

Comments on latest version of the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (VGFSyN) – 11 May 2020

Dominican Republic

In reiterating our full political and technical support to you and for the task you have been entrusted with, we are contributing to the policy convergence process with a call to attention and a related proposal. Because our contribution is of a general nature and not an edit to the draft text, we are sending it through this email, i.e. not as a marginal comment in track changes.

All participants are aware that the preparatory work towards the current draft has taken place across several years: from discussions determining that this area necessitated focused work, to requesting the High-Level Panel of Experts to address this subject, then conducting consultations on the report and the way forward, here in Rome and in all regional hubs. Inputs received in the science-based, inclusive, and transparent tradition of CFS have built the solid, coherent, and practical foundation for negotiating voluntary guidelines in a realm that is crucial for achieving food security and adequate nutrition for all.

Unfortunately, there is one crucial, all-encompassing aspect that is absent from the draft document. While any of us could have envisioned a global pandemic wreaking havoc on food systems worldwide, the whole exercise has up until now been premised on the existing food systems, i.e. the food systems that were in place before covid-19 struck. Even though pandemics have in fact occurred in the not so distant past, and that events like massive volcanic eruptions or a meteorite strike could at any time upend global food systems, taking such worst-case scenarios into account for our purposes would have been impractical. This is why paragraph 9 of the draft document falls far too short from providing clues as to how paragraphs 12 through 19 will provide actual, concrete, and useful guidance.

News reports —coming in as we write this message— point to a looming disaster for food systems and nutrition worldwide. The richest, most powerful countries are seeing their food systems deteriorate in ways not experienced since at least the last world war: untold numbers of animals are being culled prematurely as meat packing plants shut down, ranchers are dumping vast quantities of milk into waterways, and farmers unable to access markets discard tons of perishable harvests, while consumers opt for stockpiling highly processed foodstuffs of negligible nutritional value. And so on.

No one has a clear idea about when this situation will end for the highest developed countries, whose resources in human capital, financial liquidity, agroindustry, energy, communications, research, technology, or infrastructure are far superior than those of developing countries. Developed countries also enjoy robust political stability, which goes hand in hand with their socioeconomic advancement.

On the other hand, we have yet to assess, or even fully comprehend, the depth, scope, and timing of the pandemic's negative outcomes for developing countries. In a special meeting convened by the Dominican Republic, WFP Executive Director Beasley told the UN Security Council that the pandemic-triggered emerging global food crisis will be “of biblical proportions”.

Given all these facts, not to mention the many unknowns, we fear that a continued fixation on the pre-pandemic configurations and circumstances might lead to policy recommendations of limited adequacy for addressing the food systems that will emerge from this crisis. Everyone agrees that the magnitude of what

we are seeing will change the way of life for every single person on the planet —and will modify food systems and consumption choices in ways no one can even begin to imagine with any clarity.

All of the work already put into this exercise so far is, of course, extremely valuable. Forsaking any of it would be, in our view, a mistake. We also believe that a mechanism should be put in place for the voluntary guidelines to have continued relevance as the coming realities manifest themselves. This would take the form, perhaps, of a rolling/moving cross-cutting chapter on evolving and post-pandemic food systems. This “hovering” section would need to be updated with appropriate frequency, duly supported by the HLPE, and with inputs from member States and all other stakeholders, as policymakers implement real-time, real-world responses at the local, national, regional, and global levels. Adjustments will be necessary as the pandemic’s effects upon food systems become clearer, and the policy recommendations are proven to make practical and concrete sense on the ground, as we together construct the “new normal” that will arise from this crisis.