

PRESS RELEASE

UN calls for urgent action to feed the world's growing population healthily, equitably and sustainably

New York, 19 April –The COVID-19 crisis has added between 83 and 132 million to the 690 million people worldwide who were already undernourished, casting doubt on the chances of meeting global targets on food security and nutrition and prompting calls for an overhaul of the world's food systems, which the fifty-fourth session of the UN Commission on Population and Development will discuss.

This year's meeting of the Commission on Population and Development will run from 19 to 23 April. Participants will examine the interlinkages between population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development. The Commission's debates will inform the preparations of the [Food Systems Summit](#), to be convened by the United Nations Secretary-General in September 2021.

“Our children's future is in peril with unsustainable food systems,” said Liu Zhenmin, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. “What is worse, even while wreaking havoc on the planet, our current food systems fail the hundreds of millions who still go hungry and the billions that cannot afford a healthy diet. It is time for a change.”

“Too often, it is women and girls who eat last and least, even if they are pregnant or breastfeeding, with devastating effects on their health and that of their children,” said Dr. Natalia Kanem, Executive Director of UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency.

“Now, what was already bad has been made worse by COVID-19. We see spikes in gender-based violence and child marriage, and women face barriers to sexual and reproductive health services. It is a crisis with a woman's face. Yet, it also offers lessons and opportunities for building forward better and fairer for everyone.”

“The close linkages between population, food security and nutrition demonstrate that people lie at the heart of sustainable development and the creation of equitable food systems,” said Agnes Kalibata, UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the 2021 Food Systems Summit.

Population changes and the demand for food

The continuing growth of the human population, which is expected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050, together with the growth in income per capita will substantially increase the demand for food, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

The gradual ageing and urbanization of the global population will also affect food demand. The different food requirements of youth and older persons, 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.

Current food systems are failing us

Globally, more than 3 billion people cannot afford healthy diets. Over 20 per cent of children under five suffer from stunting and 7 per cent from acute malnutrition. Meanwhile, 6 per cent of children under five and 39 per cent of adults are overweight, according to a [UN report](#) released ahead of the Commission's annual meeting.

Worldwide, only 19 per cent of children aged 6–23 months eat a minimally acceptable diet, while inadequate nutrition and anaemia among women of reproductive age contribute to poor health and development outcomes for mothers and children. Unhealthy diets are now estimated to be responsible for more adult deaths and disability worldwide than tobacco use, and older persons today face heightened risks of non-communicable diseases due to poor nutrition.

Impacts of food production on the planet

Occupying 50 per cent of the Earth's habitable land, food production is a major driver of biodiversity loss, air and water pollution, deforestation, soil degradation and water scarcity. It 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.

Food security and gender

On every continent, the prevalence of food insecurity is higher among women than men. This often occurs even in the same household and even if women are pregnant or breastfeeding. Food insecurity and malnutrition are also linked to child marriage.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further deepened women's vulnerabilities, undermining their access to food and disrupting important antenatal and postnatal services, including nutrition support for pregnant and lactating women. According to a recent [UN report](#), food scarcity and restricted mobility due to COVID-19 lockdowns has increased the incidence of gender-based violence and child marriage and heightened the risk of sexual exploitation of women and girls.

While 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 – they face disadvantages in access to productive assets, inputs and services, including land, inheritance, livestock, education and extension and financial services.

COVID-19 is exacerbating food challenges

In 2020, lockdowns and other measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 disrupted food supply chains and unleashed an economic recession with massive loss of livelihoods and reduced spending on nutritious foods. School closures disrupted school feeding programmes for an estimated 370 million schoolchildren. The pandemic has also increased humanitarian needs.

Urgent change in policies needed

Government policies can create market incentives to encourage shifts in production, while also using consumer education and school curricula to affect consumption habits. Policy approaches including incentives, regulations and dietary guidelines can encourage people to adopt healthy diets based on foods that have lower environmental burdens.

It is estimated that the livelihoods of about 4.5 billion people globally are tied to food systems. With food system workers often affected by poverty and hunger, economic transformation must allow for expanded off-farm job opportunities, while improving employment conditions in the

agricultural sector. The introduction of new agricultural technologies can raise the productivity and incomes of family farmers and help to ensure the sustainability of the agricultural sector.

Efforts to increase education, prevent child marriage, reduce adolescent pregnancy and improve nutrition and access to family planning can help reduce risks to women's and children's health. Programmes for education, social protection, food security and health care, including for sexual and reproductive health-care services, should include nutrition education and assistance.

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 – including temporary measures implemented during the COVID-19 crisis – can also contribute to a long-term transformation of food systems.

Follow the 54th session of the Commission on Population and Development on [UN Web TV](#).

Background

Commission on Population and Development

The Commission on Population and Development, established by the UN Economic and Social Council, plays the primary role of monitoring, reviewing and assessing the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, at the national, regional and international levels.

At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, countries adopted a Programme of Action, which set out a bold vision about the linkages between population, development and individual well-being and which continues to serve as a roadmap for people-centred development.

For more information about the Commission on Population and Development, visit: www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/CPD

For more information on the UN Secretary-General's Food Systems Summit, visit: [Food Systems Summit | United Nations](#)

Available for interviews:

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