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2020



ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
**REGIONAL
OVERVIEW
OF FOOD
SECURITY AND
NUTRITION**

**MATERNAL AND CHILD DIETS AT
THE HEART OF IMPROVING NUTRITION**

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BANGLADESH. Social protection systems and transfers can promote the affordability of healthy diets for the poor and most vulnerable. Complementary health and nutrition education and other services is an example of using a systems approach to promoting healthy maternal and child diets.



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Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Bangkok, 2021

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FOREWORD

This is the third annual report jointly written by United Nations agencies on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (in particular SDG 2 – Zero Hunger) and the World Health Assembly targets 2030 on nutrition in the Asia and Pacific region.

Five years after the launch of the SDGs, many key indicators still demonstrate slow or no progress. In a region with the largest share of the global population, this is of major concern. There are still 351 million people undernourished in the Asia and Pacific region, more than half of the global total (688 million). This means a large number of people need to escape food insecurity and malnutrition over the next ten years. The COVID-19 pandemic will hinder progress even further.

While trends in the prevalence of stunting and wasting in young children indicate some progress towards the 2030 targets, the levels are still unacceptably high in many countries in the region. At the same time, the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in adults and children is extremely worrisome. One key factor driving these nutritional challenges is the high cost of a healthy diet, which is two to nine times the cost of a basic energy sufficient diet in the region. For nearly 1.9 billion people in the Asia and Pacific region, a healthy diet remains unaffordable. The need to improve dietary quality and intake is critical, especially for young children and mothers, and the most vulnerable community members. Given that unhealthy diets for children can have permanent effects on their physical and cognitive development, interventions to improve the diets of mothers and children under five years of age are paramount. Ultimately, a healthy population is essential for economic development and achieving zero hunger.

The first part of this report tracks progress on key SDG 2 indicators and World Health Assembly targets up to 2019. There is growing concern, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic will erase many of the gains made in earlier years, although the impact of the pandemic is not yet fully understood. Some scenarios present figures of up to 130 million additional people at risk of becoming acutely food insecure, with up to 24 million in the Asia and Pacific region. Globally, an additional 6.7 million children under five years of age are expected to become wasted. More than 3.8 million of these are estimated to live in Southern Asia. This deterioration comes on top of the pre-existing gaps in food security and nutrition and needs to be addressed urgently in a comprehensive manner by bringing together a wide range of stakeholders.

The second part of the report focuses on challenges and possible solutions to improve maternal and child diets in the Asia and Pacific region. Consumption of energy sufficient diets is not enough, as such diets lack vital macro and micronutrients and dietary diversity. Hence, promoting healthy diets, and implementing policies that allow the poor and vulnerable to afford these diets, is critical for the future productivity of their societies. To achieve healthy diets for all mothers and children in the Asia and Pacific region, the report recommends an integrated systems approach, bringing together food, water and sanitation, health, social protection and education systems to address the underlying and contributing factors of diets sustainably. The report describes promising experiences from the region and shows how, through multi-sectoral and systems analysis, these experiences can be woven into policy and

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practice. Additionally, the impacts of COVID-19 on the five interlocking systems noted above are highlighted to help mitigate the impacts on food security and nutrition.

We trust this report raises awareness of the importance of maternal and child diets for the health and wellbeing of everyone and supports the conversation of shaping policies and practices across the Asia and Pacific region to achieve food security and nutrition for all.



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