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THE DOUBLE BURDEN
Anna Lartey brings to the fore many of the nutrition challenges faced by countries worldwide, including
the increasing prevalence of the double burden of malnutrition – undernutrition and obesity – and
highlights the policy-level endeavours devised by FAO’s Nutrition Division to address them

Embedded in the core activities of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is the eradication of malnutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies and obesity. Although these issues can affect all countries and socioeconomic classes, can you highlight some of the key indicators for susceptibility?

All countries are indeed susceptible to the nutritional issues outlined. However, the underlying conditions within a setting – including poverty level, infrastructure, healthcare facilities and political status – are determining factors for the level of vulnerability. Developing countries are particularly exposed to many of these problems. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, micronutrient deficiencies, stunting and wasting are highly prevalent; but they also face opposing challenges, such as obesity. FAO is therefore addressing the double burden of malnutrition in many countries.

What factors are currently having the greatest impact on global food systems and diets?

Food availability is affected by climate change, which impacts on quality and yield. Another factor is trade, as it influences the food systems in many regions of the world. The type of food being imported into a country will determine eating patterns, encouraging many populations to move away from more traditional eating habits. In the Pacific Islands, for example, there is a heightened dependence on imported food and, in turn, a reduction in reliance on locally produced food. A similar situation exists in many countries in Africa, where high-calorie foods are displacing traditional food from diets. Agriculture is also a key factor, especially in its relation to trade, as agricultural policies influence the types of food produced, which will subsequently affect food prices, the food system and diet.

Poor nutrition is a fundamental source of bad health, and one that can lead to stunted growth and poor development. How is the FAO Nutrition Division taking up the gauntlet against this problem?

In collaboration with several other divisions, the FAO Nutrition Division has been dedicating many of its efforts to bringing attention to the issues of poor nutrition at the highest possible level. For example, we organised the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) last year. At this meeting, we gave visibility to some of the global nutrition problems, such as poor diet, and discussed how the food system is rapidly changing. We brought together quite a number of political and country leaders, and policy makers from agriculture, health and other sectors. We aimed to get countries to commit to undertaking certain actions to reverse malnutrition problems in their countries.

FAO is also endeavouring to support countries in making their agriculture policies more nutrition-sensitive. We are shifting focus from simply filling stomachs to ensuring that food is nutritious and beneficial to health. Our work involves collaborating with relevant stakeholders such as civil society, the private sector and other partners, including the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition to highlight the negative impacts of poor diet and how agriculture can focus more heavily on nutrition.

Does the FAO also work on a country-by-country basis to tackle these problems?

In some cases, yes. FAO has country representatives worldwide, and we are aware of the diversified needs between nations. Often, however, we work at the regional level dealing with prevalent issues that cross national boundaries, such as the aforementioned double burden of malnutrition. Therefore, regional conferences are held so that common problems can be discussed and resources can be pooled to address them.

Could you outline the current aims and objectives of the Nutrition Division?

Our work here is guided by FAO’s mandate to raise levels of nutrition and support countries to ensure that policies and programmes are addressing associated issues. In many countries, there is a gap between agriculture and nutrition, as the latter is considered as a health issue, which results in a lack of communication between the two sectors. Alongside ensuring that agriculture policies are nutrition-sensitive, we are looking to nutrition education, as it is an important tool for encouraging healthy eating behaviour. Additionally, we support countries by providing scientific advice and conducting nutritional surveys.

What are your key responsibilities as Director of the Division? What skills and experiences do you bring to this position?

As Director, I provide strategic direction for the Division’s work. I also take care of administrative issues, and it’s my responsibility to bring the work of the Division to the fore, so that all within and outside FAO know what we are doing. Additionally, I coordinate our efforts to ensure that we accomplish our goals.

I have fulfilled this role for about a year and a half. Many of my skills are rooted in my experience as a university researcher and professor, especially with regard to evidence-based decision making. This helps me ask the right questions to guide the Division. In addition to this, I have served on the boards of many global organisations before I joined FAO, so I can create linkages and partnerships for the Division.

More than 2 billion people are deficient in micronutrients such as vitamin A, iodine, iron and zinc

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COMMITTING TO CHANGE

At the second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), FAO launched two political documents aimed at guiding nutrition in the next 10 years.

ROME DECLARATION ON NUTRITION

A commitment by countries to eradicate hunger and prevent all forms of malnutrition worldwide – particularly, undernutrition in children, anaemia in women and children, and reversing the trend of obesity.

In brief, the Declaration aims to:

• Eradicate hunger and prevent all forms of malnutrition
• Increase investments in effective interventions and actions to improve people’s diets and nutrition at all stages of life
• Implement coherent public policies across relevant sectors, from production to consumption
  • Make food systems more sustainable
• Provide consumers with clear nutrition information so they can make informed food choices
  • Protect, promote and support breastfeeding
• Protect consumers, especially children, from inappropriate marketing and publicity of food
  • Integrate the Declaration’s vision into the post-2015 development agenda
  • Use the Framework for Action to implement the above conditions

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FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The creation of an enabling environment for effective action and the strengthening of sustainable food systems, including through investments in pro-poor agriculture and smallholder agriculture to improve diets and raise levels of nutrition; nutrition education and information; social protection; strengthened health systems for addressing specific conditions; improved water, sanitation and hygiene; and improved food security.


Following ICN2, FAO is endeavouring to develop indicators to both monitor and support Member States adhering to these commitments. The Director-General of FAO, José Graziano da Silva, has led the effort to establish an ‘Action for Nutrition’ trust fund to mobilise resources to support countries with fewer resources in the implementation of the ICN2 Framework for Action recommendations.
One particularly interesting aspect of the Division’s work is ensuring proper nutrition for children. What role has it played in improving child health and nutritional wellbeing?

FAO is improving school nutrition education as part of the curriculum, which will empower children for life and benefit their wellbeing. We are also supporting schools with activities like gardening – as opposed to simply providing the food itself, which is a temporary intervention. We want to provide sustainable means of accessing good nutrition within an everyday environment.

Is the guidance and support that the Nutrition Division provides to make adult consumers aware of nutrition therefore a continuation of that education?

Yes, it is. We work at the country level to educate the entire population, independent of age. We support countries in their development of food-based dietary guidelines that provide information on improving nutritional status. The Division has developed indicators to assess the quality of diet – especially for women, who are a vulnerable group. We also make data available that can be used for decision making. For example, we are collecting information on individual food consumption to learn about what people are eating. I believe every policy maker or leader would want to know how citizens are eating and make appropriate decisions based on this.

How do you see the Division progressing in the future? Do you have any exciting plans in the pipeline that will be influential going forward?

As Director, I hope to position the Division as the place to go to when you need information on food-based approaches for addressing malnutrition on a sustainable basis. Often, interventions have a short-term impact. If we want to address the problem of malnutrition, we have to ensure that people are eating well, which is one of our strengths. We are trying to promote that everyone should be able to meet their nutritional requirements from their diet. Therefore, countries have to look at their food production system and make adaptations to address any gaps. Our goal is to look at the entire food system and make it sustainable. We emphasised this at the ICN2. Delivering proper nutrition is something the Division really wants to spearhead.

We are also in the early stages of developing curricula for programme managers in countries to be trained in how to make food systems nutrition-sensitive. We are bringing together strategic partners and experts to brainstorm on this work. We are therefore creating tools to examine the various aspects of the food system in order to determine how it can be reformed to address malnutrition.

We are also working with institutions that give financial support to countries to make their investments nutrition-enhancing. We are creating sustainable plans of action to ensure that nations can provide their populations with nutritious food.

www.fao.org/nutrition

42 million children under five years old are overweight and more than 500 million adults are obese

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