

New CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition

February 11, 2021 – The Rome-based Committee on World Food Security (CFS) endorsed the first-ever [Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition](#). Their objective is to support countries in the process towards achieving sustainable food systems that guarantee the availability, affordability, accessibility and safety of food that contribute to healthy diets. Acknowledging environmental, health and socio-economic impacts of food production and consumption, the guidelines highlight the need for a comprehensive, systemic and science and evidence-based approach to food systems and nutrition.

Battling malnutrition in all its forms including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity is one of the most pressing global challenges for countries today. Two billion people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies and the number of overweight or obese adults continues to increase. Hunger is also on the rise, with nearly 690 million people chronically undernourished and 130 million more being pushed into hunger due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to FAO's latest estimates. Today, more than 3 billion people cannot afford a healthy diet. Moreover, food systems are responsible for almost a third of greenhouse gas emissions globally and contribute to water pollution, soil degradation and a dramatic loss of biodiversity. Meanwhile, global food waste accounts for a GHG output greater than that of India.

Acknowledging these challenges, the Voluntary Guidelines identify seven focus areas that are relevant for improving diets and nutrition through sustainable food systems: i) transparent, democratic and accountable governance; ii) sustainable food supply chains to achieve healthy diets in the context of economic, social and environmental sustainability, and climate change; iii) Equal and equitable access to healthy diets through sustainable food systems; iv) food safety across sustainable food systems; v) people-centred nutrition knowledge, education and information; vi) gender equality and women's empowerment across food systems; and vii) resilient food systems in humanitarian contexts. Each of the focus areas includes a wide range of recommendations aimed at developing coordinated, multi-sectoral policies, laws, programmes and investment plans to enable safe, healthy and nutritious diets through sustainable food systems.

Although the guidelines are voluntary and non-binding in nature, they are expected to be applied at international, regional, national and even sub-national levels by governments, UN agencies, civil society, private sector, financial institutions and other actors in order to guide policies and interventions.

Informed by scientific outputs and global discussions, the guidelines result from a five-year inclusive multi-stakeholder negotiation process. The process started in 2016, when the CFS decided to engage in advancing nutrition. In their 2017 plenary, they launched the HLPE (High Level Panel of Experts) report on Food Systems and Nutrition and decided to prepare Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition in support of the UN "Decade of Action in Nutrition 2016 – 2025". Under the leadership of a Swiss chairperson, Liliane Ortega, a first version ("Zero Draft") was established in 2019, as well as a second version ("Draft One") in 2020, which took into consideration the results from the regional consultation meetings in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Budapest, Cairo, Panama City and Washington.

From mid-2020, the Dutch permanent representative hosted virtual negotiations, which led to the endorsement of the final version of the guidelines at the CFS47 in February 2021.

Switzerland's appraisal of the final guidelines is mixed: On the one hand, the guidelines represent a first step towards the necessary food system transformation for diets that are healthy for people and the planet as they acknowledge the critical interlinkage between sustainable food production and a healthy and sustainable food consumption. Despite a lot of resistance from some countries, Switzerland was able to anchor in the guidelines references to agroecology, antibiotic resistance and SDG12.

On the other hand, Switzerland also had to accept compromises during this rather difficult negotiation process and regrets that the document's ambition pertaining to food system does not reach far beyond the current status quo. Unfortunately, the document is neither easy-to-read, nor easy-to-apply. Making the guidelines fit for dissemination, implementation and uptake will require additional work.

Elements of the emerging Voluntary Guidelines were attacked by human rights organizations through the CFS Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) during the negotiations and endorsement. Besides the lack of a comprehensive human-right perspective, they particularly criticized that the guidelines fail to pave the way for transforming the global industrial food system into more sustainable, healthy and just food systems. As a sign of protest, the CSM walked out during the last round of negotiations, acting only as an observer in the remaining negotiation process.

It remains to be seen whether the United Nations Food Systems Summit taking place in New York in September will produce more progressive thought and action on food system transformation for the sake of the planet's and peoples' health.

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