

Responding to the Challenge of Non-communicable Diseases

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

1. The food and agriculture sector is crucial for an effective response to NCDs

The food and agriculture sector plays a major role in nourishing people by increasing the availability of and access to diverse, safe and nutritious food, which meets dietary recommendations and principles relating to environmental sustainability.¹

Most of today's food systems need to be re-aligned from the production of high-yielding staple food crops such as cereals to sustainable provision of non-staple foods such as fruits and vegetables that will enhance dietary diversity. Improved food systems need to address all forms of malnutrition, such as overweight and obesity as well as wasting, stunting and micronutrient deficiencies. In today's food systems, the nutritious foods that make up a healthy diet are not always available or affordable for many people.² Various UN instruments have re-affirmed several fundamental nutrition-related rights, namely the right to have access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food, as well as the right to be free from hunger.³

The rise in obesity and NCDs is associated with a shift towards energy-dense diets, which are characterized by highly processed foods

United Nations high-level meetings have highlighted the need for UN agencies, including FAO, to scale up their work on NCDs as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

NCDs contribute to ill health, poverty and inequities and slow the development of countries. Every year 15 million people die before age 70 from NCDs, with 86% of these premature deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

Major progress on NCDs is possible. Premature deaths from NCDs are largely caused by modifiable behavioural risk factors, such as unhealthy diet, tobacco use, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol. Environmental risks (e.g. air pollution) and constrained access to basic services also contribute significantly to NCDs.

Addressing NCDs requires coordinated action from all UN agencies within a broader whole-of-society response.

high in refined starches, sugar, fats, and/or salt, accompanied by an insufficient intake of fresh fruits and vegetables, wholegrains, pulses, nuts and seeds.⁴ This shift is also coupled with sedentary lifestyles and low levels of physical activity. Most of the world's population now lives in countries where overweight and obesity kill more people than underweight.⁵

The way we produce, process, store and bring our food to markets is changing rapidly. Food production and supply chains have intensified,

1 FAO. 2018. Strengthening sector policies for better food security and nutrition results: food systems for healthy diets. Available at: www.fao.org/3/CA2797EN/ca2797en.pdf.

2 FAO. 2013. The State of Food and Agriculture 2013: food systems for better nutrition. Available at: www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3300e/i3300e.pdf.

3 FAO & WHO. 2014. Second International Conference on Nutrition, Rome, 19-21 November 2014. Conference Outcome Document: Rome Declaration on Nutrition. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-ml542e.pdf>.

4 FAO. 2017. The State of Food and Agriculture 2017: leveraging food systems for inclusive rural transformation. Available at: www.fao.org/3/a-17658e.pdf.

5 WHO. 2019. Obesity and overweight [website]. Available at: <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>.

becoming industrialized and globalized, with people eating more purchased, processed and packaged food.

Large-scale production has led to the use of a narrow range of high-yielding food crop and animal varieties, which has contributed to a reduction in agro-biodiversity. In addition, harmful chemicals used in food production are known to cause cancer.

Widespread marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt, particularly those targeted at children, is a source of concern. This development is related to the steady growth and increasing influence of the private sector, including large-scale international food and agri-businesses and retailers.

2. FAO has a role to play in supporting countries in the prevention and control of NCDs

FAO is uniquely positioned to contribute to global efforts to reduce the prevalence of overweight, obesity and NCDs through the support it provides to countries in reforming their food systems and its work with line ministries responsible for agriculture, trade, environment and rural development, as well as with other UN agencies and development partners. Key areas for FAO engagement include:

Situation analyses and awareness raising on how food systems and dietary changes drive overweight, obesity and NCDs.

Engaging food systems stakeholders in policy analysis and dialogue, and encouraging them to implement public policy and regulations in order to create an appropriate set of incentives and disincentives to drive change in food systems.

Political economy analysis to identify how different sectors impact on food systems and changes required to prevent and control NCDs.

For the first time FAO's Medium-Term Plan 2018–2021 and Programme of Work and Budget 2018–2019 explicitly mention the issues of overweight, obesity and NCDs, and refer to the related targets under Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2 and 3.⁶

FAO has reviewed the recommended cost-effective interventions endorsed by the World Health Assembly (WHA) to identify those linked to FAO's work at global, regional and country levels. Examples are included in the table.

BEST BUYS

In 2017, the World Health Assembly endorsed a set of "best buys" and other recommended interventions to address NCDs.⁷ Best buy interventions address four NCD risk factors (tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity) and four disease areas (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory disease). There are 88 recommended interventions, including overarching/enabling policy actions.



6 FAO. 2017. The Director-General's Medium-term Plan 2018-21 and Programme of Work and Budget 2018-19. Available at: www.fao.org/3/a-ms278e.pdf.

7 WHO. 2017. 'Best buys' and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. Available at: <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/259232/WHO-NMH-NVI-17.9-eng.pdf>.

Evidence-based interventions	FAO actions
Implement mass media campaign on healthy diets, including social marketing to reduce the intake of total fat, saturated fats, sugars and salt, and promote the intake of fruits.	FAO supports countries to form action networks to promote healthy diets, nutrition labelling and food reformulation as part of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition.
Limiting portion and package size to reduce energy intake and the risk of overweight/obesity.	FAO supports countries to develop food-based dietary guidelines addressing overweight, obesity and undernutrition. ⁸
Implement nutrition education and counselling in different settings (e.g. preschools, schools, workplaces, hospitals) to increase the intake of fruits and vegetables.	FAO implements school-based food and nutrition education programmes, and supports governments to develop policies and programmes in schools to encourage healthy diets.
Raise public and political awareness, understanding and practice about prevention and control of NCDs.	FAO supports countries to raise awareness on NCDs and their risk factors, including obesity and steps that can be taken to prevent NCDs.
Integrate NCDs into the social and development agenda and poverty alleviation strategies.	<p>FAO ensures that nutrition-sensitive social protection interventions also tackle the problem of diet-related NCDs.</p> <p>FAO integrates nutrition objectives into food and agriculture policy, programme design and implementation to enhance nutrition-sensitive agriculture, ensure food security and enable healthy diets for the prevention of overweight, obesity and NCDs.</p> <p>FAO supports countries in the development of easy-to-understand labels contributing to sustainable food systems.</p>

3. Partnerships are critical for FAO in mobilizing an effective response to NCDs

UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025). In 2016, the UN General Assembly mandated FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO) to lead implementation of the Nutrition Decade with the aim to achieve the global nutrition and diet-related NCD targets by 2025⁹ as well as the nutrition- and NCD-related targets in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (General Assembly resolution 70/1). It also called on FAO and WHO to accelerate the implementation of commitments made at the 2014 Second International Conference on Nutrition.¹⁰

Global Individual Food consumption data Tool (GIFT). FAO/WHO GIFT is an online platform providing individual dietary data that enables policy-makers to answer the question “What are people eating?” and to create better informed public policies for healthy diets.¹¹

Kyoto University. This collaboration includes knowledge exchange, the provision of technical expertise, and awareness raising about urban food policy, food waste, and agriculture modelling, and study of the linkages between climate change and sustainable food and agriculture systems.

The Rockefeller Foundation. Established in 2016, this partnership supports food security and seeks to reduce food losses by expanding the capacity of small-scale producers in sub-Saharan Africa.

UN Habitat. This collaboration involves building resilient food systems by improving rural-urban food supply chains, e.g. in Kenya.

⁸ Food-based dietary guidelines (also known as dietary guidelines) establish a basis for public food and nutrition, health and agricultural policies and nutrition education programmes to foster healthy eating habits and lifestyles. They provide advice on foods, food groups and dietary patterns to provide the required nutrients to the general public to promote overall health and prevent NCDs. See: www.fao.org/nutrition/education/food-dietary-guidelines/en/.

⁹ UN. 2019. UN Decade of Action on Nutrition [website]. Available at: www.un.org/nutrition/.

¹⁰ FAO. 2014. The Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) [website]. Available at: www.fao.org/about/meetings/icn2/en/.

¹¹ More information on this tool is available at: www.fao.org/gift-individual-food-consumption.

Consumers International. This partnership aims to enhance Consumer International's (CI) access to FAO's wealth of knowledge and information while allowing FAO to work more closely with the network of CI membership organizations across the world which liaise with and advocate for individual consumers. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, both organizations cooperate to support the development of public policies for improved access to nutritious food and nutritional information.

World Obesity Federation. This partnership, recently formalized in a memorandum of understanding, will increase awareness of the agriculture and food systems-related policy measures that have led to the current overweight and obesity situation and related disease burdens.



4. Mobilizing resources to deliver

FAO has developed a portfolio of programme priorities¹² and invited partners to increase their investment in food and agriculture to improve health and achieve the SDGs. Among the NCD-related priorities are:

- Tackling obesity through sustainable food systems: transforming food systems for health and well-being.
- Food and green environments for healthy cities: improving the accessibility of nutritious food and green spaces for all.

Due diligence is required to ensure that all partnerships advance health and development outcomes. Some private sector activities are beneficial for public health, while others contribute to NCD burdens by working to increase or preserve the availability, accessibility and/or desirability of health-harming products. An example is the fundamental conflict of interest between the tobacco industry and public health. Partnerships with some pharmaceutical companies may pose apparent or real conflicts of interest.

¹² FAO. 2019. Business development portfolio: opportunities to invest in sustainable development, 2019–2020 cycle. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca4265en/ca4265en.pdf>.

The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases was established in 2013 by the Secretary General and placed under the leadership of WHO to coordinate the activities of the UN System to support the realization of the commitments made by Heads of State and Government in the 2011 Political Declaration on NCDs. Joint activities included in the work plan of the Task Force are additive to various, more comprehensive efforts conducted by the UN agencies to prevent and control NCDs. These joint activities offer important opportunities to address cross-cutting issues and to advance capacity and learning in countries.

