INTRODUCTION

The current food security and nutrition situation in Europe and Central Asia (ECA) is marked by the multiple burdens of malnutrition – defined as the coexistence of more than one form of malnutrition, such as undernutrition, overweight or obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies. The latest Regional State of Food Security and Nutrition (SOFI) Report\(^1\) showed that the Caucasus, Central Asia and West Balkans sub-regions have fast growth in obesity among adults between 2000 and 2016 (7.2, 6.7 and 6.2 percentage points respectively), increasing the risk of diet-related chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer which are today responsible for over 80 percent of deaths. While obesity has become a serious concern, micronutrient deficiencies persist in many countries in the ECA region, particularly in lower middle income countries. The prevalence of anemia among women was higher in 2019 than in 2012 in almost all countries in ECA region. The hidden costs of malnutrition to households, governments, businesses and society are large and growing.

These problems are led by a combination of factors ranging from poor consumer choices, limited access to diverse and nutritious food and over-consumption of specific food groups. Reduced household purchasing power due to the cost-of-living crisis, loss of employment, cuts in wages and remittances caused by COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have direct effects on consumer choice and dietary quality, particularly among low income groups. Those who struggle to access nutritious foods tend to select cheaper, lower quality and less nutritious options.

Issues of diet quality and nutrition, however, have largely been considered as a health sector problem, particularly in countries in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Western Balkans. The role and potential of agriculture and food sectors in addressing issues of nutrition have been underestimated. National Food System-Based Dietary Guidelines (FSBDGs) can form a basis for public food and nutrition, health and agricultural policies and nutrition education programmes to foster healthy eating habits. Aiming at supporting the countries to address the key causes of malnutrition in all its forms from a food systems perspective, FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (REU) has developed a cross-country TCP project “Enhancing analytical evidence on diet and nutrition challenges from food systems perspectives in response to COVID-19”. Since 2021, the project is providing technical support in developing National Food System-Based Dietary Guidelines (FSBDGs) which include policy recommendations for public health and nutrition, agricultural and nutrition education programmes.

ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN

In 2021, the project organized a cross-country technical webinar on FSBDGs to ensure a common understanding among the national stakeholders on what FSBDGs are, why we need them and how they are developed and implemented. The webinar was attended by technical focal points of governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, civil society, development agencies and academia in the

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\(^1\) https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc4196en
ECA region. The webinar discussed the key challenges for developing FSBDGs and possible support needed from FAO. The webinar was co-organized with UNICEF which shared their perspectives on the importance of FSBDGs. The experience of Türkiye in developing, updating and implementing their national food based dietary guideline was also shared.

In 2022 and 2023, the project has provided tailored guidance, including the organization of three national level workshops in Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro and Serbia, and the formation of multi-sectoral technical working groups to support data and evidence collection. The workshops were attended by multi-sectoral stakeholders including ministries of agriculture, health, education and science, civil societies and UN agencies and provided them with opportunities to learn the processes and data requirements for the evidence review for FSBDG development (following the FAO methodological guidance). A roadmap map was developed in each country and technical working groups were formulated. The food system assessments are currently on-going in all target countries, with close follow up from the FAO technical team.

Work ahead

FAO programme countries in the ECA region regularly highlight and request technical support from FAO on FSBDGs development. FAO will continue providing technical assistance to member countries on the development of FSBDGs by national governments through the ongoing regional TCP project. Such technical assistance will include undertaking food system analyses to identify the key causes of malnutrition in all its forms from a food systems perspective; advocating the roles of agriculture and food-related sectors in addressing issues of nutrition; strengthening multisectoral and multistakeholder coordination and actions; identifying capacity and data gaps in developing FSBDGs; and supporting mobilization of resources to address the identified gaps.

As the development of FSBDGs is increasingly recognized as a priority by governments, academia, civil societies and regional partnership initiatives, FAO will explore further opportunities for resource mobilization. This will enable more countries to benefit from technical support to develop national FSBDGs. FAO will expand collaboration with national and regional stakeholders for efficient provision of technical support. Potential partners include universities and research institution which conducted national level studies on food composition and consumption, regional knowledge exchange platform such as Central Asia and Caucasus Regional Nutrition Capacity Development and Partnership Platform (RNPP) and other UN specialized agencies.