

UNITED NATIONS DECADE OF **ACTION ON NUTRITION**



2016-2025

Mid-term Review Foresight paper

The aim of the United Nations (UN) Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025 (“Nutrition Decade”) is to accelerate implementation of the commitments made at the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), achieve the global nutrition and diet-related non-communicable disease (NCD) targets by 2025,¹ and contribute to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030,² while providing an enabling environment to respect, protect, and fulfil the right of everyone to have access to safe, sufficient, and nutritious food.³ The Nutrition Decade, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 2016,⁴ is reaching its mid-term in 2020.

In line with ECOSOC resolution 1989/84⁵ on international decades, progress between 2016 and 2020 in the six action areas of the Nutrition Decade’s Work Programme⁶ is being evaluated at the Nutrition Decade’s mid-point. These action areas are: i) sustainable, resilient food systems for healthy diets; ii) aligned health systems providing universal coverage of essential nutrition actions; iii) social protection and nutrition education; iv) trade and investment for improved nutrition; v) safe and supportive environments for nutrition at all ages; and vi) strengthened governance and accountability for nutrition. In addition, the Mid-term Review⁷ of the Nutrition Decade aims to identify focus areas for priority action and promising opportunities in each of the six action areas for future progress in 2021-2025.

1. Progress made and opportunities for action in the six different action areas

Action Area 1. Sustainable, resilient food systems for healthy diets

During the first few years of the Nutrition Decade, a growing number of high-level reports and resolutions have underlined the critical role of sustainable, resilient food systems for healthy diets and improved nutrition.⁸ A number of technical meetings and scientific publications have advanced knowledge on nutrition-sensitive agriculture and food systems. Numerous alliances have been established to bring together different actors, beyond the traditional nutrition actors, for sustainable food systems.

Recognition of agroecology and biodiversity, increased consideration of sustainability issues in national food-based dietary guidelines, growing implementation of measures to reduce food loss and waste and action to enhance resilience of the food supply in crisis-prone areas have been noticed. Measures to reduce or eliminate industrially-produced trans fats have been accelerated and voluntary or mandatory reformulation of processed food products has been carried out to reduce their salt content.

¹ www.who.int/nutrition/global-target-2025/en/; www.who.int/nmh/ncd-tools/definition-targets/en/.

² <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/>.

³ www.fao.org/3/a-ml542e.pdf.

⁴ www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/259.

⁵ https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/75597/files/E_RES_1989_84-EN.pdf.

⁶ www.un.org/nutrition/sites/www.un.org.nutrition/files/general/pdf/work_programme_nutrition_decade.pdf.

⁷ www.un.org/nutrition/sites/www.un.org.nutrition/files/general/pdf/conceptnote_mtr_nutrition_decade_0.pdf.

⁸ See, for example, www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca6640en; www.g20.utoronto.ca/2018/2018-07-28-g20_agriculture_declaration_final.pdf; <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/149>; <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/253>; <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/242>; <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/132>.

Food systems need to enhance food security and nutrition for all, be economically sustainable, be inclusive and have a positive impact on climate and environment.⁹ To drive progress towards that vision in the second half of the Nutrition Decade, countries are encouraged to:

1. **Recognize agriculture and food systems delivering safe, healthy and sustainable diets are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.** The first UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 will address biodiversity, ecosystems and the challenges of climate change, and recognize food systems as key to achieving the SDGs by 2030.¹⁰
2. **Include nutrition objectives in food, agriculture and other sector policies.** No sector should do harm to the aim of promoting healthy diets and improving nutrition. Greater focus is needed on actions to promote the diversification of crops, increase the production of fruits and vegetables, legumes and pulses, raise production of oils that contribute to healthy diets, create healthy food environments and implement food price policies to support healthy diets.¹¹
3. **Ensuring access for all to safe and healthy diets, sustainably delivered, should be a key worldwide priority.** Trade-offs between environment, health and economics and further opportunities to enable sustainable healthy diets through the food system need to be identified.¹²

Action Area 2. Aligned health systems providing universal coverage of essential nutrition actions

A clear understanding of the effective interventions to be delivered by health systems has emerged during the first half of the Nutrition Decade,¹³ but there has been significant underinvestment in both ensuring adequate coverage of high-impact nutrition interventions and improving their quality.¹⁴ To accelerate progress on wasting in children under 5 years of age, a UN Global Action Plan on Child Wasting is under development.¹⁵ Strong health systems are needed to deliver nutrition actions, and the increasing political momentum for achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC)¹⁶ presents new opportunities for expanding coverage and mainstreaming WHO's Essential Nutrition Actions.¹³

Many effective nutrition actions, including counselling on breastfeeding and complementary feeding, management of severe acute malnutrition and provision of micronutrient supplements, are delivered through health systems. Over the second half of the Nutrition Decade, countries are encouraged to:

1. **Increase coverage of essential nutrition actions to address all forms of malnutrition.** Nutrition-related actions need to be integrated into national health systems and UHC plans.^{17,18} Existing gaps can be closed by increasing coverage of nutrition interventions among those already reached by health services, particularly through antenatal and delivery care. Regional coverage disparities need to be addressed, and targeting of children, adolescent girls and women is recommended.
2. **Use the upcoming UN Global Action Plan on Child Wasting to address persistent low coverage of treatment for children with wasting.** The Plan will be released in March 2020 and its roadmap for implementation will be released in July 2020.
3. **Increase investments for nutrition in UHC to improve coverage and quality of nutrition programmes.**¹⁷ Nutrition needs to be systematically and equitably included in health sector budgets. A continuum of cost-effective nutrition services (from preventive to curative) is important

⁹ www.fao.org/director-general/speeches/detail/en/c/1260815/.

¹⁰ www.fao.org/webcast/home/en/item/5213/icode/.

¹¹ www.fao.org/3/na753en/na753en.pdf.

¹² www.fao.org/3/CA2797EN/ca2797en.pdf.

¹³ www.who.int/nutrition/publications/essential-nutrition-actions-2019/en/.

¹⁴ www.who.int/nutrition/publications/policies/global_nut_policyreview_2016-2017/en/.

¹⁵ [www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/online-public-consultation---draft-of-the-global-action-plan-\(gap\)-on-child-wasting](http://www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/online-public-consultation---draft-of-the-global-action-plan-(gap)-on-child-wasting).

¹⁶ <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/2>.

¹⁷ www.who.int/publications-detail/WHO-NMH-NHD-19.24.

¹⁸ www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.m361.long.

to include in the basic package of primary health care. Further investments in integrated data systems are needed, with tracking of indicators on the coverage and quality of essential nutrition actions and developing local capacity to use such information effectively.

Action Area 3. Social protection and nutrition education

The contributions of social protection to food security and nutrition will depend on its integration at policy level. To ensure that social protection policies holistically combat all forms of malnutrition, a nutrition-sensitive approach needs to be employed in their design and implementation.¹⁹ Policy measures for improving food access, social protection and food assistance are prevalent in some regions,²⁰ while in other regions this continues to be an area of under-investment.²¹

Nutrition education is widely implemented in schools, but policies to ensure that education is supported by healthy school environments are lacking and implementation of school health and nutrition programmes has deteriorated in recent years.¹⁴ Although the majority of countries train health workers on maternal, infant and young child nutrition, the level of training is often inadequate and, more generally, nutrition action continues to be hampered by a lack of trained nutrition professionals.¹⁴ The potential of multicomponent school-based food and nutrition education programmes has been increasingly recognized as an important programmatic area for sustainable development.²²

To fully realize the potential of social protection and education to address all forms of malnutrition during the second half of the Nutrition Decade, more action is needed and countries are encouraged to:

1. **Design and implement nutrition-sensitive social protection policies and ensure coherence with other policy areas.** The benefits of social protection programmes for agricultural productivity, livelihood diversification and local economic development need more emphasis. Involvement of civil society organizations and research institutions is important to ensure that programmes are context-specific, with ownership by beneficiaries. Adequate financial and human resources, information systems and logistics arrangements need to be put in place to ensure and develop the capacity of technical staff in the field.¹⁹
2. **Integrate food and nutrition education into national plans and programmes** to influence consumer awareness and behaviour on food choices.
3. **Better leverage schools as a platform for food and nutrition education.** Gaps that hamper the impact of school-based food and nutrition approaches need to be addressed,²³ and more investment in research and capacity development is necessary.²²
4. **Increase the number and quality of nutrition professionals.** Health workers need to be properly trained to deliver nutrition interventions across the life-course.
5. **Implement policies to ensure nutrition labelling on food products to inform consumers.**

Action Area 4. Trade and investment for improved nutrition

While trade can be a key element in enhancing food security and nutrition, there has been increasing recognition of the need for trade policy and nutrition action coherence, and the importance of governance

¹⁹ www.fao.org/3/a-i4819e.pdf; www.fao.org/3/a-i7216e.pdf.

²⁰ www.fao.org/3/CA2703EN/CA2703EN.pdf; www.fao.org/3/ca3817en/ca3817en.pdf.

²¹ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/255414/WHO-NMH-NHD-17.2-eng.pdf>.

²² www.fao.org/3/ca4091en/ca4091en.pdf.

²³ For example, synergies between various interventions are not exploited; weak evidence base the multiple outcomes and impact of holistic programmes; efforts are often small-scale and fragmented; monitoring and evaluation are scarce; and failure to institutionalize effective initiatives.

and cross-sectoral cooperation.^{24,25} A finance gap persists, despite the need for responsible and sustainable investments in agriculture and food systems. Certain global value chains and agri-food industries currently produce environmentally unsustainable food products commonly high in unhealthy fats, sugars and/or salt. Increased globalization of the food supply means populations are more exposed to different food hazards. Rather than driving healthy diets, trade/investment policy are influencing malnutrition in all its forms. Increased foreign direct investment, for example, has been linked to higher consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.^{26,27} Prioritizing health over short-term economic gain has been shown to lead to greater economic gains in the long term.^{28,29}

In the remaining years of the Nutrition Decade, the following priority focus areas are proposed:

1. **Strengthen local food value chains through cold chain technology, improving post-harvest handling and connecting smallholders to new supply chains.** This can lead to lower resource use, including energy, labour, land and capital,³⁰ as well as safe foods for human consumption.
2. **For countries to consider use of trade policy, including instruments such as tariffs and quotas, to improve the food supply.** The World Trade Organization provides space for import restrictions aimed at protecting population health, through changes within the bound tariff rates and through health exceptions. Public health actors could work with economic and legal professionals (not solely trade economists) to effectively advocate on trade and investment policy.
3. **Strengthen regional partnerships among countries and leverage existing regional economic groups, improve data collection and develop tools.** Given the complexity of trade policy, country-level analysis is necessary.³⁰ Global institutions could continue to gather data and support development of methods and indicators to better understand trade policy impacts on nutrition.
4. **Invest responsibly in agriculture and food systems by international institutions, government and the private sector.** Increased investment is needed to enhance food security and nutrition and boost economic development. Trade policies need to complement investments in domestic agriculture and social safety nets.³⁰

Action Area 5. Safe and supportive environments for nutrition at all ages

Creation of healthy food environments — encompassing availability, affordability, promotion and quality of food supporting healthy diets— has become a central consideration in nutrition policymaking. There is increasing momentum for creation of healthy urban environments, and food environments are an important element.³¹

Policies to create healthy food environments in schools, to protect and support breastfeeding or to fortify staple foods with micronutrients are widespread, although implementation is often inadequate. Implementation of fiscal policies to promote healthy diets (particularly taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages) has accelerated over the first half of the Nutrition Decade. There remains much scope to scale-

²⁴ <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/132>.

²⁵ www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/sps_e/faowhowtoapril19_e.htm.

²⁶ www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4890476/pdf/12992_2016_Article_161.pdf.

²⁷ <https://globalizationandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12992-015-0127-7>.

²⁸ www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/380728/pb-tallinn-01-eng.pdf.

²⁹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13679-013-0064-9>.

³⁰ www.fao.org/3/ca1505en/CA1505EN.pdf.

³¹ For example, the 5th Milan Urban Food Policy Pact Annual Gathering and Mayors Summit in Montpellier in October 2019 highlighted the importance of healthy diets.

up and improve regulation of the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children,¹⁴ strengthen the focus on adolescent nutrition³² and effectively integrate nutrition and WASH³³.

In the second half of the Nutrition Decade, countries are encouraged to:

1. **Scale-up implementation of regulatory policies by capitalizing on recent momentum and learning from country experiences.** Examples include introduction of sugar-sweetened beverage taxes, elimination of industrially-produced trans fats (see action area 1), marketing restrictions and front-of-pack nutrition labelling. The Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition being developed by the Committee of World Food Security³⁴ will provide further guidance. The design and implementation of other regulatory policies, such as zoning regulations and tax regimes to minimize food deserts and swamps, can support creation of healthy food environments.
2. **Develop and implement other regulatory or voluntary approaches to widen the set of healthy choices and create a supportive environment for nutrition.** These include reformulation of products high in unhealthy fats, sugars and/or salt, and public food procurement policies to improve the nutritional quality of food provided in hospitals, care facilities and other public settings. Synergies with initiatives to create healthy cities could also be leveraged.
3. **Revitalize action in key policy areas which have stagnated or deteriorated recently.** Specific opportunities include: i) raising awareness of breastfeeding as a double-duty action to prevent overweight/obesity as well as undernutrition to improve policy action to increase breastfeeding;³⁵ ii) creating new alliances with those working to protect children from other harms (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, gambling, social media) better protecting children from the negative impact of marketing of food and drink products;³⁶ iii) increasing efforts to prevent anaemia in women of reproductive age³⁷ and improve adolescent nutrition; and iv) effective programming of nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

Action Area 6. Strengthened governance and accountability for nutrition

There has been significant progress in generating commitments and new financing for nutrition.³⁸ Despite considerable advances, however, the inadequate and highly variable progress towards the global nutrition and diet-related NCD targets³⁹ reflects insufficient actions to strengthen nutrition governance, policy and accountability systems. It also points to a persistent global nutrition financing and implementation gap. Donor funding for nutrition has increased during the first half of the Nutrition Decade, but it is estimated that an additional USD 7 billion is needed to fully achieve the global nutrition targets.⁴⁰

Improved global data now show which regions and countries are progressing or falling behind, but weak or non-existent nutrition information systems and insufficient data — particularly on nutritional status in specific groups and over a long enough period to track trends— remain a substantial challenge.

The following priority areas for action in the second half of the Nutrition Decade are proposed:

³² www.ifad.org/documents/38714174/40767203/Report+-+Conference+on+leaving+no+one+behind+-+making+the+case+for+adolescent+girls.pdf/2d49457b-f585-69f4-9957-48b55c0dae35.

³³ www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/news-events/who-unicef-position-paper-on-wash-and-nutrition-studies-20191125.pdf.

³⁴ www.fao.org/cfs/workingspace/workstreams/nutrition-workstream/en/.

³⁵ [www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)32506-1.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(19)32506-1.pdf).

³⁶ [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)32540-1/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)32540-1/fulltext).

³⁷ <https://undocs.org/A/72/829>.

³⁸ Fracassi, P., K. Siekmans, and P. Baker, *Galvanizing political commitment in the UN Decade of Action for Nutrition: Assessing commitment in member-countries of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement*. Food Policy, 2020. 90.

³⁹ <https://globalnutritionreport.org/reports/global-nutrition-report-2018/>.

⁴⁰ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/963161467989517289/pdf/104865-REVISED-Investing-in-Nutrition-FINAL.pdf>.

1. **Reconfigure global, national and subnational governance to ensure good governance⁴¹ mechanisms are in place.** Such mechanisms need to facilitate robust, evidence-based processes to produce knowledge-related public goods (i.e. guidelines, standards, analysis, research, innovation), be free from conflict of interest and coherently address all forms of malnutrition. Links to other systems impacting nutrition (e.g. health systems, ecosystems, land tenure, trade systems among others) are important.
2. **Strengthen nutrition action networks at all levels.** Global, regional, national and local nutrition action networks can foster inter- and intra-country cooperation and political commitment for nutrition.⁴² Nutrition coordination mechanisms — reported in 80% of countries, but are located within a high-level government agency only in 30% of them — need to be elevated and additional sectors need to be represented.¹⁴
3. **Address the role of the private sector.** Engagement with the private sector is a point of contention, sometimes hampering global collective action on nutrition.⁴³ Public health leadership is expected of governments to create food, health and care environments for good nutrition, including by using regulation and guidance, where needed. Businesses across the food value chain can contribute to transform agriculture and food systems.⁴⁴ Benchmarks provide an essential tool for measuring and comparing corporate performance regarding food and nutrition and for holding businesses to account. They enable investors and financial institutions, companies, governments, civil society and individuals to exert influence on a company's priorities towards socially responsible investment (or divestment).
4. **Increase investment in implementation-focused research to support capacity development and the scaling-up of actions.⁴⁵**
5. **Build coalitions for prioritizing nutrition to improve mobilization of domestic resources.**
6. **Streamline the global nutrition accountability infrastructure.** The crowded global nutrition accountability infrastructure is leading to accountability fatigue, and needs to be streamlined. Key actions in this area include: i) making sure commitments are SMART; ii) reinforcing social and political accountability platforms; and iii) strengthening the role of parliamentarians, the media and communities as champions for nutrition.⁴⁶

2. Cross-cutting issues and conclusions

To build on the progress realized in the first half of the Nutrition Decade, this mid-term review foresight paper has sought to identify key priority actions during the remaining time of the Nutrition Decade. In addition, several cross-cutting issues can be identified across the six action areas.

- **Effective partnerships and alliances** are important and new allies for nutrition are emerging (e.g. those advocating for sustainable food systems, UHC and protection of children from harm).
- A **cross-sectoral approach** is key to progress, but the health sector still does most of the work on nutrition at country level, along with the agriculture and education sectors. Other sectors, such as the environment, social welfare, planning, finance, trade and industry, need to be more involved.
- **Policy coherence** between nutrition and other areas, such as trade, social protection, agriculture, economic development, finance and environmental protection, is needed.

⁴¹ See www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/good-governance.pdf for definition of good governance.

⁴² <https://gh.bmj.com/content/3/1/e000485.full>.

⁴³ www.fao.org/3/a-i7846e.pdf.

⁴⁴ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32383/211491ov.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.

⁴⁵ www.implementnutrition.org/.

⁴⁶ www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.l7010.

- **Building national capacity on nutrition** is critical, through training and employment of nutrition professionals and training, supervision and mentoring of health workers and other front-line workers.
- The ‘nutrition data revolution’ is yet to be realized and **improved national data on nutrition indicators** is needed. Better tools to measure policy impact on nutrition outcomes are also required, along with more reporting of disaggregated data, which is vital to identify disparities.
- There is an urgent need to **address the global nutrition financing and implementation gap**. Funding needs to be increased by broadening the international donor base and mobilizing domestic resources.
- To **scale up and accelerate implementation**, dissemination of the evidence base and exchange of good practices and lessons from country experience are needed, along with further guidance and tools.

The acknowledgment of sustainable food systems and nutrition action as integral to achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development creates a supportive environment for nutrition impact. The Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit⁴⁷ presents a key opportunity for renewed commitments to tackle this unfinished agenda. The remainder of the Nutrition Decade, therefore, presents a critical window of opportunity to accelerate progress towards the eradication of hunger and all forms of malnutrition and realization of the SDGs, leaving no one behind.

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Food and Agriculture
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 United Nations



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⁴⁷ <https://nutritionforgrowth.org/events/>.