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Sustainable food systems and healthy diets in Europe and Central Asia

Executive Summary

Poor diets are a major contributory factor to the rising prevalence of malnutrition in all its forms, and the way food is produced and consumed is taking a toll on the environment and natural resource base. While the food and agriculture sector has performed impressively across the Europe and Central Asia region (ECA-region) during recent decades, there is growing evidence globally and in the ECA-region that the sector's performance needs to improve to overcome multiple challenges related to food insecurity and malnutrition; to provide access to affordable, safe and nutritious food; and to minimize environmental costs. As articulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a food systems approach is considered essential to responding to these issues and thus to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 2 to "end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture." Diets connect food systems with nutrition and health outcomes and their environmental, social and economic impacts.

This document provides background information for the round-table discussion on sustainable food systems and healthy diets. As this document illustrates, food systems provide numerous entry points for policy and regulatory interventions. Implementation of the food systems improvement agenda requires an enabling environment and governance mechanism based on multisectoral and multistakeholder platforms and a strong evidence base. As each country context is unique, the approaches suggested need to be adapted, including the extent of the transformation needed.

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference may:

1. Encourage Members to affirm the importance of adopting a food systems approach for healthy diets, taking into account the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic and social), as a key commitment in achieving multiple SDGs, ensuring the fostering of policy measure synergies, and reducing trade-offs.

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2. Request that Members provide an enabling environment for implementing the food systems transformation agenda, preferably consisting of a national multisectoral coordinating mechanism with a broad mandate to use a food systems lens, with representation from the relevant government and non-state actors.
3. Emphasize to Members the promotion of dialogue on the roles of various actors and the fostering of policy coherence for sustainable food systems and healthy diets.
4. Stress to Members the need to invest in data and evidence collection:
 - a. for food systems analysis and identification of barriers to transforming food systems, taking account of the COVID-19 induced environment; and
 - b. to develop analytical capacity for determining appropriate actions and analysing trade-offs and conflicts so as to formulate win-win interventions across the food system.
5. Emphasize to Members, in the context of social sustainability and leaving no one behind, the need to address power inequalities in food systems, foster a more people-centred approach, and empower vulnerable and marginalized groups, in order to provide healthy diets for all.
6. Encourage Members to share experiences of ongoing and planned policy, regulatory and non-regulatory interventions aimed at transforming food systems, including efforts to incentivize different actors.
7. Endorse the policy recommendations as outlined in Section 5 of this document.
8. Request that FAO:
 - a. support, through the Regional Initiatives, governments and non-state actors in developing, refining and implementing the transformative agenda on sustainable food systems and healthy diets, including addressing specific impacts due to COVID-19;
 - b. work with regional and national coordinating mechanisms and bodies to analyse, at the country level, the status of current diets and food systems from the standpoint of nutritional health and sustainability; and
 - c. support countries in determining appropriate policy measures and building needed capacities and knowledge, including through the provisioning of statistics and analytical tools and the sharing of best practices from inside and outside the region.

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I. Introduction

1. Current food systems¹ need to be improved to sustainably deliver the quality diets needed for men's, women's and children's health and to relieve pressure on the planet's natural resources while allowing inclusive economic growth. Food systems improvement is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically for the achievement of SDG 2, the Second International Conference on Nutrition Framework for Action (ICN2 FfA), and the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025. Poor diets are a major contributory factor to the increasing levels of obesity and associated non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the ECA-region and to undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies in some countries. Diets also are the core link between food systems and their nutrition and health outcomes.

2. Several important trends have led to this new focus on the food system's sustainability, resilience, economic viability and ability to provide affordable, safe and nutritious food. Food systems influence diets but are also impacted by consumers' food choices, via markets, together with other factors such as climate change, trade policies, urbanization and others. Food systems need to be sustainable, meaning they should ensure economic development, environmental protection and social equality. The current global outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has disrupted agricultural and food systems around the world. Within the ECA-region, certain short-term challenges are evident, while the full impact of the virus on the food systems and food and nutrition security is not yet known. However, COVID-19 is expected to have significant consequences for food systems, now and into the future.

3. This requires attention across the entire food system, including in agricultural production, food chain operations, trade and distribution patterns, management of food safety, animal health and plant health risks, and consumer education programmes adapted to the needs and priorities of various social groups. Actions at national and community levels by stakeholders from the public and private sectors influence the availability, affordability, safety and quality of food and diets. These inter-relations within food systems and with healthy diets and sustainability help identify solutions that are win-wins for both human and planetary health.

4. The purpose of this document is to provide background information on the above-mentioned topics for discussion and an exchange of views and recommendations at the round-table discussion. Section 2 provides an overview of food security and nutrition challenges in the region. Section 3 introduces the concepts of a food systems approach and sustainable healthy diets, with a view towards forging a common understanding of these emerging concepts and frameworks. Governments have a key role in creating an enabling policy, legal and institutional environment that provides incentives for food system actors to improve on the three sustainability criteria. Section 4 illustrates how food systems provide numerous entry points for this. Section 5 suggests actions for guiding the process of implementing the reform agenda. It is also expected that the round-table discussion and its recommendations will contribute to, *inter alia*, informing FAO's work in the region, the midterm review of the ICN2 FfA, and the preparation of the United Nations Food Systems Summit in 2021.

II. Food security and nutrition challenges in the region

5. Undernourishment, reflecting the inadequacy of food energy, is hardly an issue at the national level in the ECA-region, with a prevalence of 5 percent or more in just six countries.² However, other forms of food insecurity and malnutrition continue to be prominent – notably, access to quality and

¹ FAO. 2018. *Sustainable food systems: Concept and framework*. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca2079en/CA2079EN.pdf>.

² FAO. 2019. *Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia 2019: Structural Transformations of Agriculture for Improved Food Security, Nutrition and Environment*. Budapest. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca7153en/ca7153en.pdf>.

nutritious foods, overweight and obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity (SDG Indicator 2.1.2)³ remains relatively high in many countries, averaging 15.8 percent in 2016-2018 in the Western Balkans; between 11 and 19 percent in countries in the European Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Caucasus and Central Asia; and 6.7 percent in the European Union. This indicator reflects concerns over access to – and consumer choice of – quality, nutritious and sufficient food.

6. Overweight and obesity is a major issue in this region. The prevalence of adult obesity in 2016 was higher than the world average of 13.2 percent in 49 of the 50 countries of the ECA-region for which data was available, and more than twice the world average in 14 countries. Moreover, the prevalence of adult obesity was higher in 2016 than in 2010 in all 50 countries. Anaemia in both children and women is a public health concern across the region. In 2016, anaemia among women of reproductive age was specifically high in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Western Balkans and Turkey (with prevalence in the 30-34 percent range), but also relatively high in the European CIS (23.4 percent) and the European Union and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) subregions (17.2 to 18.7 percent range).

7. The simultaneous occurrence of multiple forms of malnutrition in one country, and even a household, is now a widespread global phenomenon. It is recognized that responding to this challenge requires multisectoral approaches involving food, agriculture, health, education and more. Healthy diets play a central role, and lack of access to nutritious, diverse and sufficient food is an important determinant of various forms of malnutrition.⁴ For example, the link between food insecurity and overweight and obesity may be driven partially by the higher cost of nutritious foods (and their substitution with cheaper foods high in fats and sugar), the stress of living with uncertain access to food, and physiological adaptations to periodic food restrictions.

8. Country responses to these multiple forms of malnutrition would most likely vary depending on the severity of the form of malnutrition. For example, where undernutrition remains substantive, increasing production and availability would be a priority. However, where moderate or severe food insecurity, as defined above, is widespread, where micronutrient deficiencies are at high levels, and where overweight and obesity is high and rising – as is generally the case in the ECA-region – an appropriate response would be to ensure affordable access to a range of nutritious foods on a secure basis year-round, coupled with education programmes to influence demand, as stressed in the two recent global *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* (SOFI) reports. No one action or single sector can resolve these issues alone, and acting in a timely manner in the food and agriculture sector, when countries are at the beginning of the nutrition transition, may enable more effective prevention, thus stemming the rising tide of overweight and obesity. A holistic approach based on food systems makes sense, even more so when sustainability considerations are also taken into account.

III. Forging a common understanding of a sustainable food systems approach to healthy diets

9. Given that a sustainable food systems approach to healthy diets is gaining momentum and importance, it is desirable that all stakeholders have a common understanding of the key concepts and the process for implementing the approach.

³ This is derived from the Food Insecurity Experience Scale methodology, based on the direct responses of surveyed people.

⁴ **FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO.** 2018. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018: Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition.* Rome, FAO.

<http://www.fao.org/3/i9553en/i9553en.pdf>

FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2019. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019: Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns.* Rome, FAO.

<http://www.fao.org/3/ca5162en/ca5162en.pdf>

10. **Food systems**, as defined by FAO, “encompass the entire range of activities involved in the production, processing, marketing, consumption and disposal of goods that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, including the inputs needed and the outputs generated at each of these steps.”⁵ Food systems also include people and institutions as well as the sociopolitical, economic and technological environment in which these activities take place. A **sustainable food system** extends the scope of a policy outcome to address all three dimensions of sustainability, defined broadly as economic, social and environmental. This means that the outcome of a policy intervention should: i) be profitable throughout (economic sustainability); ii) generate broad-based benefits for society (social sustainability); and iii) have a positive or neutral impact on the natural environment (environmental sustainability).⁶ Thus, achieving a sustainable food system is a progressive process of identifying and striking a balance among the food and agriculture sector’s economic, social and environmental objectives.

11. As all activities in a food system are interconnected, intervention at one point often has impacts on activities and actors elsewhere in the system and on the three dimensions of sustainability. As a result, interventions lead to trade-offs as well as conflicts. A **food systems approach** helps foresee these trade-offs and conflicts and thus contributes to formulating and implementing superior policies – those that contribute the most to the three dimensions of sustainability while minimizing conflicts across activities, actors and overall goals.⁷ The numerous entry points for policy and regulatory interventions are discussed in Section 4.

12. Food systems, having evolved for millennia, are embedded in unique historical, religious, social, cultural and economic contexts and are thus very diverse. They could also be highly heterogeneous in terms of the impacts on the three dimensions of sustainability. Even within a single country, the food system presents complex challenges where problems are often tackled through isolated interventions, fragmented policies and little consideration or regard for trade-offs. Adopting a systemic approach needs to take account of the fact that each country (or subregion) context is unique. It also needs to take into account the extent of the transformation of the food system required for the twin goals of sustainability and healthiness of diets. The end goal is for the food system as a whole to be sustainable, with all the elements of the system in place and functioning. The concept of “sustainability” is central to all SDGs, including to SDG 2.

13. The 2019 Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia (2019 Regional SOFI) reviewed the process of structural transformations taking place in food and agriculture in the ECA-region. Among other things, the review points to some positive developments towards production diversity and the evolution of healthier diets. Trends towards diversification are indicated by reduced share in total output of the two main cereals (wheat and maize) in many countries, coupled with the growth of other cereals, the rapid growth of fruit and vegetables, and large reductions of cotton in main cotton-producing countries. Furthermore, the growth was mostly due to yield and not area expansion. In addition to large increases in availability of fruit and vegetables from production and trade, increases in fish and pulses were also observed. In the meat sector, while the availability of poultry rose fast, the growth rate for red meat was slower.

14. Highlighted challenges included sustaining the growth of the food and agriculture sector and its resilience to shocks. There are indications of a slowdown in production growth in several countries, with the livestock subsector growing more slowly than crops, especially in Central Asia and the European CIS. Moreover, output growth has been more volatile in recent years, presumably due to shocks related to climate, trade, migration and remittances, and economy-wide fluctuations.

⁵ **High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE)**. 2017. *Nutrition and food systems*. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security. Report No. 12. Rome. 152 pp. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7846e.pdf>.

⁶ **High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE)**. 2017. *Nutrition and food systems*. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security. Report No. 12. Rome. 152 pp. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7846e.pdf>.

⁷ **FAO**. 2018. *Food systems for healthy diets*. Policy Guidance Note 12, 2018, Series on Strengthening Sector Policies for Better Food Security and Nutrition Results. FAO. <http://www.fao.org/3/CA2797EN/ca2797en.pdf>.

15. Many countries in the ECA-region also need to improve production (both quantity and quality of raw materials, such as milk), address land reform and the viability of small farms, improve technologies and efficiencies along value chains, strengthen policies to support farmers and stabilize food market prices, strengthen systems to prevent and manage food chain risks, minimize food loss and waste, and focus on local markets and export trade. As these elements are strengthened, adopting a systemic approach to build in sustainability means that each country would need to decide on the trade-offs, according to their situations and goals, and build on existing opportunities.

16. With the objective of facilitating country work on the transformation of food systems, and acknowledging the existence of diverging views on the concepts of sustainable diets and healthy diets, FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO) jointly organized an expert consultation in 2019, the main outcome of which was the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Healthy Diets (SHDs).⁸ The SHDs were defined as dietary patterns that promote all dimensions of individuals' health and well-being; have low environmental pressure and impact; are accessible, affordable, safe and equitable; and are culturally acceptable. The Guiding Principles agreed on: i) a holistic approach to diets; ii) considering international nutrition recommendations; iii) the environmental cost of food production and consumption; and iv) adaptability to local social, cultural and economic contexts. The Guiding Principles suggest the articulation of policies to transform food systems through the development of national food-based dietary guidelines that consider the three dimensions of sustainability.

IV. Transitioning to sustainable food systems for healthy diets

17. Our sustainability concerns with today's food systems stem from a number of realities and challenges.⁹ Briefly, while the lack of food is no longer a challenge in the ECA-region, ensuring a healthy diet for all remains a challenge. In addition, containing the environmental footprint of current and growing food production is a concern, considering such issues as land degradation, overexploitation of fish stocks, pressure on water sources, biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, high food loss and waste, and extreme weather events, among others. These stresses on food systems are compounded by consumers' food choices and food waste habits. It is important to understand these challenges in local contexts to ensure that actions and agroecological approaches and technologies, including digitalization, can be used in transforming food systems.

18. Governments have a key role in creating an enabling policy, legal and institutional environment that provides incentives for food system actors to improve on the three sustainability criteria. What is challenging is to identify the reforms needed and to generate evidence for stakeholders to reach a consensus that the proposed changes contribute to improving food systems and diets, ultimately, in a sustainable way. Achieving social sustainability requires food systems to evolve in such a way that those who are the least advantaged are not left behind. Non-state actors have a role to play in supporting governments in this task, including the private sector in driving investments and food business decisions that consider sustainability and consumer health.

19. This section presents some examples of the many entry points for improving food systems, covering primary production and post-production supply chains, on the supply side, and food environments and consumer behaviour, on the demand side. Measures taken to limit the spread of COVID-19 in Europe and Central Asia include restricted movement of people, applied export and import policies, increased border controls for people and merchandise, and closure of wet markets, restaurants, food stalls and hotels. Policies and measures such as these have the potential to negatively affect agrifood value chains, and have repercussions throughout the food system. Disruption in food

⁸ FAO & WHO. 2019. *Sustainable healthy diets: Guiding principles*.

<http://www.fao.org/3/ca6640en/ca6640en.pdf>

⁹ UNEP. 2019. *Collaboration Framework for Food Systems Transformation*.

https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sites/default/files/un-e_collaborative_framework_for_food_systems_transformation_final.pdf

production, food supply chains, trading routes for food and agriculture inputs, labour supply, distortions and cancelling of markets, sale, distribution and consumption have occurred to varying degrees throughout the region. Priorities include functioning food supply chains and assuring food and nutrition security, and protecting the most vulnerable. Policy guidance is available from FAO on a range of issues and aspects integral to the food system.¹⁰

IV.1. Transforming production structure for diversified and sustainable food systems

20. What a country produces is primarily determined by natural comparative advantage (climate, soil, traditional and dominant diets, etc.). However, policy also plays an important role. Two examples below illustrate this, but there are many entry points for policy and regulatory measures to influence production patterns. Section 5 also illustrates several examples of good practices in primary production that deserve scaling up.

21. Many governments have in the past, especially prior to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Agriculture in 1995, incentivized the production of several commodities (notably wheat, maize, sugar, cotton, dairy and meat), using instruments such as price and income support, guaranteed procurement, and import restrictions. This boosted the production of the favoured products. However, this also had the effect of indirectly disincentivizing the rest of the non-supported products, such as minor grains, legumes and pulses, fruits and vegetables, and a variety of indigenous and traditional foods often rich in micronutrients.¹¹

22. While agriculture policies are being increasingly decoupled from the production of specific commodities, it seems that there is still considerable scope for creating an environment that is truly supportive of a diversified production structure, starting with managing natural resources sustainably as recommended in the ICN2 FfA. One message in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 2018 agricultural policy monitoring report¹² was to consider shifting the focus of farm support in OECD countries, which includes more than half of the countries in the ECA-region, to general services and rural development, currently supported at relatively low levels, and away from price and income support measures, currently supported at high levels. General services and rural development measures usually contribute to a more diversified agriculture as well as improved environmental and social aspects.¹³

23. Indeed, similar conclusions as in the OECD study were drawn by two recent studies that covered several non-OECD countries from the ECA-region.¹⁴ They found that supports were provided largely

¹⁰ <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/resources/policy-briefs/en/>

¹¹ **Pingali, P.** 2015. Agricultural policy and nutrition outcomes – getting beyond the preoccupation with staple grains. *Food Security*, 7: 583–591. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-015-0461-x>.

Pinstrup-Andersen, P., ed. 2015. *Food price policy in an era of market instability: A political economy analysis*. Oxford University Press.

World Bank. 2014. *Learning from World Bank history: Agriculture and food-based approaches for addressing malnutrition*. World Bank Agriculture and Environmental Services Discussion Paper No. 10. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/497241468168227810/pdf/887400NWP0Box30ning0from0WB0History.pdf>.

¹² **OECD.** 2018. *Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2018: Part I. Developments in Agricultural Policy and Support*. Paris, OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/agr_pol-2018-en.

¹³ General services typically benefit agriculture as a whole or the rural community, such as research, pest and disease control, training, marketing, rural infrastructures, etc. Examples of rural development measures (in the European Union) are rural and farm diversification programmes, adding value to farm products, geographical indications, direct marketing, short supply chains, and support for cooperatives and youth.

¹⁴ **Kožar, M., Pintar, M., Volk, T., Rednak, Mi., Rac, I. & Erjavec, E.** 2016. *Agriculture and agricultural policy in Eastern European Neighbourhood*. 155th Seminar, September 19–21, 2016, Kiev, Ukraine 245877, European Association of Agricultural Economists. <https://doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.245877>. Covers Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation and Ukraine.

through production-coupled measures (favouring specific products) while support through general services and rural development was lower, in the 20-40 percent range of total transfers, and even lower in some countries. One constraint is public budget. While support for specific products maintained via trade policy is paid largely by consumers, income support decoupled from production requires funding from governments, which is a major constraint among certain countries of the ECA-region. For this reason, production decoupling takes place rather gradually. Recent trends in falling cotton areas in some countries in Central Asia, following the relaxation of land use requirements, are positives for diversification.

24. A second example of a policy measure that favours diversification is rebalancing public spending on agricultural research and innovation. Historically, research funding by CGIAR, the global agricultural research programme, has been highly biased towards a narrow range of prominent crops, while minor food products, many of them valued for their nutritional, social and environmental benefits, received small shares (such as for legumes) or none (no CGIAR research programme for fruit and vegetables).¹⁵ It is likely that this pattern may also apply to research funding in many countries globally, including in the ECA-region. Without sustainable and profitable technologies that raise profits and reduce risks, the undermined products underperform in attracting investment from both farmers and supply chain actors. The 2019 Regional SOFI shows, for almost all countries of the ECA-region other than in the European Union and EFTA subregions, under-investment in agriculture relative to the sector's importance in the economy (as measured by agriculture orientation index, SDG Indicator 2.a.1). Some positive trends are being observed to increase investment and focus on the food and agriculture sector, but more needs to be done. Besides raising public investment in agriculture and rural development, the quality of spending needs to be improved by reallocating spending to areas that support the goals of food security, nutrition and environmental protection. The "Farm to Fork" strategy, to be launched in 2020 by the European Union, represents an example of tackling the transition towards sustainable food systems by addressing simultaneously these different goals, with targeted actions covering every step in the food supply chain, from primary production to consumption.

IV.2. Improving supply chains

25. Food supply chains after the farm gate (storage and distribution, processing and packaging, retail and markets) provide numerous entry points for public and private actors to attain sustainable food systems and healthy diets. Examples include: preserving the nutritional value of non- or low-processed food through traditional conservation methods, improving the nutritional value of food through reformulation and fortification, curbing unhealthy nutrients, clear food labelling, appropriate advertising and marketing of food, integrated school food and nutrition initiatives, promoting the formation of cluster groups/cooperatives, supporting market access for small-scale and traditional producers, promoting short value chains, and reducing food loss and waste. Supply chains need to incorporate controls to prevent and manage risks to food safety and animal and plant health, with due regard to the international standards of the Codex Alimentarius, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC).

26. Indeed, numerous such initiatives can be found across the ECA-region. An example is procurement schemes for school food programmes in Albania. FAO has been working closely with governments in the region to link smallholders to markets, to develop the agribusiness sector, and to

Volk, T., Rednak, M., Erjavec, E., Zhllima, E., Gjenci, G., Bajramović, S. & Vaško, Ž., et al. 2017. *Monitoring of agricultural policy developments in the Western Balkan countries*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre. <https://doi.org/10.2760/146697>. Covers Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

¹⁵ **World Bank.** 2014. *Learning from World Bank history: Agriculture and food-based approaches for addressing malnutrition*. World Bank Agriculture and Environmental Services Discussion Paper No. 10. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/497241468168227810/pdf/887400NWP0Box30ning0from0WB0History.pdf>.

promote diversity in diets. For example, legal frameworks on organic agriculture were reviewed in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation. On geographical indications, the development of pilot value chains was supported, along with the updating and strengthening of legal frameworks, in Albania, Croatia, Georgia, Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Turkey.¹⁶ Furthermore, agrifood activities have demonstrated that empowering rural women economically and improving their access to knowledge, skills and markets can lead to improvements in the quality of food and nutrition for their children and households. Introducing voluntary and mandatory standards for the fortification of various food products (including flour, salt and vegetable oils) with micronutrients and vitamins (such as iron, iodine, vitamin A and vitamin B) has also proven to be an efficient way to reduce micronutrient deficiencies in Central Asia.¹⁷

27. A survey of country measures for reviewing progress in the ICN2 FfA has provided some examples of the promotion of healthy diets.¹⁸ It found that many countries have regulations for the reformulation of a range of food and beverage products to reduce or ban the content of saturated fatty acids, trans-fatty acids, sugars and salt/sodium. A relatively high proportion of reformulation measures for trans-fatty acids was mandatory, possibly reflecting the increasing number of countries with regulations banning trans-fatty acids. In 2019, WHO published the REPLACE package, a road map for countries to implement actions to reduce and eliminate industrially produced trans-fatty acids, with six strategic action areas.¹⁹

28. A number of countries are taking action to tackle food loss and waste through the formulation of national food loss and waste reduction strategies (e.g. Belgium, France, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, etc.); the development of measurement methodology and good practice guidelines for food business operators; and the revision of legislation and promotion of voluntary agreements between the public and private sectors. Other countries are also following suit with FAO support, such as introducing new legislation in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, conducting research in North Macedonia, and developing a food donation programme in Georgia.

29. There is a need to document and analyse the effectiveness of these interventions through the lens of the three dimensions of sustainability. As an example, in the European Union, SUSFANS,²⁰ a research programme implemented during 2015-2019, contributed to analysing the European Union's food systems, including food chains, from the standpoints of nutrition and sustainability. In Kyrgyzstan, FAO is working with multiple stakeholders to conduct a systematic situational analysis of pathways of cause and effect between trends in various dimensions of food systems (food supply, consumption, environment) and overweight, obesity and NCDs. The *Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems*, endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security in 2014, provides valuable guidelines for, among others, the private sector investing in food systems.

IV.3. Improving food environments through consumer behaviour

30. The way in which consumers express their food preferences and choices, which is largely influenced by food environments, not only determines what people eat but can also, via market demand, influence the private sector and shape production, supply chains and global trade. Thus, collective

¹⁶ See more details in the background document "Results and Priorities for FAO in the Region" for this Regional Conference for Europe under document ERC/20/5.

¹⁷ **Asian Development Bank.** 2010. *Satisfying Hidden Hunger: Addressing Micronutrient Deficiencies in Central Asia*. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28702/hidden-hunger.pdf>.

¹⁸ **WHO.** 2018. *Global nutrition policy review 2016-2017: Country progress in creating enabling policy environments for promoting healthy diets and nutrition*. Geneva, World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/275990/9789241514873-eng.pdf>.

¹⁹ **WHO.** 2020. REPLACE trans fat. In: *World Health Organization* [online]. <https://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/replace-transfat>.

²⁰ The name SUSFANS is derived from the capital letters of the project "Metrics, Models and Foresight for European *S*UStainable Food And Nutrition Security." For more information, see <https://www.susfans.eu/>.

changes in consumer behaviour is one critical pathway to enable healthy diets and sustainable food systems. Most countries implement policy and regulatory measures to influence consumer behaviour, with prominent measures being nutrition education, information campaigns, labelling of food packages, formulation of dietary guidelines, and fiscal measures. Such policies need to take account of gender and socio-economic differences.

31. In the progress review of the ICN2 FfA, cited earlier, it was found that many more countries were implementing “soft” measures such as the provision of information and education than “hard” measures such as restricting the availability and marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages. For example, just 30 percent of the countries surveyed globally reported regulating the marketing of ultraprocessed foods and sugar sweetened beverages to children. Furthermore, 27 percent reported using fiscal measures, and 19 percent reported slapping a ban on trans-fatty acids. In contrast, many more were implementing nutrition labelling (81 percent of the surveyed countries), media campaigns (72 percent) and nutrition counselling (83 percent). This likely indicates greater challenges in implementing more divisive measures – which may entail larger conflicts of interest and trade-offs. Soft measures play a crucial role, because they help consumers make informed choices. One study has found that the most effective strategies in changing consumption – as shown in the case of salt in Europe – are those that combine product reformulation, consumer awareness and education and are supported by appropriate monitoring mechanisms.²¹

V. Policy recommendations to implement the transformative agenda in the region

31. The transformative agenda entails providing political leadership for creating or strengthening governance mechanisms for identifying changes needed in the food systems and facilitating implementation by, *inter alia*, resolving any potential conflicts and trade-offs that may result. In Section 4 and elsewhere, policies, regulations and approaches considered useful for transforming food systems towards sustainability are illustrated (but are not exhaustive). As food systems and country contexts differ, suitable interventions need to be identified, and there are often trade-offs in terms of cost effectiveness and outcomes along the three dimensions of sustainability.

32. Responsible investment by the private sector, people-centred approaches, and community-based action are equally important. Greater gains may result through increased inclusion and empowerment of women, youth and consumers in the policy arena.

Creating an enabling environment and ensuring policy coherence

33. Given that the agenda covers many sectors, actors and policy areas, governance mechanisms need to be multisectoral – with multisectoral action plans, involving multiple stakeholders, and led by a national multisectoral coordinating mechanism. Policy coherence is ensured by aligning policies across all sectors – agriculture, health, education, environment, water, trade, etc. – from local to national to international levels and discussing them with all actors of society. One study that assessed healthy eating policies in Europe, as part of the collaborative research project EATWELL, found that, *inter alia*, “any policy aimed at healthy eating is more effective if there is a component of multistakeholder involvement and if the approach includes the synergy of different types of policy instruments.”²²

²¹ Hendriksen, M.A.H., van Raaij, J.M.A., Geleijnse, J.M., Breda, J. & Boshuizen, H.C. 2015. Health Gain by Salt Reduction in Europe: A Modelling Study. *PLOS ONE*, 10(3): e0118873. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118873>.

²² Pérez-Cueto, F.J., Aschemann-Witzel, J., Shankar, B., Brambila-Macias, J., Bech-Larsen, T., Mazzocchi, M. & Capacci, S., et al. 2011. Assessment of evaluations made to healthy eating policies in Europe: a review

34. The survey for tracking progress on the ICN2 FfA²³ provides a panorama of the current status on governance, but largely from a nutrition perspective, while the governance mechanism for improving food systems sustainably has a broader mandate. Some key survey results applying to the ECA-region were:

- i. Most countries had national policies that included nutrition, and most had dedicated nutrition plans, but only 27 percent of them were costed separately.
- ii. Sixty-seven percent of the countries that responded reported having some form of multisectoral coordination mechanism for nutrition-related work.
- iii. Twenty-nine percent of the countries housed their coordination mechanism at the highest level, in the office of the president or prime minister.
- iv. The involvement of the private sector has risen, both in nutrition actions and coordination mechanisms.

Building evidence for supporting the transformative agenda

35. Food systems encompass many subsectors and actors, and so an intervention at one point in the system tends to have consequences elsewhere. When the consequences are sizeable, affected parties tend to oppose or block the measure. There is also the need for carefully balancing potential trade-offs among the three dimensions of sustainability. Resolving such conflicts by understanding the trade-offs involved is what speeds up the transformative process. All these require sound evidence, both data and analysis. Sufficient baseline evidence is also required to be able to measure impact and understand whether certain actions succeed or fail. One example of an initiative to evaluate impacts and identify best practices and policies is the Policy Evaluation Network (PEN), established in February 2019 by the European Union research groups. The PEN plans to foster a pan-European monitoring and surveillance system, model the impact of policies at the population level, evaluate implementation processes, and give recommendations for an equity and diversity perspective in policies targeting, among others, dietary behaviours across Europe.

36. It is also important that this process of building and reviewing evidence take place through the governance structures that allow multisectoral and multistakeholder dialogue and decision-making, maximizing use of specialized expertise available in national research and academic bodies. Organizations such as FAO can contribute by organizing stakeholder meetings to demonstrate what works and what does not, and by bringing practitioners, scientists and policy-makers to the same table.

37. In building evidence and assessing trade-offs, special attention needs to be given to ***inequities and inequalities, as determinants such as gender, age, social and economic status may significantly influence access to healthy diets***. Statistics disaggregated by income, gender and subregion continue to show gaps in food security and nutrition status. Even in high-income countries, the prevalence of obesity is rising faster in households identified as being in lower socioeconomic groups based on living and working conditions, income and education. In a recent regional consultation on Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition,²⁴ participants made a number of suggestions to address social sustainability, including addressing power inequalities in food systems, empowering vulnerable and marginalized groups, having a more people-centred text highlighting rights to food, human dignity, gender equality and women's empowerment.

within the EATWELL Project. *Public Health Nutrition*, 15(8): 1489–1496. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980011003107>.

²³ WHO. 2018. *Global nutrition policy review 2016-2017: Country progress in creating enabling policy environments for promoting healthy diets and nutrition*. Geneva, World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/275990/9789241514873-eng.pdf>.

²⁴ Committee on World Food Security (CFS). 2019. CFS regional consultation for Europe on the preparation of the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition. Budapest, 17–18 September 2019. <http://www.fao.org/cfs/workingspace/workstreams/nutrition-workstream/reg/en/>.

Scaling up innovative and proven practices

38. Scaling up innovative and proven practices could also be considered as part of the food systems transformative agenda. One finds in most countries in the world, including in the ECA-region, many practices in production and supply chains, both traditional and new, that are valued for their multiple positives (nutrition, pro-poor, resilience and environment). Examples include the sustainable production and marketing of niche products, home gardens, short supply chains and local markets, territorial approaches, procurement of nutritious foods, integrated school feeding programmes, fair-trade products, users' cooperatives, food loss and waste reduction initiatives, healthy eating campaigns, and the preservation of traditional diets and food culture. Such practices are also included in recent agroecological initiatives,²⁵ land and water management and biodiversity-friendly practices and approaches in the context of a changing climate, and rural development programmes. Although they may be confined to small areas and may be composed of small-scale operations (both in urban and rural settings) with minor impacts at the national level, they may deserve to be scaled up.

39. Likewise, e-agriculture (also called digital agriculture) needs to be promoted, as do the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and digital technologies. The 2018 FAO Regional Conference for Europe (ERC), in the context of food systems, noted that a nationally integrated ICT-based platform can promote holistic integration by channelling data from agriculture, environment, health and transportation; providing or making available to consumers information on products and quality; ensuring the timely transportation of products to market; introducing new models for service delivery, fair and inclusive trade, and social and financial inclusion; and empowering smallholders through stronger linkages among small-scale producers, markets and financial services.²⁶

40. Furthermore, work on innovative approaches occurs under FAO's Regional Initiatives,²⁷ planned to be implemented during 2020-2021. Activities include empowering smallholders and family farms and engaging in community and rural development (Regional Initiative 1); equitable and safe trade in food and agriculture commodities and associated efficient agrifood value chains (Regional Initiative 2); and agroecological approaches and the protection of natural resources, including climate change adaptation and mitigation measures (Regional Initiative 3). Work under all three Regional Initiatives supports countries in the transition to more sustainable food systems and healthy diets for all, including addressing COVID-19 impacts.

41. Indeed, country practices and other experiences of food system development in the region should be identified, and any specific needs or priorities due to COVID-19; they may constitute a key part of this region's contribution to the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit. The round-table event may include discussions and decisions on these practices and experiences.

²⁵ FAO. 2017. *Report of the Regional Symposium on Agroecology for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems for Europe and Central Asia*. Symposium held in Budapest, Hungary, 23–25 November 2016. Rome, FAO. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7604e.pdf>.

²⁶ FAO. 2018. *E-agriculture: the Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for the Development of Sustainable and Inclusive Food Systems and Trade Integration*. FAO Regional Conference for Europe, Voronezh, Russian Federation, 16–18 May 2018. <http://www.fao.org/3/MW106EN/mw106en.pdf>.

²⁷ The title of Regional Initiative 1 is "Empowering smallholders and family farms for improved rural livelihoods and poverty reduction." The title of Regional Initiative 2 is "Improving agrifood trade and market integration," and the title of Regional Initiative 3 is "Managing natural resources sustainably, under a changing climate." For more information, see <http://www.fao.org/europe/regional-initiatives/en/>.