

Coalition to ensure healthy diets from sustainable food systems

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A young boy who is a beneficiary of UNICEF's nutrition plan eats green leafy vegetables and bread.© UNICEF/Rabik Upadhayay

United Nations, May 17 (RHC)-- Ensuring everyone has access to a healthy diet is among the goals of a UN-backed initiative recently launched in line with efforts to transform food systems globally.

The Coalition of Action for Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems for all (HDSFS), brings together governments, UN agencies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and social movements.

It is one of the outcomes of the UN Food Systems Summit held in September 2021, as part of the Decade of Action for delivery on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

The Summit called for progress towards achieving the SDGs by examining how food systems are linked to global challenges such as malnutrition, climate change, and poverty.

The HDSFS comes at a crucial time, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), one of its members, because “our food systems are making us sick.”

Every year, unhealthy diets cause 11 million deaths, while a further 420,000 people die from consuming unsafe foods. Unhealthy diets are also related to six of the top 10 risk factors for the global burden of disease, but some three billion people worldwide cannot afford to buy healthy food.

“The burden of malnutrition represents a violation of the human right to food and continues to drive health and social inequalities,” said WHO.

The picture gets worse, as the UN agency said the unsustainable practices which define food systems today are also driving deforestation, biodiversity loss, the depletion of the oceans, antimicrobial resistance, and the emergence of zoonotic diseases.

For WHO, “healthy diets from sustainable food systems” goes beyond having affordable access to foods that promote health and prevent disease. It also means having food that is produced and distributed in ways that ensure decent work and help sustain the planet, soil, water, and biodiversity.

WHO pointed to the wider impacts this would have towards achieving the SDGs, such as ending hunger and malnutrition, promoting healthy lives and well-being, improving maternal and child health, encouraging responsible consumption and production, and advancing urgent action to combat climate change.

The HDSFS will work as a “Coalition of the willing” -- serving as a platform for coordinated action on healthy diets from sustainable food systems through which countries can share experiences, champion policy actions, and gain support, information and inspiration.

As urgent action is needed in policies, practices, availability of data, and resource allocation, the Coalition’s work will be centred around three main areas: mobilizing stakeholders to align action across food systems; facilitating peer-to-peer learning between countries, and managing special projects on integrating nutrition, health and sustainability through food.

So far, 16 nations and the European Commission are “frontrunner countries” in the HDSFS.

The Coalition’s “core group members” include WHO and four other UN agencies: the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Programme (WFP).

Other members from civil society and academia include the World Wildlife Fund, the humanitarian organization CARE, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, and the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London.

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