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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Thirty-fourth Session

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Report on the Outcome of the Asia and the Pacific Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition

Executive Summary

The Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (RAP) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI) of the World Bank, organized the “Asia and the Pacific Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets and Improved Nutrition”. The symposium was organized as a regional follow-up to the FAO/WHO International Symposium on the same theme, which took place in December 2016 at FAO headquarters, Rome. The objective of the meeting was to share experiences and evidence of policies and interventions in agriculture and food systems with a potential to contribute to positive nutritional outcomes.

The symposium called upon all stakeholders to create synergies between global, regional and national actions outlined in relevant policy frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Framework for Action of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) and the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, as well as related national multisector action plans and non-communicable diseases work plans. It also called upon UN agencies to jointly implement concrete actions to support the countries in achieving their food security and nutrition agenda.

The outcomes of the deliberations are summarized in this information note.

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Guidance sought from the Regional Conference

The conference is invited to take note of the main outcomes of the symposium and advise FAO-RAP on the key steps to take in the countries of the region. The five major outcomes are as follows:

- acknowledgement that, despite its fast economic growth, the region is heavily affected by the multiple burdens of malnutrition – undernutrition; obesity and overweight; and hidden hunger or micronutrient deficiency;
- recognition that food systems and food environments in the Asia-Pacific region are changing rapidly in the face of globalization, economic growth and trade, urbanization, migration and climate change, with effects on incomes, lifestyles, and dietary diversity, which in turn determine the types of food that are accessed by the average consumer;
- knowledge that there is an expanding tool box of options that can be used to develop a portfolio of nutrition-relevant policies and interventions in specific contexts, considering also the needs of the more vulnerable population groups;
- understanding that nutrition for all cannot be achieved by governments alone and that partnerships with private sector, academia and civil society are vital for success; and
- recognition of the need to develop better metrics for assessing the quality of food systems and food environments as they influence food and nutrition security.

I. Background and organization of the event

1. The Asia-Pacific region is experiencing the triple burden of malnutrition. Recent FAO estimates show that there are still 490 million hungry and undernourished children in the region. In addition, 61.2 percent of stunted children and more than half of the children suffering from wasting in the world live in South Asia. Moreover, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading causes of death and disability in the region. NCDs are responsible for 80 percent of all deaths in a region that is home to more than one quarter of the world's population. NCD-related deaths are projected to increase by 15 percent (to 44 million) between 2010 and 2020, with the highest numbers predicted in the Western Pacific (12.3 million) and South-East Asia (10.4 million) regions. Health and nutrition crises will continue to grow unless food systems are radically transformed and healthy diets promoted.

2. With a view to fast tracking the operationalization of the ICN2 Framework for Action and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition, FAO organized the regional symposium on the theme of sustainable food systems for healthy diets and improved nutrition in partnership with WHO, WFP, UNICEF and the World Bank. Given the dynamic Asia-Pacific context, the symposium focused on the transformational changes taking place in food systems and environments in the region. Specifically, the symposium served as a platform for exchanging information on best practices and research at the policy and programmatic levels among different stakeholders and creating formal and informal regional as well as in-country networks to address the key challenges faced by countries of the region.

3. The agenda comprised five interactive plenary sessions, four parallel sessions, and a student session. The sessions highlighted: supply-side policies and measures for increasing access to healthy diets; demand side-policies and measures for increasing access to healthy diets and for empowering consumers to choose such diets; and measures to strengthen accountability, resilience and equity within the food system. Three commissioned background papers on food systems, dietary diversity and nutrition labelling, were shared with the participants for review and to serve as a reference for the presentations and discussions. Approximately 300 delegates from 40 countries attended. They included parliamentarians, policy-makers, programme managers, academicians, researchers and graduate students from leading academic institutions, representatives from UN agencies and other development partners, civil society organizations and the private sector.

4. The FAO-RAP Assistant Director-General/Regional Representative, Kundhavi Kadiresan, and the high-level dignitaries, notably Her Royal Highness, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand and FAO Special Goodwill Ambassador for Zero Hunger, Vice President of the Philippines Maria Leonor Gerona Robredo and Deputy Prime Minister of Cambodia Yim Chhay Ly, emphasized the importance of addressing the triple burden of malnutrition plaguing the region. They advocated for adopting a food systems lens for a more holistic and integrated approach for tackling all forms of malnutrition.
5. The keynote session emphasized rapid changes in the region which are affecting livelihoods and in turn shifting diets. Factors such as urbanization, migration, climate change and economic growth are influencing agriculture and the food environment. Constraints include resource scarcity, environmental degradation, unsustainable food production and consumption patterns, food loss and waste, food safety concerns and inequitable distribution. The region is characterized by a distinct shift towards the consumption of more meat and dairy products and a higher salt, sugar and fat content in food, both in rural and urban areas. Ensuring the availability of safe and healthy diets to consumers requires policy and investment actions aimed at well characterized entry points for nutrition in agriculture and food chains. This could include supply-side measures such as supporting sustainable production of protein sources such as fish production or pulses. It could also include promoting education and awareness to encourage demand for healthier diets from consumers, and developing partnerships with private industry for healthy food formulations. The presentation and release of the Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition further informed the delegates of the persistent slowdown in the progress against hunger and inequities in nutritional outcomes as measured by the rates of undernourishment, stunting, wasting, and overweight and obesity.
6. A lively student session showcased short talks by six graduate students from Bangladesh, Nepal, New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand and their research. The topics consisted of consumption of edible insects, potential of fruits in controlling obesity, antibacterial and therapeutic effects of spices, better agricultural management practices and value-chain-anchored technologies, food systems and diets notably in Kiribas, and infant and young child feeding.
7. The symposium examined the potential for action around various facets of food systems (such as supply, demand, agriculture production, the food environment, the enabling ecosystem) and highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary partnerships. The session on supply-side measures underscored the role of policies and regulations, consumer education and income in influencing nutrition outcomes. Evidence from several countries with a high burden of malnutrition showed that balanced diets were more expensive than diets based on staple foods. The outcomes of a study on taxation on fatty foods in Tonga were also presented and showed that the well intentioned regulations were not sufficiently accompanied by an increased availability of nutritious substitute foods. There were also mixed results from evaluations of contextual consumer awareness programmes which could be traced to insufficient convergence of messages and approaches. The coalescing of approaches was better demonstrated in a presentation from Indonesia on the National Food and Nutrition Action Plan (2015-2019). It concentrates a key part of its efforts on the first 1 000 days of life and improvement of indicators including child stunting and exclusive breastfeeding with the recognition that multiple ministries such as Health, Social Protection, Water and Sanitation will need to collaborate to this end.
8. Several Asian countries such as Brunei Darussalam, India, Japan and Nepal shared strategies that they have adopted to align and nudge consumer demand toward healthier food choices. They covered topics ranging from the psychology of consumers when choosing food to the positive effects of interventions such as school gardens and nutrition education on children's food choices. There was a consensus that awareness-raising needed to be culture- and context-specific to convince consumers, and that additional measures were necessary, such as incorporating nutrition messaging through school and university curricula. Moreover, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provided a framework to broadcast these messages to policy-makers and institutions for implementation globally.

9. Agricultural biodiversity and technological innovations and food safety were also discussed which highlighted the importance of mainstreaming neglected and underutilized indigenous species to improve nutrition in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Pacific and the role of mixed farming, including fisheries. A vibrant panel discussion on food fortification brought to the fore the pros and cons of fortification technologies in different country situations, with Pakistan as a reference point. The food safety session delved into the health-promoting role of food. The nexus between nutrition and food safety and the utility of the One Health approach were discussed with examples from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Viet Nam. A presentation on China's upgraded food safety regulations demonstrated the changes that were made in response to serious challenges in domestic and international markets.

10. The high-level Committee on World Food Security shared its multisectoral platform and pledged support to regional and country efforts to improve nutrition. Two case studies from the Philippines and Thailand were highlighted as examples of broad-based cooperative approaches to improving nutrition that took into account wider socio-economic factors and used social safety nets. Lastly, a panel discussion by representatives from development organizations, civil society organizations, regulators and the food industry discussed the challenges and opportunities of multisectoral and multistakeholder engagements and explored options that could result in multiple wins for food security and nutrition.

II. Conclusions

11. The symposium concluded on a high note, with country and regional network representatives committing to specific nutrition actions:

- Afghanistan committed to active national coordination to boost the Afghanistan Food and Nutrition Security Agenda;
- China declared its strong intent to continue its successful Big Food and Big Nutrition programme;
- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) indicated its interest to continue to promote sustainable community nutrition initiatives;
- on behalf of the Pacific subregion, Samoa expressed the intention to advocate for the inclusion of nutrition in the ministerial meetings of the Pacific islands;
- Thailand committed to the promotion of nutrition-sensitive agriculture and value chains through multi-sectoral actions.

12. UN agencies, specifically FAO, UNICEF, WHO and WFP committed to the implementation of concrete joint actions, notably the publication of the Asia-Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition (2018). In addition, unified and coherent actions will be undertaken in selected countries where joint efforts could significantly improve nutritional status.

The symposium showcased the dynamism and new ideas from practitioners and policy-makers in the region and concrete examples of nutrition-sensitive and specific actions. The symposium called upon member countries to increase awareness of changing food environments and food systems and diets so that nutrition can be appropriately addressed at the country level. This will involve strengthening the technical knowledge and skills of field staff and community workers on nutrition and advocacy for designing and implementing nutrition programmes. Importantly, the symposium illustrated the ability of FAO to convene a forum of diverse stakeholders together with sister UN agencies on this complex, multisectoral issue and obtain agreement on immediate actions and long-term strengthening of partnerships and collaboration.