Recommendations on food system, nutrition and climate change
Follow-up to the Climate and SDGs Synergies Conference
1-3 April 2019, Copenhagen

Summary

Food systems are failing us. They are not providing people with healthy and nutritious diets and are a major contributor to climate change, responsible for up to 30% of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs). Transformation is needed. Shifting to a healthier diet would have two major benefits: (1) Dietary risk factors – currently the major contributors to the global burden of disease – would be reduced substantially and (2) Negative impact on the environment would be reduced substantially. Adopting a healthier diet is, therefore, a prime example of the synergies across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG2 (on achieving zero hunger) and SDG 13 (on combatting climate change) are intertwined. In addition, both SDGs are underpinning the achievement of many other SDGs, if not the entire 2030 Agenda. Upcoming meetings of governing bodies, including the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the Climate and SDG Summits and the 25th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 25) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will have to make sure the links between nutrition and climate are seriously taking into account. Food systems are the connecting factors in all of them.

Introduction

The United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) works to maximize policy coherence for nutrition across the UN System. This includes the efforts of the UN agencies, as well as the policy and political processes of the governing bodies, such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) and the UN Environmental Assembly (UNEA).

The UNGA proclaimed the period from 2016-2025 as the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (henceforth, Nutrition Decade). During this unique 10 year timespan, all actors are called on to intensify policy making, programming and actions in order to achieve the World Health Assembly (WHA, 2012) nutrition targets as well as to accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, especially the elimination of all forms of malnutrition by 2030. Under the leadership of Nutrition Decade’s co-conveners FAO and WHO, and with assistance from the UNSCN, a program of work was developed that closely follows the recommendations of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2, 2014) and strongly promotes sustainable and resilient food systems for healthy diets. Also UN Resolutions (notably A73/544, adopted 20 December 2018), encourages the implementation of the ICN2 Framework for Action, and recognizes food systems as playing a fundamental role in promoting healthy diets and improving nutrition.

Food systems, climate and nutrition

Today the world faces enormous challenges in nourishing a growing population while assuring the health and sustainability of the planet, which is under severe environmental pressures. The ambition to ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture’ is captured in
SDG 2, however, at least 12 of the 17 SDGs contain indicators that are highly relevant to nutrition. For example, several targets of SDG 3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages - will not be achieved without substantial dietary improvements, as poor diets are the number one driver for the global burden of disease. Highly processed foods are becoming available everywhere, displacing healthier plant-based, traditional diets towards those that are high in calories, salt and sugar while low in fibre and micronutrients. If the world adopted the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations for a healthy diet, not only lives would be saved - up to 11 million preventable deaths - but also GHG emission could be reduced. Furthermore, the realisation of all of the nutrition-related or associated targets will be severely compromised if SDG 13 - Take action to combat climate change and its impacts - is not urgently prioritized.

In addition, current diets are the outcome of food production practices that are major contributors to the decline of natural biodiversity, land degradation, and water extraction and pollution. According to the FAO’s 2019 The State of the World’s Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, of the 6,000 plant species cultivated for food, only nine account for 66% of total crop production. The world’s livestock production is based on around 40 species with only a handful providing the vast majority of meat, milk and eggs. More than 900 species cultivated by humans are under threat, making food production highly vulnerable to diseases and climate change related impacts. Current food systems negatively reinforce environmental pressures and deforestation, with additional stress coming from major commodities such as palm oil, beef and coffee.

The links between climate change, agricultural production, food security and nutrition are multiple and bi-directional: the food systems are the first to be affected by climate change and, simultaneously, they themselves are major contributors to climate change by their GHGs. Current food systems are therefore not only failing to nourish the people, they are failing to safeguard the planet. It is therefore clear that food security, climate change, and malnutrition in all its forms cannot be addressed independently of one another.

The opportunity to change this picture has never been greater. There is growing scientific evidence that shifting from diets with large amounts of ultra-processed and animal-sourced products to healthier diets with high amount of fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds and low to modest amounts of animal-sourced products, coupled with the reduction of food loss and waste, will not only improve nutrition, but also contribute to a significant reduction in the emission of GHGs up to 60% by 2050 compared with a business as usual scenario, as well as reduce other negative environmental impacts. There is also political momentum: The CFS is working on guidelines for food systems and nutrition making use of entry points that can transform current food systems into sustainable food systems for better nutrition. Other governing bodies can build on these recommendations and encourage countries to implement them in their own context, once available.

During the Climate and SDG Synergies Conference, the trade-offs between keeping pace with feeding a growing population - 10 billion human beings expected by 2050 - and the need to reach the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal were discussed. This assumed trade-off presents an opportunity if people were to shift their diets (taking into account regional and local differences, as well as the needs of specific populations groups) towards healthier ones. Healthier diets, following the WHO recommendations, in general, have lower environmental food prints and, at the same time, can nourish a growing population. Healthier
diets, produced in a sustainable way, can contribute to reach the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal of the Paris Agreement, reduce the global burden of disease and prevent pre-mature deaths from NCDs.

The opportunity to reach several targets by integrated actions and policies across the food system, improving nutrition and mitigating climate change has to be discussed in the relevant governing forums. The EGM in Copenhagen provided an excellent opportunity to open the debate and provided important inputs for the HLPF in July 2019. However, it should not stop there: In September during the SDG and Climate Summits, and again, during the COP 25 to the UNFCCC, the same message needs to be repeated for country leaders to make synergistic commitments for human and planetary health.

**Recommendations**

- **Policy coherence to achieve both climate and nutrition goals.** The world is facing a climate and nutrition pandemic. One out of three people are malnourished, and we are heading towards one out of two if current trends are not reversed. In parallel, climate change is happening already, requiring increased and immediate action to remain within 1.5 degrees Celsius goal. In fact, the underlying drivers of both climate change and malnutrition are the same: they are systemic and embedded in our food system. Policy coherence should take into account the environmental and health outcomes of agricultural, food and trade policies.

- **Governments in the lead.** Governments should set the policy frame within which other actors can define their actions. Governments can also set rules and regulations, for example, for public purchase regulations, sustainability standards and food processing and food composition. **Consumers** need to be well informed and involved in the transformation in order for the transition to be fully supported. **Small scale farmers**, who are also often net-consumers, need to be assisted while shifting their agricultural production systems towards sustainable ones that produce food to support healthy and diverse diets.

- **Food system transformation.** To start transforming the food system, actionable entry points, are needed, such as dietary change. To this end, developing science-based Food Based Dietary Guidelines that include sustainability criteria is a good place to start. Such guidelines inform consumers about healthy diets and the need for sustainable production and consumption. They also inform policy makers about healthy diets and the need to design agricultural and investment policies in line with the needs for healthy and sustainable diets.

- **Responsibility of governing bodies.** It is essential that the various UN governing bodies, including the HLPF, UNGA and COP take note of this synergy and act accordingly. The Paris Agreement and 2030 Agenda call for it. In July the HLPF should take the food system as one of the portfolio’s to be discussed in the plenary. The Paris Agreement and 2030 Agenda call for it. **The HLPF, UNGA and COP should encourage Member States to act on the synergies of the climate and nutrition agendas.**

  It needs to happen now. Let the Climate and Nutrition communities join hands.