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Promoting sustainable food systems for healthy diets in Europe and Central Asia: the key role of school food and nutrition programmes

About this discussion

This document summarizes the online consultation *Promoting sustainable food systems for healthy diets in Europe and Central Asia: the key role of school food and nutrition programmes*, which was held on the FAO Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) from 7 November to 18 December 2017.

The online consultation was initiated by the FAO project “*Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia*” (funded by the Russian Federation and led by the FAO Agricultural Development Economics Division) in collaboration with the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, the FAO Nutrition and Food Systems Division, and the Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI).

This online consultation complemented the *Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia*, which took place in Budapest on 4–5 December 2017.

Over the six weeks of consultation, 22 contributions were shared by individual participants and technical teams from 13 countries: Armenia, Italy, Islamic Republic of Iran, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, France, Russian Federation, Samoa, Serbia, Sweden, Tajikistan, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.

The consultation was facilitated by:

Mauricio Rosales – Senior Coordinator of the FAO Project “*Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia*”, Agricultural Development Economics Division, FAO

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Overview

The aim of this consultation was to gather input, views and recommendations on national school food and nutrition (SFN) programmes. Forum contributors identified a number of areas in which action should be taken by these programmes, and discussed how to make them more inclusive and better integrated into food systems. In addition, they shared ideas on how SFN programmes could better support the adoption of healthy diets and lifestyles beginning at an early age. Furthermore, participants explored how to build sustainable and healthy food systems by promoting multisectoral approaches to school food and nutrition programmes based on relevant national policy and legislation frameworks.

Many contributions included examples of initiatives that have already been implemented.

Specific topics that were addressed during the discussion included:

1. Improving policy coherence for school meals programmes that can impact food security and nutrition;
2. Engaging children and their families to increase capacity to maintain healthy food practices;
3. Involving the private sector in supplying healthy and diversified nutritious foods.

Food security and nutrition policies and governance

1) Formulating and implementing effective SFN programmes

While the implementation of SFN activities takes place mainly at the local level, the multisectoral framework that anchors these activities into the normative framework is developed at the national level. Since SFN programmes often aim to achieve a number of policy objectives (such as the right to food, food safety, local procurement, and nutrition education), their legal basis, policy foundation and institutional setup require a cross-ministerial mechanism, which generally includes ministries in charge of health, education, social protection, poverty reduction and agriculture.

Appropriate regulatory and institutional frameworks at the national level not only provide an enabling environment, guidance (e.g. guiding principles, guidelines and minimum criteria), knowledge (e.g. challenges and good practices from localities across the country) and support (e.g. budget allocation and expertise) for local implementation, but can also help ensure enforcement, transparency and mutual accountability.

In addition, vertical coordination between decentralized and national authorities and involvement of local actors in the policy design are key for successful SFN programmes ([Diana Carter, FAO](#), [Reka Kegyes Bozo, European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians](#)).



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Pre-analysis of food and nutrition policies can help form a valuable baseline for policy-level dialogue and needs, as well as subsequent policy impact assessment.

FAO promotes a comprehensive and food systems-based approach to school food and nutrition, encompassing four key pillars. The first pillar, **home-grown school feeding**, aims at building links between schools and local production. The second pillar, **healthy school food and meal guidelines**, sets standards to ensure the quantity, quality and safety of school meals. The third pillar, **food and nutrition education**, provides schoolchildren with learning experiences to facilitate the adoption of healthy diets and nutrition-promoting behaviours. Finally, the fourth pillar, **policy and regulatory framework**, focuses on the enabling environment needed to formulate effective school food and nutrition policies and programmes.

FAO is implementing such programmes in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the context of the project *“Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia”*. In each country, the approach is the same but the models are different. In Kyrgyzstan, the National School Feeding Programme can be considered as the most developed among the pilot countries. It involves a centralized food procurement mechanism for school feeding, known as a Logistic Centre, which is being tested at the district level. This Logistic Centre operates in partnership with a civil society organization and a local entrepreneur. In addition to storage facilities, it is equipped with laboratory facilities to certify the quality of locally produced food. In Armenia, the pilot provides three schools with heated and irrigated greenhouses for year-round cultivation of fresh vegetables and greens, thus increasing the quality and nutritious value of children's meals. In addition to this, two schools with larger greenhouse production capacity provide headmasters with additional financial resources from sales of

produce in the local market. In Tajikistan, the Government has begun to develop its own National School Feeding Programme, with 20 schools being equipped with irrigated seedbeds. This complements the World Food Programme (WFP) school meals programme that provides them with fortified wheat flour, beans, vegetable oil and salt. Seedbeds provide them with the capacity to improve the nutritional value of child feeding as well as an opportunity to earn extra funds for school feeding development (Mauricio Rosales, FAO).

Mapping national school food policies in the European Union

To get a better overview of SFN policies, the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission carried out the first comprehensive assessment of school food policies in Europe in 2014.

The study showed that European countries acknowledge the important contribution of school food to children's health, and that they have guidelines for school food in place. However, these guidelines vary considerably from one country to another, ranging from voluntary measures to compulsory bans of certain foods or drinks.

Many schoolchildren in Europe consume at least one meal at school per day. Eating healthily during these meal times not only ensures that their immediate dietary needs are met, but also promotes healthy eating knowledge and behaviour. In addition to the report, the JRC also prepared country fact sheets with more detailed information on national school food policies and related data (Stefan Storcksdieck, genannt Bonsmann).

2) Guidance for public food procurement in schools

To support countries in local food procurement policies, in 2017 the JRC and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety presented a report on public procurement, which makes the case for considering health aspects in food-related public procurement by schools.

The report presents best practices and offers operational guidance for translating existing school food health standards into appropriate procurement specifications (Stefan Storcksdieck, genannt Bonsmann).



3) Toolkits to promote water, fruit and vegetables in school menus

Fruit, vegetables and water are cornerstones of proper nutrition. However, evidence from across Europe shows that the corresponding intake recommendations for schoolchildren are not being fulfilled. In 2016, the JRC published a set of toolkits on promoting intake of water as well as fruit and vegetables in schools in order to improve children's health. The toolkits combine practical information on education, environment, and parental involvement with guidance on monitoring and evaluation ([Stefan Storcksdieck, genannt Bonsmann](#)).

4) Strengthening governance

The National School Feeding Programme in Armenia is a good example of what can be achieved with concerted involvement from different stakeholders.

WFP offered technical and financial support while transferring its expertise to a Sustainable School Feeding Foundation. Advisory assistance was also provided by SIFI, WFP's main cooperating partner in the country.

With a focus on strengthening capacity of national institutions, the Sustainable School Feeding Foundation is responsible for the implementation of activities within the broader categories of institutional capacity building, international cooperation, fundraising and public relations, and monitoring and evaluation to ensure smooth implementation of the National School Feeding Programme.

Food safety standards is another area in which WFP, through SIFI's technical support, continues to help the Government of Armenia in collaboration with line Ministries, local administrations, UN agencies and donors. These safety standards help ensure proper hygienic conditions that are required to develop and maintain high-standard infrastructure at the school level, such as school canteens.

5) Optimized school meals programme

The experience of WFP in supporting the establishment of school meals programmes in Kyrgyzstan illustrates the elements and key directions that are necessary for successful implementation:

- ▶ Enhanced policy frameworks and institutional capacity with active engagement and government ownership;
- ▶ Enhanced systems and tools (including guidance for implementation);
- ▶ Improved canteen and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure;
- ▶ Improved quality of meals (diversity and micronutrients, design of menus);
- ▶ Enhanced nutrition and WASH knowledge and practices;
- ▶ Support to school farms and gardens, with links to local farmers;
- ▶ Increased role and responsibility of communities (decision-making, inputs, monitoring);
- ▶ Facilitation of replication nationwide (through policy design, experience exchange, awareness raising);
- ▶ Training and capacity development (at national, district and school levels).

6) Cash transfer school meals

Cash transfer school meals in Armenia not only provide the usual nutritional and educational benefits associated with school feeding, but also simultaneously support the local economy and agriculture. Joint action with WFP, the Government of Armenia, SIFI, the Sustainable School Feeding Foundation, and increased parent and community engagement make the programme more sustainable ([Gerd Buta, WFP Armenia](#)).

School-based food and nutrition education awareness and advocacy

1) School-based food and nutrition education

When school food and nutrition programmes include food education, they have great potential to impact children's food-related practices, outlooks and capacities. Countries have recognized the role of food education and have integrated it into school feeding policies and national curricula. Yet the time and investment dedicated to this is insufficient, and current methodologies may not achieve lasting behavioural change.

School food policies and food and nutrition standards are most effective when backed up by monitoring committees that involve dietitians and nutrition professionals ([Reka Kegyes Bozo, European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians](#)).

FAO is currently working towards improving the scope, quality and impact of school-based food and nutrition education (SFNE) in low and middle-income countries, by focusing on promoting a food systems approach to SFNE. In addition to fostering healthy food practices among schoolchildren,

FAO also works on strengthening the impact of school food environmental policies (e.g. restrictions on the sale and marketing of ultraprocessed foods) and developing meal nutrition standards, while targeting groups that directly influence the diets of schoolchildren, such as parents, teachers and other school staff, and farmers (Déborah Di-Sokl'n Badombena-Wanta and Melissa Vargas Araya, FAO).

Among other things, the introduction of dedicated classes to support the adoption of healthy diets was suggested. This formal learning should be associated with public catering and buffet regulation, in accordance with the dietary recommendations given to the pupils. Eating at the school canteen should be seen as an opportunity to learn about healthy habits.

Other extracurricular activities, like gardening, cooking, sports and health events, could further involve kids in the practical implementation of nutritional knowledge (experts from the

Italian Ministry of Health; Ulrika Brunn, National Food Agency of Sweden, Sweden; Corné van Dooren, Netherlands Nutrition Centre, Netherlands).

2) The school as a nutrition resource centre for the local community

In the Russian Federation, the Regional Educational Agribusiness Centre has an agrotechnological and agribusiness curriculum as well as vocational programmes aimed at equipping students with essential skills for agricultural professions.

The school acts as a resource centre for the local community, providing consultations on such topics as agricultural production, regional subsidies for agricultural producers, technological issues, innovations in agriculture, and how to start one's own farm (Vladimir Chernigov, Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute, Russian Federation).

Involving the private sector in supplying healthy, diversified and nutritious food

1) Business platforms

As the major food processor and distributor, the private sector can play an important role in promoting nutrition through the development and marketing of nutritious products and services. However, evidence gaps may limit the sector's ability and willingness to invest in these same products and services.

The creation of a business platform for nutrition research based on multistakeholder partnerships between companies, educational institutions, donors and civil society may fill gaps in the evidence base (Reka Kegyes Bozo, European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians).

2) Partnerships between local farmers and local governments

In several parts of France, municipalities employ farmers to grow organic food on municipal land for consumption in school canteens.

Because the food is field fresh, the nutritional value is at its highest. The cost of these organic school meals is not any higher than that of conventional, industrially produced meals. Furthermore, the system of local public procurement to generate employment and improve nutrition constitutes a best practice in terms of sustainable food systems for collective meals (Judith Hitchman, Urgenci International Community Supported Agriculture network, France).

In Kyrgyzstan, the FAO project "Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia" employs a

centralized model in the form of a Logistic Centre to supply schools and other social institutions with nutritious and high-quality agricultural products from smallholders. Due to existing and planned volumes, prices, and quality control in particular, the Logistic Centre is able to compete in state tenders for the supply of food products. What's more, stronger links between local food producers and the country's School Food and Nutrition Programme foster local economic development (Mauricio Rosales, FAO).



3) Home-grown school feeding

Measures such as home-grown school feeding contribute to improved nutrition and health in several ways:

- ▶ by improving the diets of schoolchildren;
- ▶ by encouraging the production of healthy foods (organic and local, if possible);
- ▶ by contributing to healthy environments;
- ▶ by providing access to markets and contributing to the livelihoods of small-scale producers, thus reviving local economies;
- ▶ by improving food practices and knowledge of children and their families, and therefore of consumers.

(Florence Egal, Food Security and Nutrition expert, Italy).

The FAO project "Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia" is implementing a pilot in Armenia and Tajikistan, "School Food and Nutrition Programmes linked to the Agricultural sector", which aims to build links between schools and local food producers. In collaboration with the local community, the project establishes schoolyards in the form of greenhouses, which involves capacity building of the school staff, students and local farmers to produce, prepare and market locally produced and diverse agricultural products. The goal is to promote nutrition among schoolchildren and in the wider local community, and to stimulate the local economy as well (Mauricio Rosales, FAO).



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WEBSITES

EU Science Hub – Helping EU schools become a springboard for healthy diet and lifestyle habits <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/helping-eu-schools-become-springboard-healthy-diet-and-lifestyle-habits>

EU Science Hub – How to promote fruit and vegetable consumption in schools: a toolkit <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/how-promote-fruit-and-vegetable-consumption-schools-toolkit>

EU Science Hub – How to promote water intake in schools: a toolkit <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/how-promote-water-intake-schools-toolkit>

EU Science Hub – Public Procurement of Food for Health: Technical Report on The School Setting <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/public-procurement-food-health-technical-report-school-setting>

EU Science Hub – School food policy country fact sheets <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/school-food-policy-country-factsheets>

Milan Urban Food Policy Pact <http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org>

Regional Symposium on Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia <http://www.fao.org/europe/events/detail-events/en/c/1034293>

School food and nutrition <http://www.fao.org/school-food/en>

Schools for Health in Europe <http://www.schools-for-health.eu/she-network>

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