



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

FOOD SYSTEMS-BASED DIETARY GUIDELINES: An overview



The need

Why is a food systems-based methodology necessary?

Most countries have developed dietary guidelines with a focus on improving consumers' nutrition and overall health. Such guidelines have been mainly used for nutrition education. Only a few countries have extended their use to inform policies and interventions in other sectors, such as in public procurement and social protection.

To leverage their potential for doing more in other sectors, some countries have included sustainability considerations in new or revised dietary guidelines. However, the methodologies and approaches used by these countries differ significantly from one another and are seldom made public.

The international community has recognized the potential and need for dietary guidelines to catalyze food systems transformation towards sustainability and to influence policies beyond the scope of consumer education. However, at present, there is a lack of global guidance and tools to facilitate this.

To fill in this gap, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has developed the new **food systems-based dietary guidelines (FSBDGs) methodology** through a collaborative process involving multiple global, regional, and country-level experts.



"Invest in a next generation of enhanced food-based dietary guidelines. These are needed as part of building a mandate for change, and they have the potential to inform and guide policymaker actions, not simply to inform or encourage individuals"

Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition, 2020

The innovation

What are food systems-based dietary guidelines?

Food systems-based dietary guidelines (FSBDGs) are described by FAO as:

... context-specific multilevel recommendations that enable governments to outline what constitutes a healthy diet from sustainable food systems, align food-related policies and programmes and support the population to adopt healthier and more sustainable dietary patterns and practices that favour, among other outcomes, environmental sustainability and socio-economic equity. Their effectiveness resides in that they are developed through an evidence-informed, multidisciplinary and multisectoral engagement process and with a food system approach. They result in a package of outputs and resources that can be adopted and used for guiding food system transformation towards better diet-related practices and, subsequently, better health, better nutrition, and more sustainable and equitable food systems...¹

How does the new methodology differ from the previous one?

FAO's new FSBDGs methodology presents several innovations to the 1998 FAO/World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on the preparation of food-based dietary guidelines:

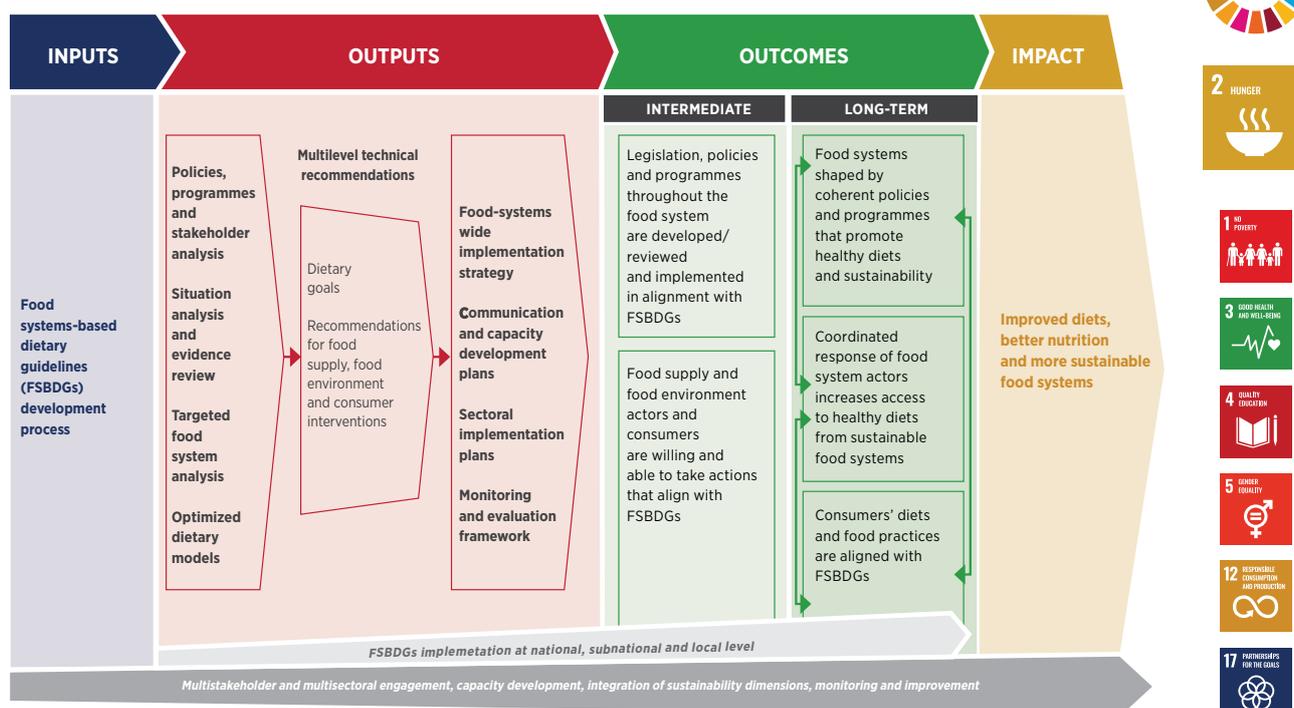
- It is underpinned by a **theory of change** and anchored in a **food systems approach**, extending beyond the health and socio-cultural dimensions of sustainability to include the environmental dimension.
- It provides clear entry points throughout the process to engage different **sectors, disciplines and stakeholders**.
- It expands the **scientific and evidence base** of dietary guidelines, linking it to food systems through a targeted analysis to address the identified nutrition, dietary and sustainability priorities.
- It proposes multilevel technical recommendations that contain both **dietary goals** and **food systems interventions, aided by diet modelling**.
- It focuses on **implementation aspects** from inception: stakeholders consider from the very start all potential organizational capacities, barriers, and enablers for implementing the FSBDGs; and jointly develop a realistic implementation strategy and action plan(s).
- It promotes the **alignment and coherence** of policies, strategies and programmes for promoting healthy diets and sustainability through national, subnational and local food systems.
- It enhances **transparency, direction-setting and accountability** by including a set of impact and process monitoring and evaluation indicators (e.g. the quality checklist).
- It considers **capacity development needs**, throughout the process, tailored to relevant stakeholders.

¹ FAO. forthcoming. Food systems-based dietary guidelines: How to develop and implement dietary guidelines with a food systems approach. Series. Rome.

Theory of change

The FSBDGs methodology is informed by a theory of change (Figure 1) which draws from the conceptual framework of **sustainable food systems for better nutrition** established by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).²

Figure 1. Food systems-based dietary guidelines theory of change



ASSUMPTIONS

- > A political will and commitment from relevant entities to support the development or revision of the FSBDGs and to implement them exists.
- > Sufficient and continuous human and financial resources and time are allocated to develop, revise and implement the FSBDGs.
- > An enabling environment for multisectoral and multidisciplinary collaboration and coordination exists to jointly develop, revise and implement the FSBDGs across the food system.
- > Openness and willingness to undertake the process in a transparent way, with clear principles of engagement and with continuous monitoring and evaluation.

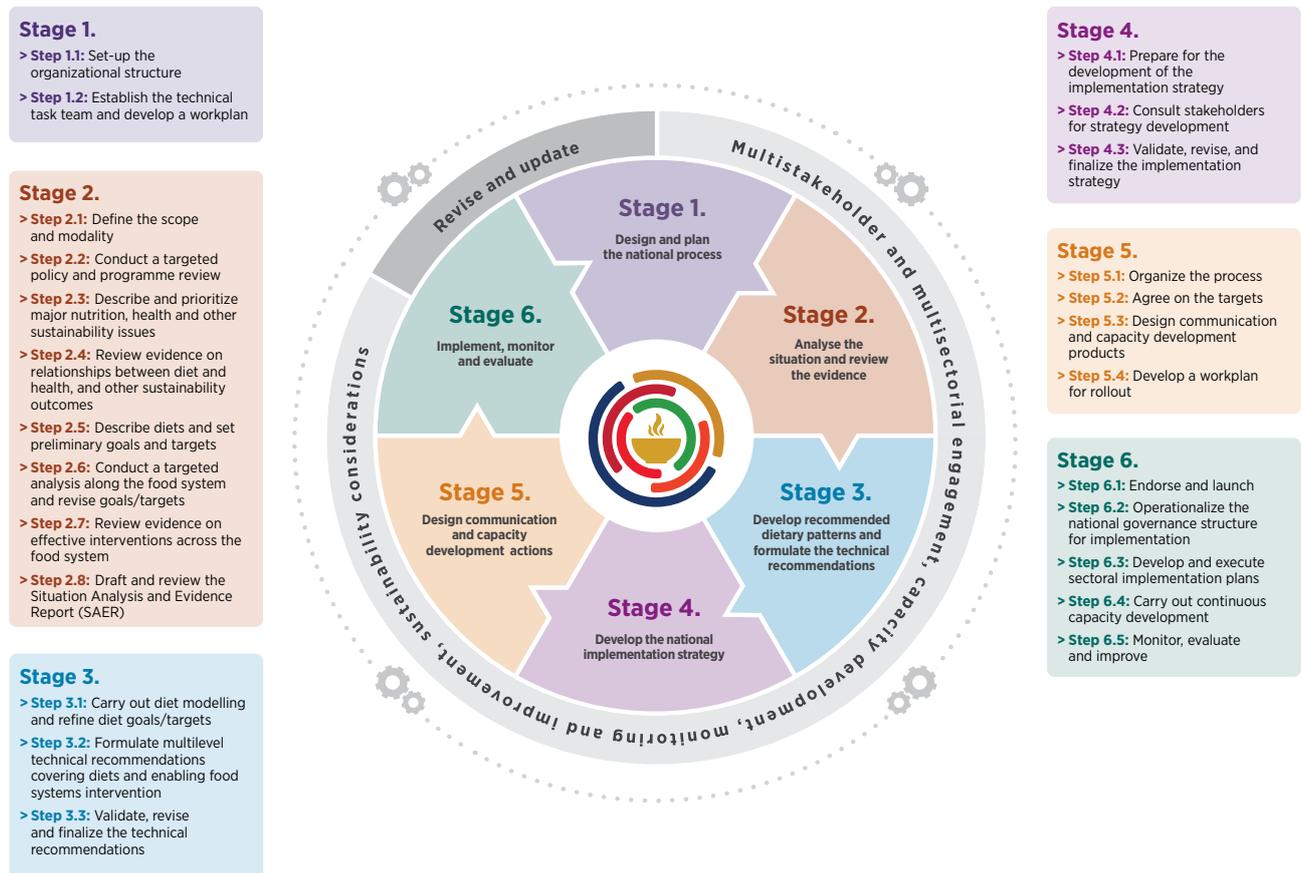
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

² HLPE. 2017. Nutrition and food systems. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/i7846e/i7846e.pdf>

A closer look at the new methodology

The FSBDGs methodology is an iterative process of six stages with crosscutting processes to be considered when planning the development or revision, implementation and evaluation of national FSBDGs.

Figure 2. The food systems-based dietary guidelines methodology



Even though the process is presented as stages/stepwise for ease of the manual, there are many instances where iteration is crucial for the quality and feasibility of the outcomes

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Where to learn more about the new methodology

The new FSBDGs methodology for country actors will be published in a manual comprising eight sequential modules to be released during 2024, and will be accompanied by a series of webinars to facilitate the uptake of the FSBDGs methodology.

For more information, contact us at:
 Email: dietary-guidelines@fao.org



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO licence