

Peer Learning Round Tables



Cluster 1: People

Strengthening health, food and social protection systems towards COVID-19 recovery and resilience

Session 1-2

Accelerating SDG progress in the time of a pandemic: improving food systems to make healthy diets accessible to all

Wednesday, 10 March 2021, 10:00-11:30 (CET)

Guiding questions for round table

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| Question 1 | How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted consumers' food choices on healthy diets, and what are effective policies and initiatives to promote healthy consumers' food choices, during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond? |
| Question 2 | What policies and actions can governments put in place to ensure that all people, particularly those in vulnerable situations, access healthy diets during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond? |
| Question 3 | What are the lessons learnt from COVID-19 pandemic in terms of adapting and improving food production and supply to ensure the delivery of healthy diets? |

Policy actions for discussion

Policy action 1: [UK - Promoting healthier diets through the reformulation and reduction of sugar and salt in food and drink and monitoring the food environment.](#)

Presenter: Dr Tazeem Bhatia, Physician, Public Health.

Policy action 2 [Sweden - School meal system innovation and national objectives for sustainable food consumption.](#)

Presenter: Dr Annica Sohlström, Director General, Swedish Food Agency.

Policy action 3: [Romania - The Regional Agrometeorological Centre, an initiative supported by the Romanian Government to cope with climate change impact on food production.](#)

Presenter: Dr Elena Mateescu, Director General, National Meteorological Administration.

Opening

Mr Vladimir Rakhmanin, Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia, FAO.

Other speakers

Academia – Dr Robin Fears, Director Biosciences Programme, European Academies' Science Advisory Council (EASAC), and Project Coordinator, InterAcademy Partnership (IAP).

Private sector - Ms Emeline Fellus, Director, Food Reform for Sustainability & Health (FReSH), World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD).

Youth - Ms Sophie Healy-Thow, Food Systems & Nutrition Activist.

Moderator

Ms Mary Kenny, Food Safety and Consumer Protection Officer, FAO.

Background

Obesity is of growing concern in the region and thus progress related to particularly SDG2 is at risk. This is substantiated through the rising prevalence of malnutrition in all its forms as well as of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) caused by unhealthy diets. This could be related to limited food availability, access and utilization, and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the food systems are vulnerable. Functioning food systems are considered as a key accelerator to achieve the SDGs.

It is, therefore, important to ensure that food systems are able to equitably deliver affordable nutritious foods contributing to healthy diets, by improving policies, legislations, programmes and institutional enabling environment, minimizing environmental costs and impacts. It is of key importance that consumers are informed, empowered, and incentivised to consume healthy diets, and that the private sector is engaged in this process.

Healthy diets are inextricably linked to food production systems and the many key elements required in the food system to build more sustainable, resilient and flexible food distribution models/ecosystems.

The peer-learning session will address healthy diets, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (impacts, experiences), including the following aspects:

1. Promoting healthy diets is key for preserving human health and preventing diseases. Unhealthy diets lead to conditions such as obesity, micronutrient deficiencies, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs), that are leading causes of illness and death in ECA.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that people affected by pre-existing medical conditions (including NCDs) can be more vulnerable to be infected with an increasing mortality. New consumption patterns and different food choices have also emerged during the pandemic (e.g. increased takeaway food purchases and packaged/frozen foods).

2. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated inequalities in people's access to safe and nutritious food. Keeping healthy diets affordable and ensuring access to nutritious and safe food to people in vulnerable situations is key during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

During COVID-19 pandemic, due to loss of employment and remittances income, the reduced purchasing power led to lowering of quality and affordability of healthy diets for low-income families. School closures and cancellation of school meals also undermined access to food for children in vulnerable households.

3. Building more resilient food value chains is key to ensure availability of safe and nutritious food during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. It is crucial to learn from the impacts on our food supply chains and markets, and the corresponding adjustments made to overcome the specific measures and challenges due to COVID-19.

Short value chains (that link food producers to local markets and consumers) and availability of diverse locally produced high quality food have become more prominent during COVID-19 pandemic, as a potential component of more sustainable, resilient and flexible food distribution models/ecosystems in a given context.

The discussions at the round table will be closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG targets 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.4) and Action Tracks of the [Food System Summit 2021](#) (Action Track 1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

Organizers

Lead organizer	UN Issue-based Coalition on Sustainable Food Systems (FAO, WFP, WHO, UNICEF, UNECE, WMO, UNDP, IFAD)
Contributors	UNEP, ITU