

Input from Gerda Verburg, SUN Movement Coordinator to the 2020 HLPF background document 'Ending hunger and achieving food security for all'

Good Nutrition and food systems transformations – key factors for achieving sustainable development

Please allow me to start with the following remark: The title of the HLPF session would better cover substance when it reads 'Ending hunger and achieving food and nutrition security for all'.

Reason: Focusing on hunger and food security only is too narrow, considering the critical role nutrition plays in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Key messages

- To achieve sustainable and transformational change, countries must lead the fight against hunger and malnutrition, applying a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach.
- Nutrition has to move from a health sector led nutrition-specific approach to be more multi sectoral, including being integrated in a food system approach in a structural way, to fully exploit the positive effects of high-quality nutrition for healthy people and a healthy planet.
- The incorporation of nutrition in the COVID-19 response is essential as access to good nutrition positively affects people's health, immune system and resilience. Integrating nutrition to the COVID-19 response measures is important to avoid causing a food- and nutrition security crisis, that risks setting back progress in malnutrition and extreme poverty reduction for years.

Introduction

Despite the evidence of the wide-range benefits of nutritious diets, the approach to nutrition is still primarily health sector led and focused on the treatment of (acute) malnutrition. At global level, "food security" is continuously interpreted as a discussion about the availability of calories rather than the quality and the nutritious value of food. This approach misses out on the beneficial preventative effects that good nutrition has to offer for individuals and societies. I advocate therefore to systematically incorporate nutrition in the food system, and to make it part and parcel of each sector, including but not limited to agriculture, education, social security, women's affairs, economics and health. Consistently doing so can support countries to invest in cost-effective nutrition interventions which benefit everyone in society and can support national development and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

1. ***Which areas and socio-economic groups are especially vulnerable to poor nutrition and food insecurity and what are ways to ensure that food systems transformations leave no one behind?***

The first 1000-days of a child, from conception to the second year of life, are the most critical for the physical and cognitive development. Any malnutrition during this window can lead to irreversible long-lasting negative effects including weak immune systems and physical and brain development. Chronic undernutrition (stunting), can reduce opportunities for children later in life and can trap families into poverty over generations. As of 2019, 144 million children globally are stunted, 47 million wasted and 38 million overweight¹. At a national level, malnutrition adds significantly to the burden of disease, exhausting the health system while hampering (economic) development when citizens are not able to achieve their full (productive) potential.

Children and women in the poorest socio-economic groups are often most affected by food insecurity and malnutrition – including them in any response strategies and actions contributes towards sustainable change. The poorest, particularly those living in rural areas dependent on agriculture for income, ironically often face the highest burdens of malnutrition. In addition, it is most often women who face the biggest burden to feed their household. Supporting female agricultural producers and workers poses a great opportunity to improve food and nutrition security, income and livelihoods of those left furthest behind. Transformation of our food systems must be inclusive, sustainable, nutrition-sensitive and climate-resilient to ensure no one is left behind.

2. ***What fundamental changes are needed to make our food systems an engine for inclusive growth and contribute to accelerating progress towards ending hunger and achieving food security for all in the Decade of Action?***

To achieve sustainable and systemic change, countries must be in the driver's seat and collaborate in a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach. Too often work is still done in silos which pose inefficiencies and in the worst case undermine each other's work. Improving nutrition is not possible without strong collaborations across sectors and ministries (including health, agriculture, social security, finance, women's affairs, education and development planning), but at the same time, in many countries, this requires alignment between development partners, civil society and meaningful support from the private sector to achieve long term lasting changes and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A food system approach should connect agriculture with nutrition, health, land use, ecosystems, biodiversity, climate change and equity to unravel sustainable and effective solutions. Hunger and food security are tremendous challenges in regard of the population growth, climate change, biodiversity loss and the current COVID-19 pandemic, but without integrating nutrition in the approach and focusing on the quantity rather than the quality of the food we will not be able to achieve the SDGs. It is essential that a food systems approach applies a nutrition-sensitive and sustainability lens which effectively addresses all forms of malnutrition (e.g. wasting, stunting and overweight) efficiently.

¹ UNICEF (2019) - <https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/malnutrition/>

3. ***How might COVID-19 facilitate or complicate the implementation of needed food systems changes?***

Good nutrition is essential to good health, to build immunity, protect against illness and infection and to support recovery from disease. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens progress which has been made in regard of malnutrition globally. In practice, with schools closed, over 350 million² children are missing out on school meals while families struggle to feed themselves during lockdown without adequate social safety nets. Major concerns are raised as farmers struggle to plant and harvest crops and supply chains of nutritious foods get hampered which show how fragile food systems still are. Any increase in malnutrition can lead to long-lasting effects on children and vulnerable groups, health and development. Any percentage point drop in GDP is expected to result in an additional of 0.7 million stunted children and a severe increase in child wasting is expected.

A multi-sectoral approach to nutrition has to be incorporated at any stage of countries' response to the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing the most vulnerable. Countries have to promote healthy and nutritious diets, ensure the delivery of life saving nutrition services, enable safe feeding of infants, continue and strengthen advocacy and support of breastfeeding, and expand social protection schemes (including cash and vouchers). In addition, it is critical to sustain the functioning of local food systems, keep markets open, maintain food production, ensure the supply of fortified foods and specialised nutrition commodities. Countries can support the capacity of smallholder farmers, small and medium-sized enterprises and local civil society organisations to continue producing and delivering affordable, adequate, safe, diverse and culturally appropriate foods. Lastly, monitoring of essential nutrition services is critical to understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on progress in nutrition.

4. ***What knowledge and data gaps need to be filled for better analyzing current successes and failures in food systems and the trade-offs and synergies, across SDGs, in implementing food systems changes to fix these failures?***

To improve nutrition, end hunger and increase food and nutrition security, more knowledge and experience should be shared on effective multi-sectoral solutions which increase people's access to nutritious food in a sustainable manner. This is not limited to increasing agricultural knowledge but requires the understanding of the private sectors' role, effective social protection mechanisms and cost-effective double-duty actions which tackle under- and overnutrition simultaneously. In addition, research has to be consistently sensitive to gender and social inequalities. This means collecting sex-disaggregated data where possible including at household level.

² WFP (May 8th, 2020) - <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/index.html>

5. ***What partnerships and initiatives are needed to harness synergies and/or reduce trade-offs in food systems?***

National governments are in the lead to ensure food and nutrition security. Governments are the duty bearers of the right to food and are expected to respect, protect and promote this right, including access to nutrition. Their commitment to the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (2015) as well as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2016) requires them to break down national silos and find synergies between sectors to achieve these goals, including a coherent integrated approach to food systems and nutrition delivering for people *and* the planet. However, Government do not have to do this without support.

Strong multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential to support governments in their efforts to improve nutrition, end hunger and increase food security. There is a strong potential for synergies when sectors in relation to nutrition come together, such as the health sector, agriculture, environmental and economic departments. Partnerships should include civil society, development partners, multi-lateral agencies, academia/research and the private sector while preventing conflict of interest by establishing principles of engagement which safeguard public interest. Collectively, the different stakeholder groups can strengthen and support governments to take the lead and to deliver upon their commitments. This requires global stakeholders to rethink their approach: from a global to national level, towards a bottom-up, country to global level approach.

The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, initiated in 2010 during the aftermath of the food price crises in 2008, has been devoted to this new multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approach with SUN countries in the lead. The SUN Movement is active in the area of nutrition but also serves as an example for other sectors on how stakeholders can come together to find synergies and discover collectively how to support governments to improve nutrition, meet the SDGs and deliver for people and the planet.