiple forms of malnutrition simultaneously. The 2022 *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report*, for example, indicates that hunger is on the rise. Between 702 and 828 million people were hungry in 2021 – around 46 million more than the previous year and 150 million more than 2019 (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2022). While the number of people suffering from micronutrient deficiencies is tragic and alarming, at the same time, the number of adults who are overweight or obese is also growing, putting them at high risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases.

Moreover, healthy diets are simply unaffordable for billions of people (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2021),²¹ especially those in the poorest segments of the population. This contributes to the rise of multiple forms of malnutrition and negatively affects health outcomes globally.

The growing prevalence, severity and complexity of malnutrition requires the implementation of integrated policy approaches that address its multiple forms and target their root causes across food systems – from food supply chains to food environments and consumer behaviour. This approach takes into account the impacts that food systems have on human and planetary health by shaping actions and decisions taken by producers, as well as choices made by consumers. Such an integrated perspective looks at the influence

that decisions and choices with regard to production and consumption have on the ability of food systems to deliver healthy diets in a sustainable way (HLPE, 2017).

A food systems approach is essential to developing coordinated policies and interventions across sectors. It helps to make them inclusive, equitable and resilient, thus strengthening their ability to provide affordable healthy diets, enhance livelihoods and foster the sustainable use and management of ecosystems and natural resources.

To address these challenges and respond to calls for coordinated action to address malnutrition through a food systems approach, in 2021, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS)²² developed its Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (the Guidelines) (CFS, 2021) through an inclusive process informed by the scientific evidence of the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and *Nutrition's Nutrition and Food Systems* report (HLPE, 2017).

The Guidelines are a concrete tool for governments, United Nations agencies and other stakeholders. They offer guidance on and inspiration for the development of policies and interventions to address malnutrition in all its forms from a holistic perspective that considers food systems in their totality and looks at the multidimensional causes of malnutrition.

The Guidelines' 105 recommendations, grouped into seven categories, provide a framework for bringing together the

²¹ According to FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2021), "the high cost of healthy diets and persistently high levels of poverty and income inequality continue to keep healthy diets out of reach for around 3 billion people in every region of the world".

²² The CFS is an inclusive international and intergovernmental platform of the United Nations that brings together a wide range of stakeholders to discuss, negotiate and find consensus on global policy guidance with regard to food security and nutrition issues.

full diversity of actors involved in food systems. The framework recognizes that all parts of the food system are interconnected and that any action or decision taken to address one aspect of a food system impacts other aspects of it.

The Guidelines adopt a holistic food systems approach. They cite the need to consider food systems in their totality and go beyond agricultural production alone. They are, therefore, intended to support the development of coordinated, multisectoral interventions within and across food systems and their constituent elements to improve their ability to deliver healthy diets and to generate positive environmental outcomes.

The Guidelines seek to promote policy coherence and reduce policy fragmentation between relevant sectors, such as health, agriculture, education, environment, gender, social protection, trade and employment – all of which impact food systems and nutrition. They provide a set of recommendations on diverse and relevant issues, ranging from the promotion of transparent and accountable governance mechanisms to sustainable food supply chains, equitable access to healthy diets, food safety, nutrition knowledge and education, gender equality and women's empowerment, and resilient food systems in humanitarian contexts. They are meant to serve as a practical guide and checklist to help countries and others develop their food systems and nutrition roadmaps by defining the main policy entry points within those systems and identifying challenges, priorities and actions.

The Guidelines now serve as an internationally agreed policy tool, as common ground on food systems to which governments can refer when formulating policies related to agriculture and food. CFS member states and other stakeholders now have the responsibility to make sure these recommendations are converted into concrete actions at regional, national and local level. Countries will also need to determine which recommendations in the Guidelines are relevant to their context, how to enact them, who is responsible for enacting them and what impact they will have.

To this end, it will be essential to build a supportive political environment, accompanied by solid, sustained investment. There will be a need to develop institutional and human capacity to fulfil some of the recommendations and this will need to be supported by coalitions and networks that hold governments to account on conflicts of interest and issues of human rights.

The legitimacy and wide ownership of the Guidelines that arose from the engagement of a broad range of stakeholders may incentivize countries to promote their adaptation to local realities and priorities (bearing in mind a number of lessons that emerged from the multilateral negotiation process that led to their adoption). First, not everyone agreed fully with everything in the Guidelines, but everyone was heard in a series of inclusive meetings on the text, so consensus was reached. Second, the type, interpretation and prioritization of evidence that supported the recommendations in the Guidelines can vary depending on the position and viewpoint of stakeholders. Third, definitions and consensus on definitions matter. Terms such as “healthy” versus “unhealthy” diets, “nutritious foods”, “food systems” and “sustainable food systems” have different meanings, and coming to a consensus on such key concepts is no small feat.

The *People-centered Food Systems: Fostering Human Rights-based Approaches* project, led by Johns Hopkins University and supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, will be using the Guidelines to strengthen a human rights-based approach to food systems in four countries: Cambodia, Ethiopia, Honduras and Uganda. This will be done by using advocacy, building capacity and developing accountability tools that better integrate human rights frameworks into food system policy and action.

The Guidelines are one such tool that will be used because of their emphasis on taking a systemic, intersectoral approach. As such, they are useful as a “prism” for refocusing the generic approach of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (United Nations General Assembly, 2018) and redirecting policy attention to food systems for improved food security, diets and nutrition outcomes. An additional strength of the Guidelines is that their structure is organized into actionable focus areas, so can offer guidance to rights holders and stakeholders on identifying actionable interventions.

The project will use the Guidelines to focus in-country discussions on policy entry points/actions to improve food systems across several national agencies. In each pilot country, stakeholders will identify policy entry points and actions from the Guidelines that they perceive as being particularly relevant to their context – ensuring a strong level of country specificity in the discussions. Each country will propose a shortlist of recommendations from the Guidelines that can advance the fulfilment of specific rights for rural food system actors. For each recommendation, countries will also identify who would benefit from that recommendation,

who are the duty bearers and how the recommendation addresses the specific rights of beneficiaries.

The implementation of the Guidelines at national level is a promising start, one year after their formal endorsement. It

is hoped that more countries and other organizations and stakeholders will begin to consider how the Guidelines and their recommendations can be used as a blueprint to better inform their food systems efforts to improve food security, diets, and sustainable human and planetary health.



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