

UNSCN Submission to the High Level Political Forum July 2019

UNSCN was established in 1977 by ECOSOC resolution and has been given the mandate to keep under review the overall direction, scale, coherence and impact of the UN system response to the nutritional problems of the world. UNSCN is universal in scope, not limited to specific groups or categories of countries, it advocates a human rights based approach to eliminate all forms of malnutrition and promotes intersectoral analysis and action. It has the following functions:

- *To provide global strategic **guidance and advocacy in nutrition** to ensure engagement and investment at the highest level and to ensure progress towards nutrition security for all;*
- *To enhance dialogue and linkages, fostering **joint nutrition action**, partnerships and mutual accountability between UN agencies;*
- *To **harmonize concepts**, including methodologies and guidelines, policies and strategies in response to the nutritional needs of countries;*
- *To facilitate **knowledge exchange** of practices, tools and needs, enhancing coherence of the global nutrition public goods agenda and identifying emerging issues;*
- *To communicate on **global trends**, progress and results and to enhance global advocacy through networks and platforms;*
- *To engage in and **facilitate dialogue** with stakeholders across health, food security, water and sanitation and social protection constituencies for strengthening nutrition action and mainstreaming nutrition into development policies.*

Malnutrition at global scale

One of the main challenges the global community faces today is how to ensure food security and good nutrition for all in a sustainable manner. Currently 1 in 3 people are malnourished – stunted, wasted, overweight or obese – and that figure is expected to grow to 1 in 2 people in the near future. Almost 821 million people are chronically undernourished, 151 million children under the age of five years are affected by stunting and 50 million by wasting. Meanwhile, almost two billion people are overweight or obese, increasing the risk of noncommunicable diseases. This burden cripples poorer households that do not have the means to cope, as well as women and children given their vulnerability and restricted access to resources needed to nourish themselves and their families. It crushes national health systems and the ability of nations to reach their full intellectual and economic potential. It destroys the world's limited resource base, whose boundaries are already stressed by the effects of climate change, pollution of land water and air, and biodiversity loss.

Alarming, the pressure to tackle the problem is growing. Economic development, globalization, urbanization and lifestyle changes have caused major shifts towards nutritiously inadequate diets based on a few major staple crops and animal species. This dietary transition is characterized by higher intakes of animal-based proteins, trans-fats, salt, sugar and highly processed food. At the same time there are huge population groups who simply cannot afford to nourish themselves with dignity and respect.

Malnutrition in all its forms can only be eradicated if we look at the underlying causes, including social, economic, political and cultural factors negatively affecting our food systems.

Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

Agenda 2030 is designed to prompt action towards ensuring good nutrition for all. Attaining this aim means that everyone should have access to an adequate diet that is healthy, nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate. If we are to ensure equal access to nutritious and adequate diets, the interlinked challenges at the individual, household, community, country, regional and global levels must be tackled simultaneously. There is also a need to understand the interdependence of rural and urban areas — for food, energy, clean water and air, and for the exchange of goods and services – to ensure that the 2030 Agenda can be achieved and the SDGs met.

Following the human rights-based approach, governments have the prime responsibility in creating an enabling environment for good nutrition. The UN system has the fundamental role of supporting governments in this endeavour. Not realizing the right to food makes other fundamental rights more difficult to uphold, such as the right to survival, the right to development, and the right to health. A human-rights based approach to development contributes to the universal realization of the right to food, addressing at the same time other cross-cutting issues, such as equity, inclusivity, accountability and policy coherence.

Key message one: Reduce inequalities and poverty. Inequalities within countries are reaching levels unheard of since the 1930s and, despite all the talk of nations catching up, inequalities between countries remain high (Atkinson 2015; Bourguignon 2015; Stiglitz 2015). However, the eradication of poverty does not automatically result in the elimination of malnutrition and inequalities. In some cases, higher gross domestic product has contributed to lower levels of undernutrition; however, this progress has been modest and uneven across countries, regions, populations groups and gender. Overweight and obesity have increased in all countries, regardless of income levels. In richer countries, poorer populations groups are disproportionately affected, although the effect is less clear for low- and middle-income countries. The increasing overall numbers of malnourished people indicates that the realization of the right to adequate food (and nutrition) is still far from being a reality.

Key message two: Capitalize on the potential for schools to act as a system to promote better nutrition, learning opportunities and investment for development. Another essential step for fair development is access to quality education (SDG 4). School meals are known as a vehicle for getting children to school, keeping them there, and ultimately improving their learning. Keeping children in school, especially for girls, is a strong indicator of better nutrition not only for the girl child but also for future generations. Good nutrition equals improvements in math, language and cognitive test.

Key message three: Increase disaggregated data and the involvement of those affected to better understand gaps and biases. All countries have populations that experience multiple forms of malnutrition. Exactly who is malnourished, however, depends largely upon gender, age, income, ethnicity and geographic location. Country averages tend to hide this skewed distribution and make it harder to identify. Therefore, policy makers need to consider how best to reach the most vulnerable in their policy design. Work to monitor the policy effectiveness once operationalized will help course correction where necessary.

Creating enabling environments for people, especially marginalized and deprived people, to empower themselves is essential. This involves enabling them to set their own priorities, ensuring their meaningful participate in decision making processes, inviting them to advise in the implementation and monitoring of

policies, as well as evaluating the outcomes to ensure that the benefits reach the intended targets. Only when a human rights approach is adopted will the international community be able to move beyond addressing short term needs to begin tackling the real issues at stake. If the underlying issues are not addressed, sustainable solutions will not be found.

Key message four: Sustainable diets for healthy people and a healthy planet. Diets are the tie that binds environmental sustainability and human health. They can improve public health and nutritional outcomes while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions in support of SDG 13 (Climate change). Food systems of the future need to move toward mostly plant-based dietary patterns, towards a dramatic reduction in food losses and waste, and towards a major improvement in food production practices. Awareness raising activities will be required to help people better understand the impacts of their diets on their health and the health of the planet to shift consumer demand.

Key message five: Mobilize the political will necessary to act on the interlinkages between climate change, food systems, diets, nutrition and health. Investments in multidisciplinary research are essential to obtain the necessary evidence on effective ways to shift towards sustainable and healthy diets for different socio-economic and cultural contexts, particularly in low income countries. Research should support the development of metrics and indicators of the co-benefits to climate and health of sustainable and healthy diets for scientific bodies to ensure that they are recognized as a priority. Disaggregated data is key but the several recently reports show that ample evidence is available. What is required now is strong commitment by global leaders to act on these interlinkages. Gender equality and the empowerment of women deserves special attention as all too often it is these embedded inequalities that lead to hunger and malnutrition and undermine the resilience of communities to shocks.

Key message six: Increase collaboration among actors and sectors. The elimination of malnutrition and the promotion of well-being is as complex of a process as working to reduce the number of people that live below the poverty line. Integrated policies are needed that combine efforts of multiple sectors and actors, in line with the efforts of SDG 17 on Global Partnerships. Deeper linkages should also be made between the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity (2011-2020), the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2020), the International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development (2018-2028) and the United Nations Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028).

UNSCN Reference Documents

[UNSCN News 43 - Advancing equity, equality and non-discrimination in food systems: Pathways to reform](#) (2018) explores the drivers of malnutrition, how they intersect and overlap, and how this intensifies the exclusion of certain groups of people.

UNSCN paper [Schools as a System to Improve School Nutrition](#) (2018) offers insights into what interventions to implement and combine to ensure the best possible nutrition outcomes for children in schools, their families and their communities, both now and in future.

UNSCN [Guidance Note on Integration of Nutrition in the UNDAF](#) (2017) is to assist United Nation Country Teams with the integration of nutrition into the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, using a multi-sectoral approach.

[UNSCN Discussion Paper - Investments for Healthy Food Systems](#) (2016) describes government policies to improve nutrition and health outcomes; offers a typology of food systems, from "rural" to "industrial"; and provides guidance about which investments are most appropriate to fit the needs of each type of food system.

[UNSCN Discussion Paper - Impact Assessment of Policies to support Healthy Food Environments and Healthy Diets](#) (2016) provides decision-makers with an analysis of all relevant aspects of nutrition in a country' specific situation and context, so that decisions are informed by all the information available.