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Outcomes of the Regional Symposium on “Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition”

Executive Summary

The Africa Regional Nutrition Symposium on Sustainable food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition was held in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire (16-17 November, 2018). The symposium was organized under the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025). The objective was to take stock of the regional food security and nutrition challenges, share key features of food systems in countries in the Africa region, and how these influence dietary patterns, and to identify regional policy and programmatic processes for tackling nutrition issues through a food system approach.

The Symposium called on African Governments to take the lead in food systems reform by enacting policies and programmes that support healthy food environments and investing resources in nutrition through a clear budget line; support smallholder farmers with resources and facilitate their links to markets to make nutritious foods accessible to all; and to take actions to protect Africa’s nutritious indigenous foods of plant and animal origins from disappearing. It further called on governments to operationalize the ICN2 Framework for Action with its recommendations for impact during this Decade of Action on Nutrition and towards achieving the SDGs.

It also called on governments to use their institutions, particularly their Parliaments, to facilitate the enactment of laws and legislations to support food systems reform to deliver on healthy diets, and ensure the provision of adequate domestic resources for actions towards improvement of food safety and quality.

The outcomes of the deliberations have been captured and summarized in this information note.

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Matters to be brought to the attention of the Regional Conference

The Conference is invited to take note of the following recommendations from the symposium:

- i) Governments are encouraged to take advantage of the SDGs, the Decade of Action on Nutrition and the Malabo Declaration to ensure positive nutrition outcomes. There is the need to invest in nutrition with evidence-based policies, promote nutrition-sensitive agriculture, and strengthen national and regional food trade integration for healthy diets;
- ii) Parliamentarians were equally urged to facilitate legislative instruments for food systems reform with resource allocations for concrete actions;
- iii) The African Union and Regional Economic Commissions are requested to coordinate biennial reporting on regional commitments and continental level cooperation to combat all forms of malnutrition;
- iv) UN Agencies were encouraged to continue providing technical and financial support for policy implementation;
- v) Private sector is urged to ensure the safety and quality of foods to promote optimal nutrition. They are to comply with regulatory requirements on labelling and targeted marketing for healthy eating and nutrition;
- vi) Farmers and pastoralists, consumers and the entire populace in the region should be encouraged to ensure availability and compliance enforcement of rules and regulations to protect food systems with the sustainable production, promotion and consumption of healthy foods including Africa's indigenous foods.

I. Introduction

1. During the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) organized in November 2014, member countries of FAO and WHO acknowledged the challenges of ensuring that current food systems deliver healthy diets for improving health and nutrition outcomes in developed and developing economies of the world. The Framework for Action of the ICN2 therefore outlined various policy recommendations for re-designing sustainable food systems that would advance optimal nutrition.

2. In December 2016, FAO and WHO jointly organized the International Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition, which explored policies and programme options for shaping the food systems to contribute to healthy diets. The success of the global symposium called for context specific regional level symposia to explore concrete regional and national experiences on how to identify gaps and improve on current food and future food systems to deliver healthy, safe and nutritionally balanced diet for populations.

3. Recognizing poor nutrition as an impediment to development, world leaders in **April 2016** dedicated the Second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2) to nutrition while several other SDGs have direct and indirect links to improving nutrition outcomes. To accelerate the implementation of the Framework for Action of the Second International Conference on Nutrition and the achievements of nutrition related SDGs, the 71st UN General Assembly proclaimed 2016-2025 as the Decade of Action on Nutrition to mobilize support to eradicate malnutrition in all its forms and operationalize the ICN2 Framework for Action in all countries through sustained and coherent implementation of policies and programmes.

4. In Africa, the Malabo Declaration of June 2014, the African Union Agenda 2063 (captioned - "the Africa we want"), the Africa Regional Nutrition Strategy (ARNS) and the Africa Renewed Initiative on Stunting Elimination (ARISE) all seek to address nutrition issues of the region and are aligned to global nutrition commitments as stipulated in the ICN2, SDGs, the Nutrition for Growth (N4G) and the World Health Assembly Nutrition Targets.

5. FAO and WHO therefore jointly organized this Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition to deliberate on the context of specific challenges and opportunities for concrete regional and national actions for addressing potential gaps and improve on current and future food systems to deliver healthy, safe and nutritionally balanced diet for populations of the continent.

6. The Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition in Africa took place in Abidjan, on 16 and 17 November 2017, and preceded the 2017 eighth annual commemoration of the Africa Day for Food and Nutrition Security (ADFNS) and the fourth International Fair on Agriculture and Animal Resources (SARA 2017) all held in Côte d'Ivoire. The symposium recognized the long-term benefits of sustainable food systems for healthier diets and improved nutrition on the socio-economic development of Africa and provided the platform for governments and stakeholders to renew commitments for the implementation of policies, programmes and investment initiatives to impact nutrition and health. The symposium reviewed evidence, examined policies and programme implications and provided some tangible recommendations on how sustainable food systems could optimize improvement in nutrition outcomes with nutritionally balanced diets and healthy lifestyles in Africa. It also showcased the policies and programmes in place at national level and explored best practices and lessons that could be learned within the region.

7. Malnutrition, including undernutrition, overnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, remains one of the greatest and most urgent health and developmental challenges in Africa. According to estimates from the 2017 Global Nutrition Report, 31 percent of children under the age of five are stunted, 7 percent wasted and 14 percent of all infants are born with low birth weight (below 2.5 kilograms) in Africa. An estimated 38 percent of women of reproductive age in Africa are anaemic

and 42 percent of pre-school children suffer from vitamin A deficiency. Coupled with this, 40 percent of women are overweight with 16 percent being obese in Africa. Only an estimated 11 percent of children of six to 23 months receive a minimum acceptable diet and only 23 percent receive minimum diversification of diets. While undernutrition is only slowly reducing, overnutrition is on the increase and threatens progress made. No country on the continent is on course to meeting the global target for adult obesity and anaemia in women of reproductive age.

8. Recognizing poor nutrition as an impediment to development, world leaders dedicated the Second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2) to nutrition¹ while several other SDGs have direct and indirect links to improving nutrition outcomes. To accelerate the implementation of the Framework for Action of the ICN2 and the achievements of nutrition-related SDGs, the 71st UN Assembly proclaimed 2016-2025 as the Decade of Action on Nutrition to mobilize support and eradicate malnutrition in all its form through sustained and coherent implementation of policies and programmes.

9. There are positive indications in the region in following up on the ICN2 commitments and Framework for Action and the outcomes of the International Symposium on Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition. The 2015 Annual Trends and Outlooks Report and the Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support System (ReSAKSS) 2016 Conference focused on the theme “Achieving a Nutrition Revolution for Africa: The Road to Healthier Diets and Optimal Nutrition” and recommended a food system approach for the continent.

10. The Africa Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition jointly hosted by FAO and WHO in partnership with the African Union Commission, the NEPAD Agency, the Africa Development Bank, UNICEF, WFP, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and other key regional stakeholders and the Steering Committee Members of the Africa Day for Food and Nutrition Security therefore reviewed evidence, examined policy and programme implications and provided recommendations on how sustainable food systems could optimize improvement in nutrition outcomes in Africa. It showcased concretely the policies and programmes in place at national and regional level and explored best practices and lessons that could be learned within the region.

II. Justification and Rationale

11. Poor diet is one of the main causes of malnutrition. Diets are not only determined by people’s knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and preferences, but also by the foods that are available, affordable, convenient and desirable to them, that is their food environment. Food environments are in turn determined by food systems (that is, how food is grown, distributed, processed, marketed and consumed). Food systems, worldwide and in Africa are undergoing rapid transformations. Drivers of food systems change include agricultural industrialization, population growth and urbanization, climate change, globalization and technological innovations in the way food is produced, processed, retailed and marketed. While having some positive outcomes, these food systems changes have also led to the “nutrition transition” in many countries in Africa. The nutrition transition is characterized by shifts in diets based on staples, legumes, fruits and vegetables to diets which include high consumption of meat by some category of the population, and increased intake of processed foods high in sugar, salt and fat and is driving up the global overweight and obesity prevalence in addition to the undernutrition burden in African countries. The question now is how best to maximize the positive contribution of food systems to nutrition and minimize the negative impacts. “Business as usual” cannot bring significant positive transformation. The health and nutrition crises in many parts of Africa will continue to grow if radical positive transformation of food systems in the region does not occur.

¹ UN, 2015. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015.

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III. Outcome of Deliberations

The Symposium noted that the Decade of Action on Nutrition and the SDGs provide opportunity to reform the food systems to deliver on healthy diets. The following recommendations were made:

- a) Countries to develop costed nutrition plans; even though donor funding is important, implementation of nutrition plans should not depend solely on donor funding.
- b) Coordination and collaboration among the UN agencies is important in their support to countries. Parliamentarians have an important role to play in food systems reform by facilitating the passing of laws and legislation on food systems.
- c) There are data gaps on food systems, research institutions and Universities must work towards bridging this gap; Universities must update their curricula to reflect the current food systems approach to nutrition.
- d) Private sector influences the food system and therefore must be involved in the food systems reform.
- e) Women play pivotal roles in the food system, they must be empowered through their improved access to land, credit and education.

IV. Conclusion

13. The outcome of deliberations and key action points of the two-day symposium were presented at the commemoration of the 8th ADFNS which highlighted the same theme on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition. The symposium, which brought together over 200 technical experts from 47 countries in Africa, came up with key action points for various stakeholders as part of operationalizing the ICN2 commitments and its framework for action of 60 recommendations with special focus on how food systems could be re-designed to contribute to improving nutrition outcomes in Africa. The evolving situation for African food systems and trends have significant implications for nutrition and health and requires that African Governments and stakeholders:

- a) remain conversant with the regional specificities of food security and nutrition challenges in Africa in relation to food systems and generate data for evidence based policy decision-making;
- b) maintain commitment and mobilize resources to support interventions that will positively transform food systems in the region. Africa's desire to eliminate hunger and all forms of malnutrition sustainably should be sustained with stronger political will;
- c) review policy processes for improving nutrition through a food systems approach. Nutrition sensitive food systems for healthy diets and improved nutrition should be prioritized by governments;
- d) identify entry points for policy and programmatic actions for transforming Africa food systems through programmes and investments;
- e) adapt policy actions in line with ICN2 Framework for Action and facilitate implementation through ownership of the Decade of Action on Nutrition for results;
- f) hold governments mutually accountable to meet regional and global nutrition commitments on nutrition.

14. **The Action Points Outlined for Follow up by the Regional Conference for Africa (ARC) and Partners.**

I. Governments

- a) Governments must take advantage of the SDGs, the Decade of Action on Nutrition, and regional commitments (Malabo Declaration, etc.) and take concrete actions to impact on nutrition.
- b) Governments are urged to invest resources in nutrition, through a clear budget line for nutrition.
- c) Evidence-based policies, regulations and instruments to address the food and nutrition challenges are urgently required.
- d) Strengthen national and regional food trade integration to ensure availability and accessibility to healthy diets.

II. Parliamentarians

- a) Facilitate the enactment of laws and legislations to support food systems reform to deliver on healthy diets.
- b) Ensure the provision of adequate resources from countries for actions towards improvement of food safety and quality.

III. African Union Commission and Regional Economic Commissions

- a) Coordinate the biennial reporting on regional commitments such as the Malabo Declaration.
- b) Encourage countries to set a budget line for nutrition.
- c) Continental level cooperation and coordination must be strengthened to ensure collaboration of all stakeholders in the fight against malnutrition in the region.

IV. UN Agencies and Partners

- a) Provide technical and financial support to countries for programmes and implementation of policies.
- b) The UN Agencies and Partners are urged to support countries to provide evidence based policies to help combat malnutrition in all its forms.

V. Private sectors

- a) The private sector should be ready to reformulate foods to ensure safe and healthy foods that will help in the battle against NCDs.
- b) Social marketing and labelling of foods must be based on regulations which will promote healthy eating and nutrition

VI. Farmers/Pastoralist, consumers and the entire populace

- a) Ensure the availability and accountability for the enforcement of rules and regulations to protect food systems.
- b) Ensure the sustainable production, diversification, promotion and consumption of healthy foods including indigenous foods.