



From 19 to 23 April 2021, the fifty-fourth session of Commission on Population and Development is considering the special theme of “Population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development”. The session will consider how the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) can help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals on ending poverty and hunger, improving health, achieving gender equality, ensuring responsible consumption and production, and urgently taking climate action, among others. The Commission will also contribute to the preparations for the Food Systems Summit, to be convened by the Secretary-General in September 2021.

Since the 1960s, global growth in agricultural production has outpaced population increase. However, this success has come at high costs. Food systems are already exceeding planetary boundaries for key resources and are generating tremendous food loss and waste. Current diets are resulting in premature mortality and susceptibility to both chronic and infectious diseases. Today’s food systems give rise to vast inequalities, as evidenced by the persistence of hunger and food insecurity and the struggle for decent livelihoods for workers.

The following key messages are based on the report of the Secretary-General on population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development ([E/CN.9/2021/2](#)).

Ten key messages

1. Population size and distribution are important drivers of the demand for food

Continued population growth will substantially increase the demand for food by 2050, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Food demand will also be influenced by the gradual ageing and urbanization of the human population. The different food requirements of young and old people, as well as the different consumption patterns of urban and rural populations, will affect minimum dietary energy requirements and the demand for various types of food. As per capita income has increased, diets have included more calories and more varied and expensive foods.

2. The number of undernourished people is rising, while billions suffer from various forms of malnutrition

Following decades of progress in reducing hunger, the number of undernourished people globally rose from around 630 million in 2014 to almost 690 million in 2019. Over 20 per cent of children under five suffer from stunting (low height for age) and 7 per cent from wasting (acute malnutrition). Meanwhile, 6 per cent of children under five and 39 per cent of adults are overweight (obese). Estimates suggest that healthy diets are unaffordable for more than 3 billion people in the world.

3. Unhealthy diets are creating disease burdens throughout the life course

Worldwide, only 19 per cent of children aged 6–23 months eat a minimally acceptable diet. Inadequate nutrition, as well as anaemia among women of reproductive age, contributes to poor health and development outcomes for mothers and children. Older persons may face elevated risks of non-communicable disease due to poor nutrition. One study concluded that unhealthy diets are now responsible for more adult deaths and disability worldwide than tobacco use.

4. Food systems exert increasing pressure on natural ecosystems and climate

Food production is a major driver of biodiversity loss and of air and water pollution, deforestation, soil degradation and water scarcity. Food production occupies 50 per cent of the Earth's habitable land, accounts for 70 per cent of freshwater consumption and produces around one quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions. The impacts are especially severe in low- and middle-income countries, where many people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and where food security and adaptive capacity are low.

5. Food systems are important sources of livelihoods

It is estimated that the livelihoods of about 4.5 billion people globally are tied to food systems. Often, those working in food systems are themselves affected by poverty and hunger. Economic transformation must allow for expanded off-farm job opportunities, while improving employment conditions in the agricultural sector. New agricultural technologies should serve to raise the productivity and incomes of family farmers and to ensure the sustainability and resilience of the agricultural sector.

6. Gender-sensitive social protection measures contribute to food security

Women make up over 37 per cent of the world's rural agricultural employment, a figure that rises to 48 per cent for low-income countries. Women face disadvantages in access to productive assets, inputs and services, including land, inheritance, livestock, education, and extension and financial services. Containment measures for COVID-19 pose new challenges for women in their roles as agricultural producers, farm managers, food processors, traders, wage workers and entrepreneurs.

7. COVID-19 is exacerbating challenges to both food security and nutrition

In 2020, lockdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19 disrupted food supply chains and caused a global economic recession, resulting in massive loss of livelihoods and reduced spending on nutritious food. School closures disrupted school feeding programmes for an estimated 370 million schoolchildren. The COVID-19 pandemic has also amplified humanitarian needs.

8. Policy measures on climate action and health promotion can be synergistic

Policy approaches, including incentives, regulations and dietary guidelines, can encourage people to adopt healthy diets based on foods that have lower environmental burdens. Government policies can create market incentives to encourage shifts in production, while also using consumer education and school curricula to affect consumption habits. There is an urgent need for affordable, nutrient-rich foods, including plant-based proteins, fruits and vegetables.

9. Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action contributes to food security and improved nutrition

Efforts to increase educational enrolments, prevent child marriage, reduce adolescent pregnancies and improve access to nutritious foods and family planning services can help reduce risks to women's and children's health. Nutrition education and assistance can be integrated into programmes for education, social protection, food security and health care, including for sexual and reproductive health-care services.

10. Addressing the impacts of COVID-19 may have long-term benefits

Actions to improve food security and nutrition in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – including targeted social protection programmes, protections for vulnerable food system workers, including migrant workers, protections for import-dependent countries, and increased diversity and resilience of production and distribution systems – can contribute to a long-term transformation of food systems.



Prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. More work of the Population Division is available at www.unpopulation.org.