

Strengthened Action on Nutrition in the COVID-19 Response

Putting healthy, affordable and sustainable diets at the heart of a human-rights based response to COVID-19

Overview: The following narrative was created by members of the UN Interagency Task Force on NCD's Nutrition Working Group. Members represent UN agencies and partner organisations who work collaboratively to raise awareness and strengthen action towards reducing all forms of malnutrition and diet-related NCDs. This narrative advocates for strengthened action on nutrition to stem the rising food and nutrition crisis that threatens to violate human rights and worsen what is already the leading cause of ill health globally – malnutrition.

“Unless immediate action is taken, it is increasingly clear that there is an impending global food crisis that could have long-term impacts on hundreds of millions of children and adults”.

- UN Secretary General, António Guterres.¹

Despite the unprecedented disruption of essential services and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, malnutrition remains the leading cause of ill health and premature mortality affecting hundreds of millions of people². Malnutrition in all its forms not only is a major hindrance to individual and collective social and economic progress, but also constitutes a violation of human rights, including the right to adequate food,³ to an adequate standard of living and to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.⁴

Sustainable healthy diets are a crucial ingredient for health, equity, sustainability, livelihoods and social and economic development at any time. The global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as emergency measures taken to mitigate its effects on public health and the emerging global recession, has begun to undermine progress in tackling all forms of malnutrition. Already, countries are describing the dual impact of food system disruptions combined with a steep economic downturn as a “historic setback” for nutrition. The UN Secretary General policy brief warns that without large-scale coordinated action the threat to food systems could result in global health and nutrition crisis of a severity unseen for half a century.¹ UN agencies have rapidly mobilized to put the directives of this policy brief into action and to protect peoples’ nutrition during the crisis, but more work is needed.⁵ Food systems transformation, solid rule of law, sound legal and policy frameworks and strong human right-based approaches are needed to build back better and ensure equal access for all to healthy, affordable and sustainable diets which advance progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The impact of COVID-19 on diets and nutrition is likely to hit vulnerable individuals and populations already suffering from malnutrition the hardest, and will expose millions more people to food

¹ UNSG, 2020. [Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-9 on Food Security and Nutrition.](#)

² [Global Nutrition Report](#), 2020

³ ICESCR. Article 11, 1966; CESCR. General Comment no. 12: The Right to Adequate Food (Art. 11 of the Covenant), 2000

⁴ ICESCR. Article 12, 1966; CESCR. General Comment no. 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Art. 12 of the Covenant), 2000

⁵ Standing Together for Nutrition consortium, 2020. Impacts of COVID-19 on childhood malnutrition and nutrition-related mortality. The Lancet

insecurity, undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight/obesity. This impact will be felt across a broad spectrum of countries, both high-income and low income alike.

In many countries, food systems are increasingly disrupted, health systems are overburdened, education systems and workplaces are substantially altered, legal systems are under stretch due to emergency measures, and social protection systems are facing a sharp increase in demand due to rapidly spiraling unemployment. All of which has the potential to negatively impact on nutrition. For example, loss of income coupled with disrupted food supply and possible price hikes reduce the affordability of nutritious foods,⁶ while confinement, physical distancing and quarantine all limit access to healthy diets and restrict physical activity.⁷ As the forecasted global recession progresses some countries are likely to face significant challenges in meeting their obligations to securing access to food in the right quantity, frequency, and diversity to ensure sustainable healthy diets to fulfill the rights to adequate food and to health for all. At the same time, purchase and consumption of processed shelf stable foods high in fat, sugars and/or salt may increase due to convenience, perceived safety, affordability and long shelf life.⁸ Coupled with movement restrictions, this unhealthy dietary trend could result in an energy imbalance and rapid weight gain, compounding the existing obesity epidemic. Overweight and obesity are among the most common comorbidities in hospitalised COVID-19 patients and have been associated with greater severity of symptoms and poorer outcomes⁹.

Yet again, the poorest families, communities and countries will be hardest hit. These vulnerable populations continue to face historic barriers to nutritious foods including limited purchasing power, food systems geared towards an overabundance of low nutrient crops and highly processed foods, lack of legal protection, and lack of inclusion in decision-making processes.^{2,10}

The impact of COVID-19 on nutrition is likely to be felt through four main pathways:

- Worsened access to nutritious foods that contribute to healthy diets
- Disrupted access to essential nutrition services
- Undermining healthy dietary practices and caregiver behaviours
- Exacerbating inequalities in access to nutritious foods and nutrition services

All these pathways, both individually and in conjunction, raise the likelihood of malnutrition and consequent violation of related human rights. For example, children with nutritional deficiencies are more likely to die, while those who survive grow poorly, perform less well at school, and go on to have lower earnings throughout their lifetime. At the same time, unhealthy diets lead to overweight and diet-related non-communicable diseases (such as stroke, heart disease, type-2 diabetes and some forms of cancer) which have become the world's leading cause of mortality. The impact of poor nutrition on the immune system also affects vulnerability to COVID-19.

As we stand today, estimates suggest an additional 140 million people will be thrown into extreme poverty and the number of people facing acute food insecurity in lower middle income countries will double to 265 million by 2021.⁵ Food insecurity and health service disruptions compound existing states of malnutrition. Projections suggest that without urgent action an additional 6.7 million cases of wasting in children younger than 5, and 128,605 additional child deaths will occur in 2020.⁵ Myths, misconceptions and fears are also negatively impacting breastfeeding and young child feeding

⁶International Monetary Fund, 2020. Josef Schmidhuber, FAO - COVID-19: From a Global Health Crisis to a Global Food Crisis?

⁷ UN DESA, 2020. Policy Brief 73: The impact of COVID-19 on sport, physical activity and well-being and its effects on social development

⁸ IFIC, 2020. Impact on Food Purchasing, Eating Behaviors, and Perceptions of Food Security.

⁹ Garg et al., "Hospitalization Rates and Characteristics of Patients Hospitalized with Laboratory-Confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019 — COVID-NET, 14 States, March 1–30, 2020," April 17, 2020; Simonnet et al., "High Prevalence of Obesity in Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) Requiring Invasive Mechanical Ventilation."

¹⁰ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP & WHO, 2020. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World.

practices – threatening the vital first 1000 days as well as influencing food purchasing habits more broadly and peoples trust in nutritious food sources during the outbreak. Disruptions to maternal child health care mean essential opportunities for nutrition interventions are missed- exacerbating both immediate states of malnutrition as well as allowing the intergenerational states of poor nutrition to continue.⁵ School aged children might have less access to adequate food and diet quality with school closures disrupting the school feeding programmes, which are key to guaranteeing schoolchildren’s entitlements to adequate, safe and nutritious food without discrimination, in conditions of equality and equity.

While the COVID-19 pandemic poses a new and unprecedented global challenge, the solutions to prevent the impending threat of malnutrition are not new. Solutions are supported by the Decade of Action on Nutrition 2015-2025 and the Sustainable Development Goals and should be based on effective rule of law, good governance and respect for human rights.¹¹ They strive to end malnutrition in all its forms by 2030 by orientating health, food, legal and social protection systems towards the provision of sustainable healthy diets to all people all-year round throughout the life course, leaving no one behind.

Even before the pandemic, the world was not on track to achieve these goals with undernutrition, food insecurity and overweight/obesity all showing steady increases since 2014 along with the degree of inequalities.¹⁰ The global pandemic has exposed and exacerbated failings within food and health systems and added urgency to the need to advance the nutrition agenda, though also placed its progression at risk as the importance of nutrition risks being lost in the immediacy of health and economic threats. But left unchecked, the looming nutrition crisis threatens to exacerbate health system burdens, delay economic recovery, lead to more loss of life and cause a health and development crisis that impacts a generation of children throughout their life.

UN agencies and other inter-governmental organizations have mobilized, amplified and united to progress the nutrition agenda in the time of COVID-19. Efforts aim to not only address the immediate threats posed by COVID-19, but to also avert the looming food crisis and build back healthier, more resilient systems in line with human rights standards. Efforts are focused on the following areas:

- Designating food and nutrition services as essential to prevent disruptions to food supply
- Tailoring, strengthening and expanding nutrition-sensitive social protection systems.
- Recognizing the potential benefits of different transfer modalities; in-kind, cash, or vouchers as well as public food distribution systems to ensure access to diverse, balanced and nutritious meals for the most vulnerable.
- Ensuring the delivery of essential nutrition services through health systems to reach vulnerable groups including women, children, the elderly and those with specialized nutritional requirements
- Provide support to maintaining continuity in the provision of diverse, healthy and safe school meals, including identifying modalities to reach vulnerable children when schools are closed
- The promotion of sustainable healthy diets for immunity and health, including supporting families with information and practical solutions on breastfeeding and feeding affordable, safe and healthy diets to young children in context of COVID-19
- Strengthening double duty actions which address both undernutrition and overweight/obesity to maximize the impact of interventions to address all forms of malnutrition. This includes the promotion and protection of exclusive breastfeeding.
- Controlling the marketing, promotion or mass distribution of highly-processed foods that are high in saturated fats, free sugar and/or salt to children and families in the context of the emergency response, including the harmful practises of marketing breastmilk alternatives.

¹¹ Agenda 2030, para. 35

- Encouraging healthier purchasing patterns through fiscal policies such as sugar-sweetened beverage taxation and increased subsidies for fruits and vegetables
- Advocating for the continuation of local markets, shops and stores and secured supply chains to support availability of reasonably-priced fresh foods and essential staples
- Working across sectors (e.g. WASH, education, social protection and workplaces) in a coordinated manner to counteract negative impacts of COVID-19 and adapt measures to ensure continued local availability and affordability of nutritious foods and safe drinking water
- Promoting workplace nutrition programmes as part of a broader occupational safety and health strategy
- Increasing understanding of the challenges to access to food in emergency and recovery situations and of potential policy and legal solutions amongst stakeholders involved in increasing food security.
- Looking beyond the pandemic to transform food systems – enhancing their resilience, shortening supply chains and placing nutrition at their core to deliver healthy sustainable diets.

The impact of these directives depends upon continued dedication to the nutrition and human rights agenda by the UN and its partner organizations, member state support and implementation as well as increased investment in sustainable healthy diets through sound human-rights based interventions.

A full list of UN agencies nutrition related directives, tools and resources in response to COVID-19 [can be found here](#).

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