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Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

# **FAO/ WHO Multi-stakeholder Policy Workshop: Leveraging Food Systems to Combat Obesity in the Near East and North Africa Region**

## **Workshop Report**

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Cairo, Egypt**

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## Abstract

A food systems approach is acknowledged to be key to efforts to combat obesity and eliminate other forms of malnutrition in the countries of FAO's Near East and North Africa Region (NENA) and WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region. A two-day regional multi-stakeholder consultation workshop, entitled *Leveraging Food Systems to Combat Obesity in the Near East and North Africa Region*, held in Cairo on 23-24 September 2019, brought together a range of stakeholders to discuss food systems for healthy and sustainable diets.

The workshop identified a series of conclusions and recommendations, with a strong emphasis on the need for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches. It is also clear that close cooperation and networking between Member States is important, in collaboration with FAO, WHO and UNICEF and other international partner organizations. Robust policy responses, many of which have already been agreed internationally, are needed to transform food systems, create healthy food environments and ensure access to healthy, sustainable diets for all. The UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016 - 2025 presents a key opportunity to focus political attention on these efforts.

Key challenges that were identified include a lack of leadership and of coordination, undue influence of vested interests, difficulties in convincing other sectors and actors of their relevance and/or role, a lack of infrastructure and investment, as well as addressing long-term health challenges in a crisis context. Support needs expressed included support to develop clear argumentation on the social and economic case for action and technical support from FAO/WHO to help countries act on the key priorities for future action identified:

- public procurement (food in public institutions);
- the out-of-home or food service sector (restaurants, cafes, street food);
- reformulation to eliminate trans fats and reduce salt and sugars;
- promoting physical activity;
- food supply and trade policies;
- regulation on labelling, marketing and fraud.

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# FAO/ WHO Multi-stakeholder Policy Workshop: *Leveraging Food Systems to Combat Obesity in the Near East and North Africa Region*

## Introduction and background

Most countries in the Near East and North Africa Region (NENA)<sup>1</sup> and WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region<sup>2</sup> are faced with multiple burdens of malnutrition - that is multiple forms of malnutrition (undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight or obesity) which co-exist within populations. Recent decades have seen shifts in dietary consumption and energy expenditure (due to changing lifestyles and reduced physical activity levels and increasing sedentary behaviours) as a result of modernization, urbanization, economic development, and increased wealth. This nutrition transition has been a key contributor to the obesity epidemic and growing burden of diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in the region and worldwide.

Addressing all forms of malnutrition is embedded in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, and the *UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025*, which provides a clearly defined and time-bound framework for accelerating actions on nutrition. In order to provide better access to affordable healthy diets, food systems need to be transformed and policy measures need to shape supportive food environments which make healthy eating the easiest choice. This requires consideration not only of the way food is produced, but also how it is processed, stored, distributed, marketed and consumed.

A regional symposium on *Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition*, held in Muscat, Oman, in 2017, highlighted the need to discuss and address food system challenges with a special focus on obesity. To follow up on this recommendation and to improve understanding of the main drivers of obesity along the food system the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa and the World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean Region (WHO-EMRO) organized a two-day regional multi-stakeholder consultation workshop in Cairo on 23-24 September 2019. This workshop, entitled *Leveraging Food Systems to Combat Obesity in the Near East and North Africa Region*, brought a range of stakeholders including policymakers, analysts, UN, NGOs, private sector, civil society and government agencies together in order to facilitate stakeholder dialogue from national, regional and inter-country perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> The countries of the FAO Near East and North Africa Region are: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen.

<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

## Objectives, expected outcomes and organization of the Workshop

The purpose of the workshop was to provide a platform for stakeholders to discuss selected policy issues related to obesity and food systems for healthy and sustainable diets; advocate for a more comprehensive food systems approach in addressing obesity; encourage countries to develop and/or review their action plans for addressing obesity; and identify priority actions that have the best impact on the prevention of overweight and obesity.

### Objectives

The **main objectives** of the workshop were to:

- Improve understanding of and highlight good practice in food systems approaches and policy responses to address obesity, including actions on food supply chains, food environments and consumer behavior;
- Agree on priority actions for curbing the rising obesity prevalence levels through food systems-related policy measures in consistency with the 2030 Agenda and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition;
- Identify the role of regional multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral mechanisms, and ways to promote policy convergence, coherence and joint action to address obesity through integrated food systems approach.
- Develop regional-level recommendations for further discussion at the FAO Regional Conference in 2020, and during the upcoming sixty-sixth session of the WHO-EMRO regional committee meeting in October 2019.

### Expected outcomes

The **expected outcomes** of the workshop were:

1. Various stakeholders in the region are updated on new research and guidelines to foster a national policy dialogue on transforming food systems and promoting healthy diets for the prevention of overweight and obesity.
2. Regional-level recommendations for priority actions in addressing obesity are drawn for further discussion at the FAO Regional Conference in 2020, and during the sixty-sixth session of the WHO-EMRO regional committee meeting in October 2019.
3. A final report capturing the main action points emerging from the contributions of all stakeholders.

### Participation

In total, about 60 participants took part in the workshop, and 16 countries within the Region were represented.<sup>3</sup> Participants represented a range of stakeholders and included governments, regional and international organizations, academia, research institutions, private sector and civil society organizations.

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<sup>3</sup> See Annex I for list of participants.

## Format of the workshop

The workshop consisted of presentations, panel discussions and working group sessions.<sup>4</sup> The workshop was organized around six themes:

- Session 1: Global and regional situation of obesity in the Eastern Mediterranean Region
- Session 2: Strategic interventions to address obesity in the Region
- Session 3: Food supply chain for healthier diets
- Session 4: Early childhood development and nutrition to address obesity
- Session 5: Towards healthier food environment – Food trade and marketing for healthier diets and better nutrition
- Session 6: Promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration in achieving SDG2.2 of ending all forms of malnutrition

FAO and WHO were the key partner/co-organizers of the workshop. The other partners included the League of Arab States (LAS), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and International Food Policy Research (IFPRI).

## Opening session

The workshop was opened with introductory remarks on behalf of FAO, WHO and other key partners, and an introduction to the regional situation and global and regional strategies to address obesity.

**Dr Serge Nakouzi, Deputy Regional Representative, FAO**, welcomed guests on behalf of FAO. He thanked WHO for hosting and co-organizing the event, as well as for the strong partnership with FAO. In his opening remarks he underlined that, today, not a single country in this region is free from malnutrition, be it hunger, undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency, overweight or obesity. There is a growing trend of the “double burden” of malnutrition, where undernutrition and obesity co-exist within countries, communities and even households. Overweight and obesity affect rich and poor countries and communities alike, and the future consequences in terms of human health, productivity, employment, incomes and growth are cause for deep concern.

Healthy diets are key to preventing all forms of malnutrition, but are only possible when our food systems provide affordable nutritious foods that constitute a healthy diet all year-round accessible to everyone. However, the food system contribution is only as good as the agricultural, nutrition, health and education policies, institutions and programmes in which it is embedded and to which it is linked. Coordinated actions and policies across the entire food supply chain are required and must be part of a broader framework — that links directly to nutrition, health, economic investment choices and public education and information — in order to eradicate all forms of malnutrition and achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

**Dr Rana Hajjeh, Director of Programme Management, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean**, delivered welcome remarks by video. She highlighted that the participation of multiple stakeholders in the workshop is particularly valuable, coupled with the strong

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<sup>4</sup> See Annex II for the workshop programme.



partnership between international organizations. In response to the high rates of overweight and obesity among children and adults in the Region, WHO Member States have endorsed a *Regional framework for action on obesity prevention 2019 – 2023*. This includes a food system approach to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, and to reduce fat, sugar and salt intakes, as well as actions to promote breastfeeding and increase physical activity. Policies are required to make healthy choices the easiest choice, not only for consumers, but also for producers, processors and marketers.

Member States in the region and globally, have committed to addressing malnutrition in all its forms. Nonetheless, countries struggle to implement actions and more focus is needed on practical solutions for priority areas.

**Ms Vilma Tyler, UNICEF**, added welcome remarks on behalf of UNICEF and thanked FAO and WHO for organizing the workshop. She described how the face of child malnutrition has changed over the last two decades. With one in three children still not getting the nutrition which they need, coordinated action and policy will be critical to ensure good nutrition in early life, tackle obesogenic environments and transform food systems.

In her introductory remarks, **Ms Joyce Njoro, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)**, stressed some important issues that need to be considered in discussions on food system transformation. Namely, the role and situation of smallholder farmers, sustainability of food systems, gender and youth engagement.

On behalf of the **League of Arab States, Mr Abd Elkareem Fares Mussalem**, described the League's work on eradicating hunger in the countries of the League of Arab States. Seven policy areas have been highlighted as priorities, and working groups constituted to take the work forward, working towards launch of the initiative in 2020.

**Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean**, added his welcome to participants and provided a brief overview of the regional situation. Malnutrition and dietary risks are the two leading causes of mortality and morbidity worldwide, and this is associated with high human, social and economic costs. The WHO Eastern Mediterranean region has the third highest prevalence, globally, of obesity in adults and the region is *not* on track to meet the global target to halt the rise in obesity and diabetes by 2030. Unhealthy diets and insufficient physical activity (the region has the second highest prevalence, globally) are key contributors. Diets in the region continue to be too low in fruits and vegetables and too high in saturated and trans fats, free sugars and salt. In addition, exclusive breastfeeding rates (31%) fall far short of the global target of 50 percent.

It is clear that robust policy responses are required, including regulatory action. WHO has developed guidance to support Member States to eliminate trans fats, implement front-of-pack nutrition labelling and restrict marketing of energy-dense foods with minimal nutritional value to children. In addition, policy priorities for preventing obesity are set out in the *Regional Framework for action on obesity prevention 2019-2023*. Coherent policies across *all* sectors are now needed to transform food systems for better nutrition and healthy diets for all.

**Ms Tamara Nanitashvili, FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa**, welcomed participants and outlined the objectives and expected outcomes for the workshop. The aim will be to improve understanding, share experience of best practices, identify priority actions and – crucially – to identify ways to promote policy convergence. At the end of the workshop, it is hoped that stakeholders will have been updated on new research and guidelines and some regional recommendations will have been proposed.

## **Session 1: Global and regional situation on obesity**

The first session set the scene for further discussions, with an overview of issues relating to food system transformation and sustainability, the regional situation in relation to NCDs and the framework that the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition presents for accelerating nutrition action.

**Keynote presentation: Food system transformation for healthy and sustainable diets, Professor Barbara Burlingame, Massey University, New Zealand**

A sustainable diet is healthy and safe for both people and planet, according to a definition developed through a series of consultations and workshops led by FAO and Bioversity International in 2010 (FAO, 2010). Food systems are very complex and it is clear that transformation of food systems for sustainable diets needs interdisciplinary action involving the sectors of agriculture, health, environment and culture.

An important issue is the dramatic decline in agro-biodiversity over the last century. Despite the existence of 75,000 edible plants, only 200 species are used regularly and just nine crops supply 75 percent of food energy. Furthermore, most cereals are consumed in a highly refined form. The links between biodiversity, food and nutrition and the importance of biodiversity conservation for health are not always well known. There can be significant differences, for example, in micronutrient content between cultivars and varieties of plants. Sustainable food systems are intricately balanced and small changes can result in important implications for nutrition, so sustainable diets need to respect an ecosystem approach.

Reducing food waste is another key challenge for promoting sustainable diets. It is possible to think about overconsumption of food — that is, in excess of nutritional needs — as a form of food waste. Sustainable diets do not necessarily require use of more land for food production, rather they require reductions in food waste and over-consumption. A working group convened as a part of the First International Scientific Symposium on Sustainable Diets (FAO, 2012) proposed a code of conduct for sustainable diets, modelled on the *International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes* (WHO, 1981). Food manufacturers often see demand for “healthy diets” as presenting opportunities for new product development of highly processed foods, with addition of nutrients, or reduction of fats or salt. It is important, therefore, to promote a discourse on sustainable diets (which, by definition, are healthy and safe) as part of sustainable food systems and healthy ecosystems, and not simply “healthy diets” which may have no relationship to a sustainable food system.

**Regional indicators on noncommunicable diseases, Dr Nasim Pourghazian, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean**

NCDs account for 62 percent of deaths in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region and the risk of dying from NCDs between the age of 30 and 69 (22%) is second highest globally. At the country level, NCDs are responsible for between 21 percent and 89 percent of deaths among the region's Member States. The region has the highest prevalence of diabetes and second highest of physical inactivity in the world, and has increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity among both adults and children. Meanwhile, the rate of decline in the prevalence of raised blood pressure remains insufficient. Cancers are the second leading cause of death in the Region, and based on demographic growth alone, are predicted to increase substantially by 2035. It is clear that unhealthy diets are key contributors to the Region's NCD burden.

### **An overview of implementation of the Nutrition Decade, Dr Trudy Wijnhoven, FAO Headquarters**

The *United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016 -2025*<sup>5</sup> was declared and endorsed in 2016, following a recommendation included in the *Rome Declaration on Nutrition*, issued at the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) (FAO/WHO, 2014). FAO and WHO have been tasked with leading implementation of the Nutrition Decade and supporting implementation through existing structures and mechanisms. The Nutrition Decade represents a commitment by UN Member States to undertake 10 years of sustained and coherent implementation of policies, programmes and increased investments to eliminate malnutrition in all its forms, everywhere, leaving no one behind. Six cross-cutting action areas have been identified, which are based on the policy recommendations that are included in the ICN2 Framework for Action:

1. Sustainable, resilient food systems for healthy diets
2. Aligned health systems providing universal coverage of essential nutrition actions
3. Social protection and nutrition education
4. Trade and investment for improved nutrition
5. Safe and supportive environments for nutrition at all ages
6. Strengthened governance and accountability for nutrition

One of the means of implementation of the Nutrition Decade is for countries to make SMART<sup>6</sup> commitments for action on nutrition. To date, three countries have made SMART commitments.<sup>7</sup> Another mechanism is the sharing and exchange of knowledge and experience through topic-specific informal coalitions of countries (Action Networks). Three global Action Networks have been established, relating to sustainable food from the oceans and inland waters, nutrition labelling and traditional, healthy and sustainable diets. A number of other regional networks have also been established, mainly in the Region of Latin America and the Caribbean. A mid-term review of the Nutrition Decade's implementation will be conducted in 2020, through an open and participatory dialogue with stakeholders. Countries are encouraged to make SMART commitments and to

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<sup>5</sup> UN Decade of Action on Nutrition [website]: <https://www.un.org/nutrition/home>

<sup>6</sup> Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound

<sup>7</sup> Details of the commitments can be seen in the Nutrition Decade's commitment repository <https://www.un.org/nutrition/commitments/database>. FAO/WHO have produced a resource guide to help countries develop country-specific SMART commitments, *Strengthening nutrition action: A resource guide for countries based on the policy recommendations of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2)*.

collaborate in Action Networks, using the Nutrition Decade as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to focus political attention on nutrition.

### **Summary of plenary discussion**

Given the complexity of food systems, the discussion explored how Member States can be supported to generate political will to take action on nutrition — and specifically obesity — and to tailor their responses to the national context, particularly in situations where there is very poor or weak governance. There are particular challenges associated with addressing malnutrition in all its forms in emergency or post-conflict situations.

It is clear that generating political commitment to focus on improving nutrition and access to healthy diets is often difficult. Presentation of data on the economic costs of malnutrition, including of overweight/obesity and diet-related NCDs, as well as demonstrating that policies or interventions can work, can help convince political leaders to act. In addition, advocacy on the basis of international days (e.g. World Food Day) can generate momentum. To support implementation, networking with other Member States is important to learn about examples of successful implementation and exchange technical knowhow. It is important to mainstream nutrition into all sectors, including, for example, ensuring that food aid programmes take into account the quality of foods or diets and not only the quantity of food energy distributed. Similarly, social protection programmes and subsidies should be aligned with dietary guidelines, rather than promoting consumption of foods such as sugar and oils or products that undermine optimal infant feeding (e.g. infant formula).

There was discussion of the challenges in defining sustainable, healthy diets in detail. The FAO definition is widely accepted and used in the scientific and popular literature but has not yet been endorsed by an international standards' setting body. There have been important steps forward recently — through, for example, the One Planet Initiative<sup>8</sup> and the EAT Lancet Commission — but more work is needed to bring the health/nutrition and environmental sectors together and to further the knowledge in this area.<sup>9</sup> The traditional Mediterranean diet is one model that warrants further study (in terms of sustainability), although diets in Mediterranean countries have changed dramatically over the past few decades and rarely resemble the traditional diet.

In relation to food waste and obesity, there was some concern that targeting over-consumption as a form of food waste could be counterproductive, by contributing to blaming individuals and increasing stigma. It is important that efforts to address obesity tackle the issue as a systemic problem — that needs a multisectoral response and a food systems approach — rather than one of individual responsibility. Nutrition policies and interventions also require investment, and

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sustainable-food-system> for details of the One Planet Network's work on sustainable food systems.

<sup>9</sup> FAO and WHO convened in July 2019 an international consultation on sustainable and healthy diets, at which a group of experts reviewed the concept of diets that support reaching goals of health and well-being while also considering the evidence about economic, social and environmental sustainability. The consultation developed guiding principles for sustainable healthy diets that had not yet been released at the time of the Consultation took place. The guiding principles for sustainable healthy diets will guide action in the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016–2025 and in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. See: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca6640en/ca6640en.pdf>

it was suggested that a fund could be created for Member States starting actions to reduce obesity.

### Key messages

- Multisectoral action is required to transform food systems to ensure access to sustainable, healthy diets.
- Member States need support to convince political decisionmakers to take action on malnutrition in all its forms, and particularly on overweight, obesity as well as diet-related NCDs.
- Networking between Member States is important to learn about examples of successful implementation and exchange technical knowhow.
- The UN Decade of Action on Nutrition presents a key opportunity to focus political attention, whereby countries are encouraged to make SMART commitments and to collaborate in Action Networks.
- Much closer collaboration is needed between the health/nutrition, food and environment sectors to better address availability of and access to sustainable, healthy diets and identify the policy responses required to promote production and consumption of such diets.

## Session 2: Strategic interventions to address obesity in the Region

A panel discussion session explored the different options for interventions to address obesity in the Region. Panelists included **Dr Hessa Al-Hussaini, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia**, **Dr Farah Naja, American University of Beirut**, **Dr Trudy Wijnhoven, FAO**, **Ms Joyce Njoro, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)** and **Karen McColl, consultant for WHO**.

The panel described ongoing work to address obesity, at the international and national levels. Internationally, there are efforts to mainstream nutrition into programmes (e.g. 50 percent of IFAD's investments should be nutrition sensitive) and to develop further guidance for countries (e.g. voluntary guidelines being developed by the Committee on World Food Security; WHO's *Regional Framework for action to prevent obesity*; FAO's work to improve understanding of the food system changes needed to make diets that meet dietary guidelines available and affordable). Other specific interventions include support for smallholder farmers to increase fruit and vegetable production, empowering women farmers, addressing post-harvest loss, improving access to markets and protecting biodiversity by increasing appreciation of local foods. At the national level, there were country examples of implementation of multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms, legislating to improve nutrition standards in school canteens and interventions to improve the nutritional quality of food eaten outside the home (restaurants, cafés, street food). There were also examples of policies intended to influence demand by introducing taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages, requiring front-of-pack nutrition labelling and calorie labelling on menus, prohibiting health claims and all advertising for foods that are high in fat, sugar and/or salt, and nutrition education.

Common challenges include the lack of coordination and difficulties in achieving true multi-sectoral cooperation and investment (particularly in sectors not directly focused on nutrition), the lack of data to inform policies and interventions, the difficulty of long-term monitoring and

evaluation of policies and the lack of human capacity. It is clear that changing behaviour in the face of pervasive marketing, misleading health claims and the widespread availability of cheap foods that are high in fat, sugars or salt is very challenging. There was recognition that there is a need to change food environments — through changes to food systems and via government action — which impact on food choices.

#### Key messages

- Wherever possible, nutrition considerations should be mainstreamed into other sectors (e.g. agriculture, social protection, education), so that these sectors' policies are nutrition-sensitive.
- As well as multi-sectoral coordination, a multi-stakeholder approach is required, involving civil society, media, academia, development partners and — in an appropriate role — the private sector.
- Key priorities for strategic interventions to prevent obesity have been agreed internationally<sup>10</sup> and Member States are urged to translate these commitments into action. An exercise to map their food systems can help countries to identify context-specific entry points for action.
- Member States are encouraged to collaborate with one another, with technical support from FAO, WHO and other partners, to share experience and exchange knowhow.

### Session 3: Food supply chain for healthier diets

The third session focused on how changes to the food supply can be leveraged to improve access to healthy diets and address obesity.

#### **Case study: Transforming wasted crops with high nutrient components into shelf-stable products, Nicole Rogers, Agriprocity**

A case study from Kenya involves a private company seeking to apply a food systems approach. The approach focuses on rescuing 'imperfect' crops that previously would not have had a market to process (drying) them on a small scale on or near to the farm gate into shelf-stable powders for sale to food manufacturers. In discussion, there was clarification that this and similar projects are designed to be sustainable in the long term.

#### **Diversification of production systems for dietary diversity, Ms Bezaiet Dessaegn, International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA)**

Food security policies have tended to push continuous mono-cropping of cereal, through use of subsidies, price policies etc. Diversification of the production system is important to promote dietary diversity, and one way to achieve this would be to increase legume production. Legumes (e.g., lentils, chickpeas, faba beans) have many nutritional, environmental and economic benefits. They are valuable sources of digestible protein, micronutrients and low-glycemic carbohydrate and can also be biofortified to enhance the nutrient content of selected micronutrients and vitamins. Their production breaks continuous depletion of soil fertility, improves the physio-chemical properties of soil, reduces the need for chemical inputs and has a negative carbon

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<sup>10</sup> See FAO/WHO [Second International Conference on Nutrition Framework for Action](#), and the [Regional Framework to scale up action on obesity in the Eastern Mediterranean Region](#).

footprint. In addition, rotation with legumes (especially with improved varieties) leads to higher yields of subsequent cereal crops and provides nutritious feed for livestock. Legume crops can, however, be vulnerable to biotic challenges and require manual harvesting and so more resources. The region produces less than two percent of global legumes and currently imports pulses to meet demand. Investment and research are needed to diversify production systems to integrate legumes. It is important to raise awareness and generate evidence to engage policymakers and other stakeholders on the nutritional, environmental and economic case for diversification to include legumes. Overall it is important to recognize that healthy diets are also strong drivers for sustainable production, which is contribution to SDG12 (Sustainable Consumption and Sustainable Production). 'Diversity' is thus a characteristic of food systems that support resilience for farming systems and healthy lives.

**Mapping the sources of salt, trans fatty acids and sugars in a traditional and locally-produced diet in Egypt, Dr Ghada Ismail, Aim Shams University, Egypt,**

As part of a mapping study to identify key sources of sugar and trans fatty acids in Egypt, analysis of commonly consumed juices and beverages found high levels of total sugars. High levels were also present in sweetened milks and sweetened yoghurt drinks, often considered "healthy" in Egypt. The mapping study also analyzed trans fatty acid contents of a wide variety of food, and found some high levels. To tackle this situation, recommendations include: mandatory nutrient declarations (and serving amount); standards for permitted total sugar levels; and legislation to remove trans fats, set the saturated : unsaturated fats ratio and require pre-market approval for products. Other recommendations include awareness-raising, updating Egyptian food composition data, capacity building and nutrition education. The data will be presented to the government as evidence of the need for such action.

**Food system analysis for the prevention of overweight, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases, Ms Ceren Gurkan, FAO Headquarters**

It is worth considering carefully whether some important factors have been overlooked in relation to the rising trends of overweight and obesity. A new area of research, being explored by FAO, relates to the role of the gut microbiome and whether gut dysbiosis (imbalance) could lead to inflammation and be linked to NCDs. Dysbiosis may be linked to food system practices (e.g. use of pesticides, emulsifiers, fermented foods) and there is a need for more work to understand this issue and the possible links with maternal nutrition, infant feeding and health outcomes. In discussion, it was noted that this is currently an emerging area of work and FAO has convened a group of experts to examine this issue further.

**Summary of plenary discussion**

It is important to improve the availability of food composition data throughout the Region, to be able to identify main sources of sugars, salt and trans fats. WHO has worked with the UK-based Quadram Institute to update food composition data, using standardized methodology, in 10 Member States.

There was discussion of the need to acknowledge an important role for food processing in healthy diets, and not to demonize all forms of processing in the discourse. Where there is no

cold chain, for example, fruits may be harvested before they ripen, and when such fruits are processed into juices sugar is added to boost the sweetness levels. The challenge is how policymakers can engage food producers appropriately and incentivize them to produce healthier food options and not to produce foods with a high energy density and minimal nutritional value.

#### Key messages

- Different entry points in food supply chains provide opportunities to improve nutrition and/or sustainability by, for example, diversifying production, cutting food waste and reducing levels of trans and saturated fats, free sugars and salt.
- Access to food composition data — through food composition databases or specific mapping studies — is important to inform the design and targeting of policies and interventions.

## Session 4: Early childhood development and nutrition to address obesity

The fourth session highlighted the fundamental importance of good nutrition in early life for the prevention of all forms of malnutrition, including overweight and obesity, and outlined the interventions and policy solutions to protect early nutrition.

### **Role of early nutrition on obesity prevention and first 1000 days of life, Dr Vilma Tyler, UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office**

Across the UNICEF Middle East and North Africa (MENA)<sup>11</sup> region, too few children are getting the nutrition the need to survive, grow and develop: only 34 percent are exclusively breastfed for six months, complementary foods are introduced between 6 and 8 months for only 74 percent of children, and only 23 percent of children aged 6-23 months are being fed a minimum acceptable diet. Children in urban households have better diets than those in rural areas (28 percent compared to 20 percent of minimum acceptable diet) and those in richer households have better diets than those in poorer households (31% vs 19%). Crucially, there is increasing evidence that exclusive breastfeeding for six months is associated with a reduced risk of childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes, as well as better learning and income outcomes. There are also concerns that children are increasingly being fed complementary foods which include added sugars and salt, with implications for later dietary preferences and health.

It is critical, therefore, to take action to increase exclusive breastfeeding rates and promote appropriate complementary feeding. The required policy actions include implementation and enforcement of adequate national laws and policies (the *International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes*, national healthcare quality standards for baby-friendly facilities and maternity protection in the workplace, including maternity leave). In addition, there is a role for community support, improved breastfeeding counselling and delivering breastfeeding support throughout the first 1,000 days from conception to a child's second birthday. In relation to food

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<sup>11</sup> Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen



systems, the priorities should be to improve nutritional quality, strengthen marketing regulations and create incentives and environments for healthy eating, while supporting dietary behaviour change.

### **Supplement feeding for children under 5 in Yemen, Ms Eshraq Al Falahi, WHO Yemen**

In the current context in Yemen, 22.1 million people (including 4.7 million children) need urgent nutrition interventions. Between January and June 2019, 3.2 million people were reached, including over 150,000 children treated for severe acute malnutrition (SAM) without complications and over 7,000 children treated for SAM with complications. More than a quarter of a million children were treated for moderate acute malnutrition and nearly 300,000 pregnant or lactating women were treated for acute malnutrition. Over 50,000 young children received vitamin A supplementation, nearly 300,000 children at risk of malnutrition and over 350,000 pregnant or lactating women received supplementary feeding support. Implementation was challenging due to the complexity, and issues around governance, multi-sectoral commitment and funding. Supplementary feeding merits careful evaluation, in view of how reliant stakeholders are on this intervention. Yemen is affected by the double burden of malnutrition, but it is very challenging to address long-term issues, including obesity, in such an emergency context. It is important, therefore, to create systems that will be able to address prevention issues in due course.

### **Promotion of infant and young child feeding in Pakistan, Dr Noureen Nishtar, WHO Pakistan**

In Pakistan, just under half (48.4%) of babies are exclusively breastfed, around a third (36%) start complementary feeding between 6 and 8 months and only 3.6 percent of babies 6 - 23 months receive a minimum acceptable diet.<sup>12</sup> Various infant and young child feeding laws, policies and interventions have been developed across Pakistan. In Punjab province, for example, interventions include, among others, the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) (1,692 facilities are reporting monthly), strengthening of NetCode monitoring and establishment of a nutrition training resource centre. Sindh province has, for example, developed behaviour change training material and food demonstration videos and has outreach activities promoting optimal infant and young child feeding. The national assembly has passed a bill for six months maternity leave but this has not yet been implemented. Legislation to implement the Code has been in place since 2002, and a new law on protecting breastfeeding was passed in 2013. A breastfeeding and child nutrition smartphone app has been developed for inspectors in Punjab to monitor BFHI compliance and other activities in health facilities.

### **Summary of plenary discussion**

The plenary discussion raised a number of issues:

- It is important to continue to fully advocate for implementation of WHO guidance (early initiation of breastfeeding, exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding up to two years of age or beyond). Breastmilk substitute companies continue to try to influence scientific groups and health workers, and it is important to safeguard against such conflicts of interest. Governments can legislate to ban conference

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<sup>12</sup> Indicators from the National Nutrition Survey 2018.

sponsorship by breastmilk substitute manufacturers, as Saudi Arabia has done, and civil society has an important role to monitor and denounce violations;

- Maternal nutrition is a key issue. Assessment of mothers' nutritional status when children are being assessed needs to be better incorporated into health worker training;
- While engagement with other sectors is key, it must also be acknowledged that more still needs to be done to mainstream nutrition actions *within* the health sector and to leverage the role of health workers for better nutrition;
- There was discussion of whether the lack of diversity in diets could be due to the emergency situations in many countries, but studies suggest that conflict is not the main driver;
- It is important to recognize that the nutritional status of people who live in extreme urban poverty (slums) can be even worse than that of rural populations;
- Finally, there was acknowledgement that there is not sufficient evaluation of implemented policies and that this is another area which needs to be improved.

#### Key messages

- Protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding is a key investment for countries to protect children from all forms of malnutrition, including childhood obesity, as well as some diet-related NCDs, and promote the good health of mothers.
- Key policies include full implementation and enforcement of laws to give force to the *International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes*, institutionalizing Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative criteria into health facility standards and maternity protection laws.
- There are encouraging examples from countries in the region of other policies to promote good maternal nutrition and optimal infant and young child nutrition.

## Session 5: Towards healthier food environment – Food trade and marketing for healthier diets and better nutrition

The penultimate session explored issues around making healthier food environments, using policies relating to trade and marketing to promote and enable healthier diets.

### **Food policies and obesity in the MENA region, Dr Abay Kibrom, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Egypt**

Trade and food policies are important policy instruments in the MENA region because many countries import a substantial share of their food and/or have long provided government food subsidies. Such policies may influence nutrition through several channels:

- Trade policies increasing food imports and, thereby, the availability and affordability of food
- Encouraging the flow of foreign direct investment, including in food processing industries
- Trade policies influencing the relative prices of foods
- Agricultural and food subsidies influencing domestic food systems
- Subsidy policies making specific foods relatively cheaper.

Food availability has tripled for some countries over the last 50 years, with increasing imports. Analyses suggest that low tariffs on imported foods are associated with higher rates of obesity. Similarly, a proportion of government expenditure on subsidies is associated with higher prevalence of overweight. The price of food high in sugar, salt and fat is inversely correlated with body weight. Overall, these results imply the need for nutrition-sensitive food trade policies.

**Improving food systems through trade and industry to promote healthy diet, Dr Faisal Bensaidan, Saudi Food and Drug Authority**

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, standards and regulations have been introduced to improve the food system. Regulations have been introduced to require display of calorie and nutrition information for meals in food establishments. To aid implementation food establishments were provided with training workshops and a software programme to help calculate calorie and nutrient contents. A regulation has also been introduced to restrict the sugar content of fresh juices (limiting addition of *any* sweetener, nectar or energy drinks to juices). Further legislation requires nutrition labelling (including added sugars) on all packaged food products and front-of-pack traffic light labelling. The latter was initially voluntary but will be mandatory from 2020. A regulation to set a maximum permitted amount for trans fatty acids in vegetable oils and soft spreadable margarines (two percent of total fat) and other foods (5%) is in force, and from 2020 use of partially hydrogenated vegetable oil and trans fatty acids will be banned. Future plans include restrictions on food marketing to children, improving food sold in schools, labelling of juices and other beverages and introducing taxes on food products high in sugar.

**Regulating trade to tackle obesity, Dr Andrea Zimmerman, FAO Headquarters**

It is important to recognize that regulations on foodstuffs can sometimes be perceived as being technical barriers to trade and Specific Trade Concerns can be raised at the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Technical Barriers to Trade Committee. While the Agreement states that countries should not be prevented from taking measures to protect public health, regulations must treat imported and domestic products the same. Regulations should not create unnecessary obstacles to trade, while they should refer to relevant international standards. There have been discussions, for example, at the WTO's Technical Barriers to Trade Committee of legislation requiring mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling (e.g. Chile's warning labels). The objectives of all of the schemes under discussion were agreed to be legitimate, but questions were raised regarding the justification of measures. There is now ongoing work within the Codex Alimentarius Committee on Food Labelling to establish common principles for front-of-pack labelling.

Another important aspect of trade policy relates to tariffs, and raising tariffs on specific foods is sometimes considered as an alternative lever to food taxes. Raising tariffs, however, may have a limited impact on price, can violate WTO rules and may result in substitution effects through cheaper domestic production. In conclusion, trade policies are not targeted and can have unintended effects. A better approach may be a mix of policies to more directly affect industry and consumer behaviour. The best policy mix needs to be identified through careful analysis of the situation at the national level.

**Food labelling in Morocco: challenges and success, Dr Leila El Ammari, Ministry of Health, Morocco** Actions to combat childhood obesity and improve nutrition in Morocco include: healthy lifestyle campaigns focusing on reducing fat, sugar, salt consumption; a nutrition education programme in health facilities; systematic screening for childhood overweight and obesity in health facilities; establishment of a national multisectoral, multi-stakeholder committee on nutrition to monitor implementation; nutrition guidelines for school food; construction of local sports areas; and, campaigns to promote physical activity. In addition, work is ongoing to set a legal upper limit for salt in bread, a 26 percent reduction was achieved between 2011 and 2016 and there has been an increase in public awareness. In 2019, a 50 percent tax on sweetened drinks was adopted. Legislation on nutrition labelling was adopted in 2016, requiring mandatory nutrition labelling for some nutrients and providing for voluntary labelling of other nutrients. Work is now underway to introduce front-of-pack nutrition labelling and a study is being conducted to test consumer reaction to different label types, including Nutri-Score. Finally, following work to develop food composition data (and to standardize with some neighbouring countries), food composition tables for Moroccan recipes were published in 2019, with a Nutri-Score rating for each recipe.

**Emerging messages on best practice for implementation of front-of-pack nutrition labelling, Ms Karen McColl, WHO Consultant**

Front-of-pack labels present simplified nutrition information, often in graphic format, on the front of food packages. Front-of-pack labels are generally preferred by consumers, who often find more detailed nutrition labels difficult and time-consuming to understand. Mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling for all pre-packaged foods is recommended in the *WHO Regional framework for action to prevent obesity*. Worldwide, more than 23 schemes are in use, while in the region schemes are in use or being developed in six countries. Evidence from research and country experience suggests that simplified, interpretive (rather than solely informative) labels, which cover foods which are less healthy options as well as those that support a healthy diet, are underpinned by robust criteria and are implemented on a mandatory basis are most likely to be effective. At the global level, Codex discussions are ongoing and WHO has drafted guiding principles for front-of-pack labelling, while the WHO Regional Office for the Mediterranean is developing tools to assist countries in implementation.

**Summary of plenary discussion**

In relation to labelling, challenges associated with implementation were mentioned, including enforcing the rules on imported foods and convincing policymakers that a mandatory approach is most effective. Other labelling issues were raised, including country of origin and incorporation of sustainability criteria labelling, and the latter is likely to be an important issue in the future. A new global Action Network on Nutrition Labelling was established in February 2019, led by France and Australia, and all countries are welcome to join the network.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For more information see

[https://www.un.org/nutrition/sites/www.un.org.nutrition/files/general/mon/vf.reportnetwork\\_nutrilab\\_meeting\\_02.07.2019.pdf](https://www.un.org/nutrition/sites/www.un.org.nutrition/files/general/mon/vf.reportnetwork_nutrilab_meeting_02.07.2019.pdf). Countries interested in joining the network should contact Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh at WHO or Ms Trudy Wijnhoven at FAO.

Discussion of trade policies, emphasized the need for a very careful analysis and mapping of food systems to be able to decide the best mix for a specific country context, while identifying trade-offs and addressing equity impacts. In relation to taxes and subsidies, issues such as price elasticity of products and possible substitution effects need to be considered.

#### Key messages

- Food and trade policies have clear implications for nutrition and, more specifically for overweight and obesity trends, and nutrition-sensitive policies on trade and subsidies are needed.
- Trade policies, however, can be poorly targeted and a mix of regulatory and taxation policies to more directly affect industry and consumer behaviour is likely to be more effective.
- It is important to frame all legislative proposals carefully to avoid any problems with trade rules.
- There are encouraging examples across the region of countries using regulatory approaches to improve nutritional quality of the food supply and influence consumer demand, including nutrition standards for food service establishments, upper limits on trans fatty acids, sugars or salt in manufactured foods, taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and mandatory front-of-pack labelling.
- For each specific country context, a detailed mapping of the food system and analysis of the situation will help identify the ideal mix of policies and regulation for each country.

## Session 6: Promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration in achieving SDG2.2 of ending all forms of malnutrition

A panel discussion, facilitated by Dr Al-Jawaldeh and Ms Nanitashvili, explored issues around multi-stakeholder collaboration for addressing obesity through food systems

**Ms Vilma Tyler, UNICEF**, described experience with tackling micronutrient deficiencies in the region through flour fortification as an example of a multi-stakeholder approach. In Jordan, for example, engagement with the Ministry of Food, the food regulatory authority, the standards body, consumer associations and the private sector had been key. Since 2002, fortification has been mandatory, with the government funding provision of the premix to millers.

**Dr Nausheen Hamid, Parliamentary Secretary, Pakistan**, described the multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach in Pakistan. Many government departments and agencies are involved in action on nutrition, including the offices of the Prime Minister and the President. The Ministry of Education, for example, has introduced school nutrition programmes and banned sugar-sweetened beverages in and around schools. The Ministry of Planning and Development coordinates the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) network in the country, while the Ministry of Science and Technology is involved in food compositional standards. It is clear that, with so many different sectors and actors involved, a framework mechanism is needed to help sectors work together with a coordinated approach. The Prime Minister has launched the EHSAAAS social

protection programme in 2019 to reduce inequality, with a focus on those living in extreme poverty and other marginalized groups. This is based on a whole-of-government, multi-sectoral collaboration. Other activities include: a maternal and child health initiative on stunting (including treatment of malnutrition, supplementary feeding, supplementation, deworming and water and sanitation activities); a community-based initiative to promote breastfeeding and optimal infant and young child feeding; a kitchen garden initiative, including distribution of free seeds; and, provision of small livestock to poor rural households.

**Mr Mahmoud Fatafta, Director of Planning and Preparing Programmes and Projects, Palestine,** described a multi-stakeholder approach in the West Bank. Given the context of the occupation, the high levels of poverty and unemployment, limited access to agricultural inputs, the limited availability of agricultural land (the Palestinian Authority only controls 20% of the land) and funding difficulties, improving food security and nutrition – especially in rural areas – requires making the maximum use of available resources. At the initiative of the Prime Minister’s office, a national policy to improve food security and nutrition was developed with involvement of a wide range of stakeholders (Ministries of agriculture, education, health, local government and national economy; water and environment authority). This resulted in an investment plan, which highlighted a number of nutrition-specific investments. Namely, nutrition surveillance, micronutrient supplementation of vulnerable groups, behaviour change communication, prevention and treatment of overweight and obesity, an initiative to reduce saturated and trans fats, sugars and salt, and protection and promotion of breastfeeding and optimal infant and young child feeding. A Higher Council for Food Security and Nutrition has been created.

**Dr Salima El Meimari, Ministry of Health, Oman,** discussed a multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder food system approach in Oman, where 60 percent of food is imported, two-thirds of the population are overweight or obese and there is a high prevalence of diet-related NCDs. The Ministry of Health set out to promote sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition and invited a variety of different sectors to get involved. A food system approach was adopted, with a view to increasing production and consumption of fruits, vegetables and fish, while also tackling other important issues such as environmental sustainability and employment. Land was allocated to citizens for small-scale production, high technological solutions are being used to increase fruit and vegetable production (e.g. aquaponic systems, solar energy), while other measures were introduced to increase demand. Investment, through the Ministry of Social Affairs, funded training in sustainable agriculture to people seeking employment. A programme to create school gardens is being introduced. The Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health are leading the programme, and a wide range of other actors are involved.

### **Summary of plenary discussion**

Other examples of food system approaches were described during the plenary discussion, with examples of projects to increase production of vegetables through home garden projects, provision of resources to poor farmers and help with quality control and marketing of produce.

The discussion highlighted that both high level leadership and multi-sectoral collaboration are essential to drive progress. The key role of civil society was highlighted – to provide insight into the situation on the ground and ideas for the way forward, as well as holding industry and government to account. Countries reported different methods for civil society engagement in

policy or programme development (e.g. through consumer associations, via focus groups at community level).

The importance of evaluating policy impact was also highlighted. Countries are trying to build evaluation into programme design from the outset, but face many challenges, such as a lack of data.

#### Key messages

- There are interesting examples of multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder efforts to apply a food system approach to improving nutrition across the region.
- There is a key role for civil society in multi-stakeholder initiatives, and it is important to engage with civil society from an early stage of the process.
- It is also important to consider from the outset how initiatives/policies/ programmes will be evaluated and how the challenges associated with evaluation can be overcome.

## Working groups: Challenges, opportunities and barriers for multi-stakeholder collaboration for addressing obesity through food systems

Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh set the scene for working group discussions to consider challenges, opportunities and barriers and the development of national nutrition action plans for obesity prevention. He pointed out that a strong foundation already exists, with Member States already having agreed relevant action plans, strategies and frameworks for action.<sup>14</sup> It is time for countries to put these commitments into action.

### Working group 1: Challenges and opportunities for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration for obesity prevention

A working group composed of middle-income countries considered the challenges and opportunities for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

A number of challenges were identified:

- Lack of leadership (possibly due to conflicts of interest);
- Difficulty of convincing all the key players of the relevance to them. Including “obesity” in the name of an initiative/structure/mechanism is likely to discourage other sectors from participating;
- Undue influence of the private sector on policy development and opposition from vested interests;

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<sup>14</sup> These include the [WHO Comprehensive Implementation Plan on Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition](#), the [WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs](#) and its ‘Best Buys’, the [FAO/WHO Second International Conference on Nutrition Framework for Action](#), the [Work Programme of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025](#), the [WHO Regional Nutrition Strategy 2010-2019](#) and the [Regional Framework to scale up action on obesity in the Eastern Mediterranean Region](#).

- It can be difficult to make contact with the right person from each sector. Ideally, higher-level representatives should be involved;
- The independence of food control authorities and bodies.

Advice on opportunities identified to help multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches include:

- Do not focus solely on overweight/obesity, rather frame initiatives in relation to “food, health and environment” or “food and nutrition for sustainable development”;
- Highlight the importance of treating obesity as part of universal health coverage;
- Emphasize the need to protect healthy, traditional diets and ensuring that decisions affecting the food system do not have a negative impact.

### Working group 2: Developing national action plans

The second working group of Gulf Cooperation Council countries considered a number of questions relating to the steps for setting up national action plans for tackling obesity.

*Do you have a multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms?* In general, countries do have multi-sectoral committees on nutrition.

*Do you have a national target for nutrition and NCDs?* Yes, countries do have national targets.

*Do you have a monitoring system including regular reporting for the national key indicators?* Some countries do have monitoring and surveillance arrangements (STEPwise surveys, unified electronic health information systems, some monitoring of obesity in schoolchildren), but others do not.

*What do you see as the key priority actions?* Three issues were identified as priorities to strengthen the existing measures (taxes, regulations) adopted in GCC countries:

- **Public procurement** (nutrition standards for food in public institutions) and **food service** sector (cafés, restaurants, street food)
- Interventions to increase facilities and opportunities to participate in **physical activity**
- **Reformulation** programmes, including mandatory reduction of sugars and salt.

### Group 3: Tackling obesity in crisis situations

The third working group, comprised of countries with ongoing humanitarian crises, discussed the challenges and opportunities for food system reform and tackling obesity in such contexts.

*Current actions:* A number of countries already have food security and nutrition strategies and action plans, and some specifically have obesity plans (even if not yet implemented on the ground). In general, however, the focus tends to be on food security, and there is little relating to obesity or NCDs given the context. Some countries have had to delay plans to implement long-term action plans and shift to emergency plans. Several countries cited examples of multisectoral collaboration mechanisms, sometimes with various stakeholders including civil society.



*Challenges:* The key challenges identified were: lack of infrastructure or poor infrastructure; Weak traceability of foodstuffs (to be able to deal with adulteration) and lack of research on reducing risk factors. In addition, there were many challenges specific to the crisis context.

*Opportunities:* Participants highlighted the need for a greater focus on food supply and trade issues, regulation on labelling and marketing, physical activity interventions and legislation to tackle adulteration, fraud or misleading claims/marketing. They also highlighted the important role of consumer organizations and civil society to help orient government action. One possible opportunity cited was the creation of special funds, whether at the international or local levels, to fund investment in interventions to increase the availability of and access to nutritious foods. Finally, participants pointed to the important role of parliamentarians and politicians, who are critical to increasing political will to act and to invest in action.

#### Summary of plenary discussion

Participants were thanked for their input and contributions. All of the feedback once again emphasizes the importance of a multisectoral approach and the roles of different stakeholders. Member States were encouraged to strengthen or accelerate their multisectoral working and invited to report back on progress to FAO/WHO. It was proposed to add all participants to the regional platform for communication on nutrition.

## Key messages

- The working groups identified a number of challenges to addressing obesity through food systems, including:
  - lack of leadership and of coordination;
  - undue influence of vested interests;
  - difficulties in convincing other sectors and actors of the relevance of the issue to their work and/or their potential role;
  - lack of infrastructure and investment;
  - difficulties associated with the crisis context.
- A number of opportunities to drive further progress were suggested:
  - framing the issue differently to encourage buy-in from other sectors (e.g. no obesity in the title, focus on nutrition/health/sustainability);
  - leveraging the current impetus for universal health coverage (and ensuring nutrition and obesity are integrated);
  - protecting healthy traditional diets from changes which might have a negative impact;
  - greater mobilization of civil society and parliamentarians.
- The key priorities for future action to emerge include:
  - public procurement (food in public institutions);
  - the out-of-home or food service sector (restaurants, cafes, street food);
  - reformulation to eliminate trans fats and reduce salt and sugars;
  - promoting physical activity;
  - food supply and trade policies;
  - regulation on labelling, marketing and fraud.

## Conclusions and closing remarks

**Ms Tamara Nanitashvili, FAO**, thanked participants for their contributions, and noted with appreciation the diversity of views and opinions. There is clear agreement that it is very important for the health sector to work with a wide variety of different sectors and different stakeholders to be able to leverage food systems to combat obesity. FAO and WHO are ready to provide technical support on these issues. The *UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025* presents a framework for accelerating action to tackle malnutrition in all its forms. Countries are encouraged to collaborate and network to exchange knowledge, share experience and identify ways to overcome challenges in implementing policies for obesity prevention. Any Member State(s) prepared to take a lead, with the support of the joint FAO/WHO Secretariat of the Nutrition Decade, in forming an Action Network on a topic of particular interest is encouraged to contact FAO.

**Ms Vilma Tyler, UNICEF**, also offered some concluding remarks, highlighting that the workshop had brought people from different sectors together. Evidently, not all of the learning points or

conclusions will be applicable to all countries. Member State representatives were encouraged to take away at least one key action for implementation in their national context.

**Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, WHO,** also thanked participants for their diverse and lively contributions. The discussions highlight the need to recognize the very different contexts in the region, and that not all of the policy options can be priorities in all contexts. He hoped that participants would return home with ideas and inspiration for action and reassured them that WHO is very willing and available to provide technical support for implementation.

## Conclusions and recommendations

- A food systems approach is acknowledged to be key to efforts to combat obesity and eliminate other forms of malnutrition in the countries of the Near East and North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean Regions.
- In order to leverage food systems to combat obesity, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches are essential. Key aspects include multi-sectoral coordination, mainstreaming of nutrition considerations into the policies and actions of many sectors (e.g. agriculture, health, environment, rural development, education, social protection etc.) and mobilizing civil society.
- Close cooperation and networking between Member States is important, in order to facilitate sharing of knowledge, learning from country experience and working together to tackle cross-border issues.
- The collaboration between FAO, WHO and UNICEF, as well as other international partner organizations such as UN Environment, is welcome and should be continued and intensified in order to provide technical support to Member States.
- To be able to implement a food systems approach, a mapping exercise to better understand the food system in their national context and identify opportunities for action is recommended.
- Key priorities for strategic interventions to prevent obesity have been agreed internationally and robust policy responses, including regulatory measures, are needed to transform food systems, create healthy food environments and ensure access to sustainable, healthy diets for all.
- The UN Decade of Action on Nutrition presents a key opportunity to focus political attention, and countries are encouraged to make SMART commitments and to collaborate in Action Networks.
- Much closer collaboration is needed between the health/nutrition, food and environment sectors to better define what constitutes a sustainable, healthy diet and identify the policy responses required to promote production and consumption of such diets.
- Nutrition in early life, particularly the first 1,000 days from conception to a child's second birthday, is fundamental to efforts to end all forms of malnutrition, and policies to protect, promote and support breastfeeding and optimal infant and young child feeding are critical.
- Support to develop clear argumentation on the social and economic case for action, and the best way to frame the issues, will be important to support countries in overcoming key challenges such as:
  - lack of leadership and of coordination;
  - undue influence of vested interests;
  - difficulties in convincing other sectors and actors of the relevance of the issue to their work and/or their potential role;
  - lack of infrastructure and investment;
  - difficulties associated with addressing long-term health challenges in a crisis context.
- Further technical support from FAO/WHO will also be important to help countries take action on the key priorities for future action identified:
  - public procurement (food in public institutions);
  - the out-of-home or food service sector (restaurants, cafes, street food);
  - reformulation to eliminate trans fats and reduce salt and sugars;
  - promoting physical activity;
  - food supply and trade policies;
  - regulation on labelling, marketing and fraud.

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**Dr Barbara Burlingame**

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**Ms Karen McColl**

Independent consultant (nutrition and public health)  
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## Annex II: Programme

### FAO / WHO JOINT MULTI-STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTATION WORKSHOP LEVERAGING FOOD SYSTEMS TO COMBAT OBESITY IN THE NEAR EAST NORTH AFRICA (NENA) and THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Cairo, Egypt, 23 – 24 September 2019

#### WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

DAY ONE: 23 SEPTEMBER 2019	
08:30 – 09:00	Registration
09:00 – 10:00	<p>Opening Session</p> <p>Address of the meeting <b>Dr Serge Nakouzi, Deputy Regional Representative, FAO-RNE</b> <b>Dr Rana Hajjeh, Director of Programme Management, WHO-EMRO</b></p> <p>Welcome remarks by key partners (UNICEF, IFAD, Arab League)</p> <p>Introductory to the regional situation and global and Regional strategies to address obesity in the Region <b>Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, WHO-EMRO</b></p> <p>Meeting objectives and expected outcomes <b>Ms Tamara Nanitashvili, FAO-RNE</b></p> <p>Introduction of participants</p> <p>Group photo</p>
10:00 – 10:30	Coffee Break
<p><b>Session 1: Global and Regional Situation of obesity in the Eastern Mediterranean Region</b> <b>Facilitator: Ms Tamara Nanitashvili, FAO-Regional; Dr Ghada Ismail, Ain Shams University</b></p>	
10:30 – 10:55	<p>Keynote presentation: Food system transformation for healthy and sustainable diets <i>Professor Barbara Burlingame, Massey University, New Zealand</i></p>
10:55 – 11:10	<p>Regional indicators on Noncommunicable Diseases <i>Dr Nasim Pourghazian, WHO EMRO</i></p>

11:10 – 11:25	An overview of implementation of the Nutrition Decade <i>Dr Trudy Wijnhoven, Nutrition Officer, ESN Division, FAO, Rome</i>
11:25 – 12:00	Plenary Discussion
<b>Session 2: Strategic Interventions to Address Obesity in the Region</b> <b>Facilitators: Professor Barbara Burlingame, Massey University, New Zealand</b> <b>Dr Sahar Zaghloul, National Nutrition Committee, Egypt</b>	
12:00 – 13:00	Panel Discussion: Members: Ms Karen McColl, WHO Consultant Dr Hessa Al-Hussaini, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia Dr Farah Naja, American University of Beirut (AUB) Dr Trudy Wijnhoven, FAO-HQ Ms Joyce Njoro, IFAD-HQ
<b>13:00 – 14:00</b>	<b>Lunch Break</b>
<b>Session 3: Food supply chain for healthier diets</b> <b>Facilitator: Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, WHO-EMRO</b> <b>Ms. Joyce Njoro, IFAD-HQ</b>	
14:00 – 14:10	Case study from Kenya: transforming wasted crops with high nutrient components into shelf stable products <i>Agriprocity, Ms Nicole Rogers, Founder and Chief Executive Officer</i>
14:10 – 14:20	Diversification of production systems for dietary diversity <i>Ms Bezalet Dessalegn, ICARDA-Egypt</i>
14:20 – 14:30	Mapping the sources of salt / TFA / Sugar in a traditional and locally produced diet in Egypt <i>Dr Ghada Ismail, Professor of Clinical &amp; Chemical Pathology, Ain Shams University</i>
14:30 – 14:40	Food systems analysis for the prevention of overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases <i>Ms Ceren Gurkan, Food Security Officer, FAO-HQ, Rome</i>
14:40 – 15:30	Plenary Discussion
<b>15:30 – 15:50</b>	<b>Coffee Break</b>

<b>Session 4: Early childhood development and nutrition to address obesity</b> <b>Facilitator: Dr Farah Naja, AUB, Lebanon</b>	
15:50 – 16:05	Role of early nutrition on obesity prevention/first 1000 days of life <i>Ms Vilma Tyler, UNICEF</i>
16:05 – 16:20	Supplement feeding for children under 5 in Yemen <i>Ms Eshraq Al Falahi, WHO Yemen</i>
16:20 – 16:35	Promotion of Infant and Young child feeding in Pakistan <i>Dr Noureen Nishtar, WHO Pakistan</i>
16:35 – 17:00	Discussion
<b>DAY TWO: 24 SEPTEMBER 2019</b>	
09:00 – 09:15	Recap of Day 1 and outline of Day 2
<b>Session 5: Towards healthier food environment: Food Trade and Marketing for Healthier Diets</b> <b>Facilitators: Dr Nausheen Hamid, Parliamentarian, Pakistan</b> <b>Ms Maryam Rezaei, FAO, HQ</b>	
09:15 – 09:25	Food policies and obesity in MENA <i>Dr Abay Kibrom, Research Fellow IFPRI, Egypt</i>
09:25 – 09:35	Improving food system through trade and industry to promote healthy diet <i>Dr Faisal Bensaidan, FDA Saudi Arabia</i>
09:35 – 09:45	Regulating trade to tackle obesity <i>Dr. Andrea Zimmermann, Economist, FAO Rome</i>
09:45 – 09:55	Food labelling system in Morocco, challenges and success <i>Dr Leila El Ammari, Head of Nutrition Department, Ministry of Health, Morocco</i>
09:55 – 10:05	Emerging messages on best practice for implementation of Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labelling <i>Ms Karen McColl, WHO Consultant, France</i>
10:05 – 10:45	Plenary discussion

<b>10:45 – 11:00</b>	<b>Coffee Break</b>

<b>Session 6: Promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration in achieving SDG2.2 of ending all forms of malnutrition</b> <b>Facilitator: Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, WHO EMRO</b> <b>Ms Tamara Nanitashvili, FAO-RNE</b>	
11:00 – 11:45	Panel Discussions: Panel Members (Speakers): Dr Nausheen Hamid Ms Vilma Tyler Mr Mahmoud Fatafta Dr Salima El Meimari
11:45 – 13:00	Working Group sessions:  Group 1: Challenges, opportunities and barriers for multi-stakeholder collaboration For addressing obesity through food systems;  Group 2: Development of Action Plans for Addressing Obesity
<b>13:00 – 14:00</b>	<b>Lunch Break</b>
14:00 – 15:00	Working groups presentations
15:00 – 15:30	Distribution of prizes to the winners of FAO-Egypt twitter contest on <i>Healthy Diet</i>
<b>15:30 – 15:45</b>	<b>Coffee Break</b>
15:45 – 16:00	Conclusions and next steps  <b>Closing remarks</b> Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, WHO-EMRO Ms Tamara Nanitashvili, FAO-RNE