

In a timely response to the worsening food and nutrition situation regionally and globally, WHO announces the launch of a draft new nutrition strategy and plan of action for the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The draft strategy will be discussed during a meeting to be held on 13 December 2009 at the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, which will be attended by His Excellency Dr Hatem Al Jabali, the Minister of Health of Egypt, and representatives of several United Nations (UN) agencies and all Member States in the Region.

The draft strategy document provides an analysis of the regional nutrition situation exploring the causes and consequences of nutrition problems. The major nutrition problems in the Region include: protein energy malnutrition, a high prevalence of low birth weight and micronutrient deficiencies, including iodine deficiency disorders, vitamin A deficiency, iron deficiency anaemia in young children and women of childbearing age, and calcium, selenium, zinc and vitamin D deficiencies. The strategy defines priority areas for action including: monitoring, advocacy, strengthening the implementation of nutrition programmes, promoting community participation and mobilizing resources. The draft strategy document also contains a plan of action that addresses the main health and nutrition problems and provides strategic directions to address nutrition-related challenges supported by recommended approaches and programmes, which can be adopted by Member States and adapted according to national contexts.

The Region suffers from unprecedented nutrition and demographic transition, with a broad shift in disease burden. Noncommunicable diseases are expected to account for 60% of all deaths in the Region by 2020. While the problem of under-nutrition still exists, the burden of overweight, obesity and diet-related chronic diseases is increasing. The overall proportion of underweight in children under-5 years of age has increased in the Region from 14% in 1990 to 17% in 2004. This nutrition transition is alarmingly serious as it negatively impacts on health systems in the Region. A complex set of factors affect nutritional status, including food safety, changing lifestyle patterns and decreased food production and availability. Food distribution and catering in many countries is concentrated in the hands of a few operators, who influence product supply, safety and price. The media, advertising and retail sectors and the food industry have an influence on dietary choices, sometimes promoting food choices which are not those recommended by public health specialists. Urban design, too, often discourages recreational activities, such as walking or cycling, and the increasing use of television and computers

encourages sedentary leisure activities, thus adding physical inactivity as an underlying factor contributing to many health challenges.

The overall goal of the proposed strategy is to improve the nutritional status of people throughout the life-cycle by encouraging countries to reposition nutrition as central to their development agendas. The WHO Regional Office, through this strategy, will work closely with Member States and provide technical support, in coordination with other key partners and UN specialized agencies, to ensure that nutrition is ensured a prominent place in national development plans and related programmes to achieve health and nutrition security for all.

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