

## **ACHIEVING FOOD SECURITY AND HEALTHY DIETS FOR ALL BY TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS**

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### **Introduction**

The Rome Declaration on World Food Security in 1996 defined food security as a condition in which “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Policies that aim to increase food availability and energy intake while paying little attention to improving food quality have long been a key element of efforts to achieve food security. But this paradigm is changing. The prevailing strategy to achieve food security for all must address other multifaceted challenges, including environmental sustainability and the multiple burdens of malnutrition. Food policies have perhaps overemphasized calories and protein quantity, neglecting the wider range of dietary quality required for people’s health. Moreover, any approach to achieving food security must also consider the sustainability of food systems. This article highlights the interrelated challenges of food security, diet and nutrition and solutions to address them, particularly through the transformation of agrifood systems. The focus will be on the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

### **Transforming agrifood systems for food security and healthy diet for all**

The most recent editions of The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World have presented evidence that the decades-long decline of people throughout the world suffering from food insecurity, as measured using the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU), has ended. The PoU increased from 8.4 percent in 2019 to around 9.9 percent in 2020, meaning that around 768 million people worldwide lacked access to sufficient dietary energy in 2020 – as many as 161 million more people than in 2019. Malnutrition in all its forms also remains a challenge. It is estimated that 22 percent (149.2 million) of children younger than 5 were stunted, i.e. too short for their age, and 5.7 percent (38.9 million) were overweight. Adult obesity is increasing sharply worldwide. Global progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 targets on food security and nutrition is insufficient or is even stalled or worsening.

Meeting these targets will be possible only if people have enough food to eat and if what they are eating is nutritious. One of the biggest challenges in achieving this is the cost and affordability of healthy diets. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021 estimates that the cost of a healthy diet is much higher than the international poverty line of USD 1.90 per day in purchasing power parity terms. This puts healthy diets beyond the reach of those living in poverty or just above the poverty line. Shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate this because they negatively affect diet quality and make healthy diets less accessible. Unhealthy food production and consumption patterns also increase the cost of dealing with health problems as well as the adverse effects of climate variability, among such other environmental challenges as biodiversity loss, soil degradation, pollution and water use.

Ensuring the affordability of healthy diets requires the significant transformation of existing agrifood systems. Given the diversity and complexity of these agrifood systems, countries will need to implement context-specific policies. This starts with a rebalancing of agricultural policies and incentives towards more nutrition-sensitive investment in food and agricultural production, especially fruits and vegetables and protein-rich plant-based and animal-sourced foods. Policies to improve the efficiency of food supply chains while avoiding disincentives to the local production of nutritious foods are essential to making healthy diets more affordable. Policies to enhance employment, generate household income and implement social protection programmes are also required.

The FAO Strategic Framework for 2022–2031, which seeks to support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through the transformation of agrifood systems for better production, better nutrition, better environment and better life, was adopted in 2021. Together with Turkey, an important strategic partner, FAO will continue working on implementing the Framework and promoting the “four betters.”

### **Food security and healthy diets and food systems in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

In the past two decades, countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia have made significant progress in food security. The number of undernourished in the subregion declined from 9.5 million in 2000 to 2.6 million in 2019, a much faster rate of reduction than the world average. However, since 2014 this rate has slowed and even reversed in some countries, posing a threat to the attainment of the 2030 target of eliminating hunger. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made this more challenging, as the number of undernourished increased to 3.2 million in 2020.

The three main issues of concern in the Caucasus and Central Asia are undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and obesity. The prevalence of undernutrition, as measured by the percentage of stunted children (10 percent in Central Asia and 13.1 percent in Caucasus), is well above the average of the 53 countries in the FAO Europe and Central Asia region. Similarly, the

prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies, as measured by the prevalence of anaemia among women of reproductive age, is consistently above the regional average. The latest estimate, from 2016, showed that the prevalence of adult obesity in the Caucasus and Central Asia has been steadily rising, and in 2016 it was much higher than the world average of 11.8 percent. No country is on track to meet the global nutrition target of halting the rise in obesity by 2025.

Unhealthy diets are a leading cause of malnutrition in all its forms. No country in the Caucasus and Central Asia meets the recommended level for daily consumption of fruits (200 g per day), with the countries in Central Asia not even reaching 100 g per day. Meanwhile, the aggregate average per capita availability of red meat and milk are above the standards of optimal intake.

Unhealthy diets are also one of the leading causes of environmental degradation. In most of the countries in the subregion in which the consumption of animal-sourced foods is high and rapidly increasing, a rebalancing of diets and a transition to more plant-based foods may be needed to reduce the negative environmental impacts of chemical use, land use, freshwater extraction and biogeochemical flows. In addition, the production of animal-sourced foods causes higher greenhouse gas emissions, thus worsening climate change.

The existing gaps in food diversity among the countries of the subregion provide an opportunity to drive down the costs of healthy diets in the long run. Capacity-enabling hard infrastructure (such as adequate food storage, transportation infrastructure and food preservation capacity) and soft infrastructure (such as marketing and financial facilities) are necessary for the efficient functioning of food supply chains that can drive down the costs of healthy foods. Other non-monetary factors, including nutrition education, can change consumer preferences and demand.

## **Conclusion**

SDG 2 emphasizes not only the need to ensure access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food for all people at all times, but also the need to eradicate all forms of malnutrition. There is now enough published evidence to conclude that unhealthy diets pose major challenges for food insecurity and malnutrition, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia subregion, which is characterized by the coexistence of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and obesity. Hence, national policies require a focus on the promotion of healthy diets and sustainable food systems.

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