



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



World Health
Organization

SUSTAINABLE HEALTHY DIETS GUIDING PRINCIPLES



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FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
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Two of the major challenges of our times are malnutrition in all its forms and the degradation of environmental and natural resources. Both are happening at an accelerated pace.

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report (SOFI 2019) shows that the number of the undernourished has been slowly increasing for several years in a row, and at the same time the number of overweight and obese people all over the world is increasing at an alarming rate.

More than 820 million people go to bed hungry every night. In 2018, 1.3 billion people experienced food insecurity at moderate levels, meaning they did not have regular access to nutritious and sufficient food. Overweight and obesity and their associated diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are contributing to 4 million deaths globally. Today, 2 billion adults and over 40 million children under five are overweight. Moreover, over 670 million adults and 120 million girls and boys (5-19 years) are obese. Malnutrition is costly to the health of individuals, their wellbeing and productivity. It also has high socio-economic costs for societies in all regions of the world.

Poor diets are a major contributory factor to the rising prevalence of malnutrition in all its forms. Moreover, unhealthy diets and malnutrition are among the top ten risk factors contributing to the global burden of disease.

In addition, the way we produce and consume food is taking a toll on the environment and natural resource base. For example, food production accounts for the use of 48 percent and 70 percent of land and fresh water resources respectively at the global level.

Social, demographic and economic factors are also contributing to changing lifestyles and eating patterns, and subsequently putting pressure on resources for food production.

In 2014, the FAO/WHO Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) acknowledged that: “current food systems are being increasingly challenged to provide adequate, safe, diversified and nutrient rich food for all that contribute to healthy diets due to, inter alia, constraints posed by resource scarcity and environmental degradation, as well as by unsustainable production and consumption patterns”. To address these challenges, the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016 – 2025 puts a specific focus on the transformation of food systems to promote healthy diets that are sustainably produced and improve nutrition to achieve the global nutrition and diet-related NCD targets in line with commitments of ICN2 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Considering the detrimental environmental impact of current food systems, and the concerns raised about their sustainability, there is an urgent need to promote diets that are healthy and have low environmental impacts. These diets also need to be socio-culturally acceptable and economically accessible for all.

Acknowledging the existence of diverging views on the concepts of sustainable diets and healthy diets, countries have requested guidance from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) on what constitutes sustainable healthy diets. The two organisations jointly held an international expert consultation on Sustainable and Healthy Diets from 1 to 3 July 2019 at FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy, to address these issues. The Consultation agreed on guiding principles for what constitutes “Sustainable Healthy Diets”. This comes at a time when the debate around the sustainability of diets is high on the agenda of governments, international organisations, civil society organisations, the private sector and academia.

These guiding principles take a holistic approach to diets; they consider international nutrition recommendations; the environmental cost of food production and consumption; and the adaptability to local social, cultural and economic contexts. At the Consultation the experts agreed on the term “Sustainable Healthy Diets” which encompasses the two dimensions – sustainability and healthiness of diets. Countries should decide on the trade-offs according to their situations and goals.

These guiding principles emphasize the role of food consumption and diets in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs at country level, especially Goals 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality) and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 13 (Climate Action).

This publication aims to support the efforts of countries as they work to transform food systems to deliver on sustainable healthy diets.

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