

Twelfth meeting of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of NCDs on COVID-19 and the NCD-related SDGs

Date of meeting: 26 June 2020

Participants: Over 40 participants joined, representing 14 Member agencies of the Task Force.

Summary:

1. The theme for this meeting was: Obesity/overweight and other aspects of malnutrition and their linkages with COVID-19. The session was moderated by UNSCN, as coordinator of the Thematic Working Group on Nutrition. A presentation (attached) was given by WFP. A second verbal presentation was shared by WHO (PPT attached; not share during meeting due to technical glitch). Interventions were made by FAO and UNICEF.
2. Each of the elements of food security – i.e. availability, access, utilization and stability – is being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance: (i) farms closing due to lockdown measures result in reduced food production; (ii) movement restrictions impair accessibility of fresh food, and school closures have an impact on children partially or fully depending on school meals; (iii) teleworking, isolation, lack of physical activity and related mental health issues may lead to changing dietary patterns and habits; and (iv) loss of income or high fruit and vegetables prices shift people's behaviors into less desirable options, that may be high in fat, salt and sugar.
3. As of 22 June 2020, more than 8 million people were infected with COVID-19. Globally, 1 in 3 people are overweight or obese. There is emerging evidence that obesity related conditions (e.g. diabetes, hypertension, etc.) worsen the effect of COVID-19 and increase the severity of symptoms. Obesity is the single biggest determinant of hospitalization and critical illness for COVID-19 infected people, after age and sex.
4. WFP continues to support vulnerable groups to access nutritious food through government social protection and market systems, in addition to the use of WFP's supply chain and logistics to ensure distribution of nutritious food. The organization also works with the private sector both with formal and informal retailers throughout business platforms. WFP analyses availability, affordability and consumption of foods to tailor programmes to ensure a healthy diet for all, and influences household purchasing and consumption behaviors through social behavior change communication techniques. Finally, WFP is also involved in ensuring that children depending on school meals are not affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, through guidance documents, promotion of school health and nutrition programmes, and adapting programmes to alternative arrangements, including the delivery of take-home food rations.
5. A joint UNICEF-WFP initiative is in place to ensure a comprehensive package of health and nutrition programmes for when children return to school, which includes vitamin supplementation, education, vaccines, and de-worming.
6. FAO is assessing how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the food and agriculture sector. FAO has published multiple policy briefs analyzing financial impacts of the pandemic and impacts on poverty and nutrition. Jointly with the World Obesity Federation, FAO is producing a brief on the impacts of COVID-19 on food systems (with links to obesity).

7. UNICEF's work is focused on ensuring accessibility of essential key nutrition services. The challenge is ensuring that policy makers' attention is on the prevention of children overweight and obesity, as a long-term strategy to decrease vulnerability to COVID-19 and other related health conditions, such as diet-related NCDs. UNICEF's work around breastfeeding also contributes to overweight and obesity prevention.
8. WHO conducted a literature review on the linkages between obesity and COVID-19, confirming the higher risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes for people who are obese. However, with regard to the alleged higher susceptibility to the infection, it is not clear whether obesity plays an independent role, or if the correlation is influenced by other factors. For instance, in the US 60-70% of the COVID-19 patients who were obese, were also African Americans, which has been recognized as an independent social determinant of worse COVID-19 outcomes within the US population. WHO is also working on a number of policy briefs and guidance notes, covering food security and the protection of healthy food environments, as well as on the taxation of sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) as a way to enhance domestic resource mobilization during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, WHO is also assisting countries to develop/maintain school food environment policies.
9. Participants were informed about an advocacy piece that the Thematic Working Group Nutrition is developing.

Actions on nutrition and COVID-19:

1. Task Force members to continue raising the issue of nutrition in the time of COVID-19 and to propose new angles of the topic to be discussed in future meetings.
2. Support countries to enact evidence-informed policies on breastfeeding and complementary feeding in the context of COVID-19.
3. Strengthen the capacity of health workers in providing skilled counselling and support for breastfed and non-breastfed infants, as well as on age-appropriate, diversified and safe diets for young children, by using the IYCF counseling tools adapted to the context of COVID-19, either safely face to face, by telephone or through e-learning. Ensure that mothers who are too ill to breastfeed are supported to safely feed their infants and re-initiate breastfeeding after recovery.

Other actions:

1. Agencies to continue to share new publications/other outputs as they emerge with Task Force Secretariat (to be linked on the website).
2. Task Force members to promote the 2020 Task Force awards and disseminate the [call for proposals](#) on their webpages and social media. **Note that the call is extended until 3 July.**

Next meeting:

Friday 3 July 2020 at 4 pm CET. Theme: working with civil society and academia in the time of COVID-19. The session will be led by IDLO.

3 July 2020