



ZERO HUNGER

Tackling Obesity and Diet-related Chronic Diseases

Transforming food systems for health and wellbeing

©FAO/Dan White

The issue

While problems of hunger, food insecurity and undernourishment persist, a new and equally challenging set of nutrition problems has emerged more recently: overweight, obesity and diet-related chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer. The costs to households, governments, businesses and society are large and growing. The origin of these problems goes far beyond poor consumer choice. A combination of factors is at play, including over-consumption, limited access to quality food and the contamination of foods with chemical contaminants, toxins and antimicrobials. Nutritional intake in the first 1 000 days of a child's life is also a risk factor. Global challenges, such as rapid urbanization, have exacerbated nutritional issues, with people increasingly consuming packaged and fast foods and living a more sedentary life. Research over the past two decades shows poor diets also have a major impact on the human microbiome, the combined genetic material of all microorganisms in and on our bodies. The human gut microbiome is central to energy harvesting and storage, as well as a variety of metabolic functions, such as fermenting and absorbing undigested carbohydrates. The microbiome is also an instrumental part of the human immune system. Diet-induced changes in the gut microbiome play a major role in the onset of various chronic diseases.

The action

The programme aims to generate evidence of how agriculture and food systems contribute to obesity and chronic diseases and identify policy entry points for tackling the problem. An holistic approach is required. Building on a series of regional symposia on sustainable food systems for healthy diets held in 2017, co-organized with the World Health Organization (WHO), FAO is scaling up its response in tandem with other UN bodies and key actors. Governments and development partners will be supported by comprehensive situational and food-systems analyses, food-systems policy analysis, design and evaluation, multi-stakeholder dialogue, policy action research and knowledge exchanges. This support will form the basis of capacity development and priority action plans to be conducted by governments, the private sector, civil-society groups, consumers, academia and other stakeholders. Key implementing units will be identified within government agencies and across a range of non-state actors. They will be responsible for designing and implementing targeted actions and boosting investment in agriculture and the food system in order to prevent obesity and diet-related chronic diseases.

The issue in numbers



670 million adults and over 124 million children worldwide are obese



88% of deaths in high-income countries and 37% in low-income countries are due to diet-related diseases



50% of overweight children under five live in Asia and 25% live in Africa

Programme targets



30 countries launch action plans on sustainable agriculture and food systems to combat obesity



15 parliaments adopt legislation to reduce obesity and diet-related chronic diseases



30 national FSN coordination platforms bolstered to engage on obesity issues

The budget



USD 50 million



8 years  **30 countries**

Expected results

- Generate strong evidence and create understanding among decision-makers of how agriculture and food systems contribute to problems of obesity and diet-related chronic diseases and how policy changes can help to stop the problem from escalating and eventually reverse current trends;
- Improved public-sector capacity to design and implement a comprehensive set of national food-system policies, regulations and actions in support of healthy diets;
- Increased public-sector resource allocation in support of food systems and nutrition research, innovation and action to prevent obesity and diet-related chronic diseases;
- Enhanced institutional arrangements and collaboration among governments, the private sector, civil society, consumers and academia (for example, through food policy councils) to make agriculture and food systems work for nutrition and health.

Geographic focus

The programme pays particular attention to Latin America and the Caribbean, Small Island Developing States, South Asia, South-East Asia, the Near East and North Africa, Europe and Central Asia, building on FAO's work to identify the main drivers and primary policies and policy instruments influencing obesity and chronic diet-related diseases. Regional analysis will inform the identification of priority countries, and key windows of opportunity will be identified through FAO's Policy Investment Facility (PIF), together with governments, funding partners, local partners and FAO Representations.

In partnership with

FAO will build on its existing partnership with WHO, which has vast experience in this domain, as well as other actors, such as the International Food Policy Research Institute, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the International Network for Food and Obesity/Non-Communicable Diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS), the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition (GLOPAN), the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, and the UK Food Foundation.



SDG contribution



Tackling obesity in Small Island Developing States

Pacific Islands, such as Fiji, face a “triple burden of malnutrition”: malnourishment, micronutrient deficiencies and diet-related chronic diseases associated with obesity. Trade liberalization, along with high rates of urban-rural migration and low investment in the production of traditional staple foods, has reduced the relative cost of imported substitute foods. FAO, together with the Food and Nutrition Security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation (FIRST) programme, has undertaken a feasibility analysis to identify which households and areas are most at risk of food and nutritional insecurity, the major factors behind the nutritional issues and policy options to address them. The National Food Policy Forum is examining this information to gauge which measures would have the most impact: a “health tax”, food vouchers for low-income households, or a 20 percent price cut in certain healthy foods.



Why invest?

Chronic diet-related diseases are a leading cause of death in many countries and forecasts to cost developing countries more than USD 21 trillion over the next 20 years. Currently, less than 1 percent of overseas development assistance is channelled to under-nutrition and less than 0.01 percent to addressing obesity. Yet, figures show that each USD 1 spent on good nutrition shows a USD 16 dollar return. Overall, healthcare bills for diet-related illnesses are estimated to reach USD 47 trillion by 2030. FAO's promotion of healthy diets via sustainable agriculture and food systems will not bring healthcare savings, but safeguard human and economic potential. Investing in this programme will help generate critical evidence to inform national policy and practices, ensuring responsible food-system management and healthy diets for all.

CONTACT:

Director, FAO Business
Development and Resource
Mobilization Division (PSR)
PSR-Director@fao.org

FAO Strategic Programme
Leader, Food Security and
Nutrition (SP1)
SPL1@fao.org