

Responding to the Challenge of Non-communicable Diseases

World Food Programme

1. The nutrition and food security sectors are central to an effective response to NCDs

WFP is the food-assistance branch of the United Nations (UN), delivering food assistance in developing and emergency contexts, and working with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience.

Unhealthy diets ¹ are a leading risk factor for NCDs. Diet-related NCDs include cancers, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

The right to food must not be reduced to “the right to not starve.” ² Ensuring access to diverse, safe and nutritious foods can prevent NCDs and their impacts on sustainable development.

The triple burden of malnutrition—undernutrition and hunger, overweight and obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies—remains unacceptable. Children under five face large and multiple burdens: 149 million are stunted, 49.5 million are affected by wasting, and 40.1 million are overweight. ³

United Nations high-level meetings have highlighted the need for UN agencies, including WFP to scale up their work on NCDs as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

NCDs contribute to ill-health, poverty and inequities and slow the development of countries. Every year 15 million people die before age 70 from NCDs, with 86% of these premature deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries.

Major progress on NCDs is possible. Premature deaths from NCDs are largely caused by modifiable behavioural risk factors such as tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol. Environmental risks (e.g. air pollution) and constrained access to basic services also contribute significantly to NCDs.

An approach to the prevention of NCDs requires food system transformation and policies that address aspects of the wider food system, encompassing nutrition, food culture and identity, public food and meals, food loss and waste and sustainable diets.

Addressing NCDs requires coordinated action from all UN agencies within a broader whole-of-society response.



1 Unhealthy diets include energy-dense and highly processed foods that are high in refined starches, sugar, fats and/or salt, accompanied by an insufficient intake of fresh fruits and vegetables, wholegrains, pulses, nuts and seeds. FAO (2017). The State of Food and Agriculture 2017: Leveraging Food Systems for Inclusive Rural Transformation. Available at: www.fao.org/3/a-17658e.pdf.

2 A/HRC/19/59. Report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A-HRC-19-59_en.pdf

3 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank. Levels and trends in child malnutrition: key findings of the 2019 Edition of the Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2019. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

The world is now experiencing record levels of overweight and obesity among adults (38.9%), with trends increasing, particularly among adolescents.⁴

Supporting good nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life and adopting healthy dietary habits during adolescence can reduce the risk of NCDs later in life. Supporting prematernal and gestational nutrition can reduce NCD risks for both mother and child.

2. WFP has a role to play in supporting countries in preventing and controlling NCDs

WFP supports governments to implement a comprehensive multisectoral package of actions that address the triple burden of malnutrition and the prevention of diet-related NCDs. Through its core work on nutrition and food security, and in collaboration with various stakeholders, WFP is uniquely positioned to contribute to global efforts to address NCDs.

WFP's nutrition policy (2017–2021) articulates its role in addressing NCDs and supporting governments to achieve the NCD-related targets in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. WFP works with government counterparts and partners to develop five-year country strategic plans, which are subsequently endorsed by WFP Executive Board members.

A review of the cost-effective interventions endorsed by the WHA identified relevant WFP interventions at the global, regional and country level. Six examples are shown in the table.

BEST BUYS

In 2017, the World Health Assembly endorsed a set of "best buys" and other recommended interventions to address NCDs.⁵ Best buy interventions address four NCD risk factors (tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity) and four disease areas (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory disease). There are 88 recommended interventions, including overarching/enabling policy actions.

Evidence-based interventions	WFP actions
Implement mass media campaign on healthy diets including social marketing to reduce the intake of total fat, saturated fats, sugars and salt, and promote the intake of fruits.	Work with governments on strategies and programming for social and behavioural change and communication (SBCC), nutrition education and messaging across a variety of electronic and traditional media platforms including social media and press/radio. Related activities have been rolled out in countries, e.g. Sudan, Madagascar and Mozambique.
Promote and support exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life.	Promote infant and young child feeding through existing platforms such as community management of acute malnutrition and food assistance programmes.
Implement nutrition education and counselling in different settings (e.g. in pre-schools, schools, workplaces and hospitals) to increase the intake of fruits and vegetables.	Support governments to ensure that school meals programmes are nutritious. Support governments to develop policies and programmes in schools to encourage healthy diets.
Implement nutrition labelling to reduce total energy intake (kcal), sugars, sodium and unhealthy fats.	Work through the SUN Business Network to support governments in encouraging the private sector to strengthen nutrition labelling to inform consumers about total energy intake, sugars, sodium and unhealthy fats.
Access to improved stoves and cleaner fuels to reduce indoor air pollution.	Country-level implementation of the initiatives contained in the WFP Handbook on Safe Access to Firewood and Alternative Energy.

4 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank. Levels and trends in child malnutrition: key findings of the 2019 Edition of the Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2019. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

5 'Best buys' and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. WHO. 2017. Available at: <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/259232/WHO-NMH-NVI-17.9-eng.pdf>.

3. Partnerships are critical for WFP in mobilizing an effective response to NCDs

WFP collaborates with a range of partners including the UN and the private sector to address malnutrition in all its forms. Partnerships are aimed at strengthening coordination, developing multisectoral policy, enhancing research and development, strengthening logistics and supply chain, and promoting digital technology and education. WFP ensures that partnerships are in the interest of public health.

The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Business Network. WFP and GAIN co-convene the SUN Business Network which, at the global and country levels, provides a platform to advance the dialogue on nutrition between the private sector, governments and other stakeholders. Depending on national nutrition priorities and the local private sector setting, efforts of the SUN Business Network may focus on reducing undernutrition, overnutrition or micronutrient deficiencies.

Committee on World Food Security (CFS). The CFS is the foremost international and intergovernmental platform to promote food security and nutrition for all. In 2017, CFS started developing a set of voluntary guidelines on food systems and nutrition.

Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) United Nations Network (UNN)/REACH. 'The SUN UNN/REACH initiative' is a partnership between WFP, Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Its mandate is to accelerate the scaling up of food and nutrition actions in countries experiencing a high burden of child malnutrition.

The UNN was established in 2013 by WFP, Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The UNN works in countries to elevate national nutrition dialogue through its senior leadership and helps to leverage the collective strengths of the UN agencies, to foster innovations, find efficiencies and enhance complementarity across agencies and with government and SUN networks.

Global Fund. WFP partners with organizations and companies to ensure that food and nutrition assistance is available to communities in some of the world's hardest-to-reach areas. WFP's partnership with the Global Fund is addressing logistics and supply chain issues around health and nutrition commodities in countries such as the Central African Republic and Burundi.

IASC Humanitarian Cluster Mechanism. WFP is the lead agency in the Logistics Cluster⁶ (a coordination mechanism to ensure an efficient and effective emergency response, including the provision of NCD-related medicines during emergencies). WFP and FAO co-lead the Food Security Cluster⁷ (a coordination mechanism for food security response in humanitarian crises).



⁶ World Food Programme. Logistic cluster. <https://www.wfp.org/logistics-cluster>
⁷ Food Security Cluster. Coordinating the food security response in humanitarian crises. <https://fscluster.org/>

Due diligence is required to ensure that all partnerships advance health and development outcomes. Some private sector activities are beneficial for public health, while others contribute to NCD burdens by working to increase or preserve the availability, accessibility and/or desirability of health-harming products. An example is the fundamental conflict of interest between the tobacco industry and public health. Partnerships with some pharmaceutical companies may pose apparent or real conflicts of interest.

4. Mobilizing resources to deliver

WFP leverages existing programmes to drive actions against undernutrition and hunger, overweight and obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies. Priorities include:

- *Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG)*. This tool analyses the nutrition situation in a country and identifies the barriers faced by the most vulnerable in accessing and consuming healthy and nutritious foods; the FNG tool is used to inform government policies and WFP programming. In Madagascar, FNG helped to make the school meal food basket more nutritious.
- *School meals*. Schools can encourage healthy eating among students, their families and communities. WFP's Regional Bureau in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is currently at the forefront of efforts to address overweight and obesity in schools in the LAC region. As part of the Latin American Network for School Meals initiative, WFP recently published an analysis on how nutrition-sensitive national school meals programmes can address malnutrition (undernutrition, overweight and obesity and micronutrient deficiencies), as well as accelerate progress towards achieving the SDGs (particularly SDG 2 and 3).

- *Social protection systems*. WFP supports governments in the design of nutrition-sensitive social policies, mainstreaming nutrition education and supporting the design of shock-responsive social protection systems.
- *Social and behaviour change communication*. This aims to improve behaviour around access to, selection, preparation and consumption of nutritious foods, to strengthen nutrition education and behaviour change communication in nutrition-specific programmes and to mainstream nutrition education aligned with national food-based dietary guidelines.
- *Food environments*. WFP works to ensure balanced food baskets through diversification and micronutrient fortification, advocates for regulatory policies that improve the availability of safe, nutritious food and work environments, and negotiates with the private sector to increase the availability and marketing of age-appropriate and nutritious food.



The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases was established in 2013 by the Secretary General and placed under the leadership of WHO to coordinate the activities of the UN System to support the realization of the commitments made by Heads of State and Government in the 2011 Political Declaration on NCDs. Joint activities included in the work plan of the Task Force are additive to various, more comprehensive efforts conducted by the UN agencies to prevent and control NCDs. These joint activities offer important opportunities to address cross-cutting issues and to advance capacity and learning in countries.

