

21 January 2019, Cairo, Egypt □ The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is holding an intercountry consultative meeting for nutrition focal points from 22 to 24 January 2019, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, UNICEF and the World Food Programme. Participants, including representatives from Member States and a range of stakeholders, will address the issue of malnutrition in the Region.

Malnutrition, in its various forms, is a serious public health problem in WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region. More than 20 million children under the age of 5 are stunted by poor nutrition. Half of all women, more than two in five men and 15% of children in the Region are overweight or obese. Some countries, especially those affected by conflict, continue to experience high levels of food insecurity, undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies.

Malnutrition in all forms takes a heavy toll on the health, well-being and sustainable development of populations. Unhealthy diets – along with lack of physical activity – are key contributors to noncommunicable diseases, which are now responsible for two thirds of deaths globally and in the Region.

Despite commitments to address all forms of malnutrition at global, regional and national level, countries are still struggling to implement strategies, policies and regulatory measures to improve nutrition.

A new comprehensive nutrition strategy is being proposed for 2020–2025 in order to establish a framework for efforts to reach agreed upon targets for nutrition, diet-related noncommunicable diseases and sustainable development, as well as to guide implementation of the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition in the Region. Participants of the meeting will be providing feedback on the draft strategy and identifying areas requiring WHO technical support.

“There is a growing body of evidence on the effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and feasibility of policy interventions to improve nutrition, and there is an urgent need to translate this knowledge into action and to disseminate lessons from implementation on the ground. Meanwhile, more than ever, there is a need for comprehensive, multisectoral action to tackle malnutrition in all its forms across the Region,” said Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. “There is a long road ahead to achieve the nutrition- and NCD-related targets. There is now greater recognition that current food systems are failing to deliver nutrition for all

and that radical transformation of food systems is needed to improve access to healthy, sustainable diets.”

Given this challenging context, WHO and partners have responded to Member States’ demand for technical support to develop national strategies and implement policies to improve nutrition. “We propose that the strategy is developed through a review of the current nutrition situation in order to identify the main policy priorities and strategic interventions required to address the double burden of malnutrition in the Region and recommend key actions for different stakeholders, including Member States, civil society, WHO and other United Nations partners. Those policy priorities and strategic interventions should align with the framework of the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition,” Dr Al-Mandhari confirmed.

Throughout this decade, a regional strategy on nutrition 2010–2019 and related plan of action have been in place to support Member States in establishing and enforcing action on nutrition. Since the current strategy was adopted in October 2010, there have been significant changes in the nutrition landscape. Many countries in the Region are shifting from traditional diets to an unhealthy diet high in sugar, fat and salt, and the burden of diet-related noncommunicable diseases has increased, while other countries have seen increases in undernutrition associated with conflict and political instability.

The proposed strategy is set to respond to all of these challenges.

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