19 September 2023, Amman, Jordan – Today is the first day of the intercountry meeting for nutrition focal points organized by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. It also marks the launch of the Eastern Mediterranean Region food composition database, a joint initiative by Al-Quds University and the Regional Office.

The meeting is taking place from 19 to 21 September 2023, in Amman, Jordan, under the patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Salha Bint Asem. Representatives of all of the Region's Member States will attend, along with members of academia, United Nations agencies and international organizations.

Experts from the WHO Headquarters and the Regional Office will update delegates on relevant WHO guidance and resources, and opportunities for technical support. They will share country experiences on policy implementation, as well as other success stories and challenges, and identify country support needs and opportunities for intercountry collaboration.

Double burden of malnutrition

In her opening remarks, Her Royal Highness Princess Salha Bint Asem noted the nutrition situation in Jordan: "Jordan, like other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, is suffering from a rapid nutritional shift that has led to high rates of overweight and obesity, and thus a high incidence of related noncommunicable diseases."

HRH Princess Salha continued: "Health authorities, in collaboration with WHO, support healthy nutrition programmes to reduce obesity rates and control high blood pressure, diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases."

In his opening remarks, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, stressed on the heavy burden of malnutrition in the Region: "Malnutrition in all its forms takes a heavy toll on the health, well-being and sustainable development of populations in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. The countries of the Region face the double burden of malnutrition – where undernutrition coexists with increasingly common overweight and obesity."

Despite some progress, poor maternal, infant, young child and adolescent nutrition continues to threaten the health and development of women, children and adolescents in the Region. In 2020, 26.2% of children aged under 5 years in the Region were stunted, while 7.4% of children aged under 5 years were affected by wasting to some degree, and 3% were severely wasted.

Meanwhile, one in 12 children aged under 5 years in the Region was overweight in 2020, with serious implications for health and well-being throughout the life course. Many children also continue to face the hidden hunger of vitamin or mineral deficiencies. Among girls and women of reproductive age (15–49 years), the prevalence of anaemia ranges from 24% to 70% across the Region.

Region-specific nutrition data

The Regional Office supports Member States in their efforts to scale up policy implementation and to translate knowledge into action. The Eastern Mediterranean Region food composition database, launched today, is one such recent initiative.

“At its core, the food composition database is a testament to the importance of region-specific nutritional information. It seeks to provide researchers, nutritionists, health care professionals and policy-makers with accurate, comprehensive and actionable data about the foods consumed in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. With the global rise in noncommunicable diseases and the increasing recognition of diet’s role in health, such data are more crucial than ever,” said Dr Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh, WHO Regional Advisor for Nutrition.

The food composition database, available as a book and as an electronic database, examines the nutritional landscapes of the Eastern Mediterranean. Users can learn about the macro- and micronutrient profiles of foods that sustain millions, and gain insights into dietary patterns, enabling informed decisions in health care, policy-making and community nutrition planning. This is not just about what foods are consumed; it’s about their implications for health, wellness and disease prevention.

“The book and database are the outcome of tireless work by dedicated researchers, field workers, dietitians, and many contributors from Al-Quds University and the World Health Organization – in collaboration with others in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, including the University of Jordan, Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research, Lebanese University and Oman’s Ministry of Health – who have meticulously gathered, analysed and presented food composition tables that not only inform but also set benchmarks for health in the Region,” said Dr Radwan

Qasrawy of Al-Quds University.

Identifying priorities for further progress in nutrition

At the meeting, nutrition focal points from all Member States will share their experiences and success stories around addressing nutrition as a major health issue. They will discuss countries' actions to improve nutrition in low-income and emergency contexts and identify priorities to speed up progress on nutrition across the Region.

Jordan has had a successful experience in enhancing the role of private clinics and dietitians in addressing obesity and noncommunicable diseases in the country. During the meeting, Jordan will share this experience with all participants for fruitful discussion.

Concluding his opening remarks, Dr Al-Mandhari called for more action to tackle malnutrition: "Further comprehensive, multisectoral action is still required to accelerate progress to address malnutrition in all its forms across the Region. We believe it will contribute to improving nutrition and achieving the regional vision: health for all by all."

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