

Keynote live

CFS High-Level Special Event on Strengthening Global Governance of Food Security and Nutrition

Committee on World Food Security

14 October 2020

Honourable Chair, Ministers, Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

I would like to start by thanking the Committee on World Food Security for convening this event, which comes at an auspicious moment.

Last week, the World Food Programme was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its courageous and far-ranging work.

The world's attention has been drawn to the critical importance of global nutrition and fighting hunger.

Today's event brings us together to discuss the critical topic of building back better after the COVID-19 pandemic, including how we can strengthen preparedness for future zoonotic crises.

In less than 10 months, COVID-19 has completely changed our world.

More than 37 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported to WHO, and over 1 million deaths.

Beyond the suffering and death caused by the virus itself, the pandemic has caused severe disruptions to essential services for immunization, maternal and child nutrition, non-communicable diseases, family planning and more.

And the impacts of the pandemic go far beyond health.

Major disruptions from both the disease itself and the response, including stay-at-home orders and other restrictions, mean that already-vulnerable families are struggling to get enough to eat, let alone the safe and nutritious food they need for a healthy diet.

There will be a price to pay: we expect a 14% increase in children suffering from malnutrition around the world.

That translates to an additional 6.7 million malnourished children.

Already-overstretched health systems could be forced to divert resources away from key services, such as micronutrient supplementation, prevention and treatment of childhood diarrhoea and acute malnutrition.

Vulnerable populations in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia are expected to be the most affected.

Ten thousand children a month could die.

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The pandemic has exposed and exploited the inequalities within and between countries.

Livelihoods have been lost, the global economy is in recession, and geopolitical divisions have been deepened.

While the rich can afford to stay home and stay safe, the poor must go out to work to feed their families.

Unfortunately, this is not a new story. Every day, millions of people are exposed to hunger, sickness or poverty.

We have built food systems that put healthy diets out of the reach of millions.

If we do not act, the hard-won gains we have made in recent years under the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition are at risk.

In concrete terms, that means that millions of children will once again be struggling to get healthy food to eat.

The impacts of malnutrition will reverberate across the health system.

Diseases caused by lack of access to safe food, or consumption of unhealthy or high-calorie diets, are the single biggest cause of global ill health.

Especially dangerous now are obesity and diabetes, which are among the largest risk factors for illness and death from COVID-19.

Obesity is estimated to double the risk of hospitalisation for COVID-19.

Equitable access to safe food, healthy diets and care is not an aspiration for the future.

The time to fix our food systems is now.

Even before the pandemic, over 3 billion people in the world were not able to afford a healthy diet, and 690 million people went hungry every day.

We cannot accept a world in which the rich have access to healthy diets, while the poor are left behind.

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In July, WHO, WFP, FAO, and UNICEF issued a call to action to protect children's right to nutrition in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We proposed five concrete actions that must be urgently taken up by governments, donors, the private sector, and the United Nations system:

Promoting access to affordable diets;

Improving maternal and child nutrition;

Reactivating and scaling up services to prevent and manage wasting;

Maintaining school feeding programs;

And expanding social protection programs.

We cannot allow the COVID-19 pandemic to become an excuse for failing to deliver on our commitments.

The pandemic has demonstrated why the Sustainable Development Goals are so important, and why we must pursue them with renewed focus and determination.

The world cannot afford repeated disasters on the scale of COVID-19, whether they are triggered by the next pandemic, or from mounting environmental damage and climate change.

Going back to "normal" is not good enough.

We can only promote and protect human health with a "One Health" approach that also promotes and protects the health of animals and the planet on which we depend.

As countries seek to build back better in the post-COVID period, central to their efforts must be an environment that helps, not hurts us, and fit-for-purpose food systems.

WHO recently published a “Manifesto for a Healthy and Green Recovery”, which includes policy prescriptions for healthy food systems and natural resource protection.

We need food systems that provide healthy and sustainable diets, and ensure the safety of food and the health of food workers.

That includes better regulation and resourcing of traditional markets, to prevent future outbreaks and pandemics.

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Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

I will leave you with three policy priorities.

First, access to nutritious, safe and affordable diets must be a cornerstone of the response to COVID-19. This includes investment in well-regulated and sustainable supply chains.

Existing childhood feeding programmes need to be re-established and scaled up.

Second, we call on all countries to take actions to meet national dietary guidelines.

This includes making public food procurement healthier; improving food labelling, reducing marketing of foods high in fats, sugars and salt, and using fiscal policies to drive food choices.

If the nations of the world were to meet WHO's dietary guidelines, it would save millions of lives, reduce disease risks, and bring major reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions.

And third, governments in countries at all income levels must work in a whole-of-government approach, with the private sector and civil society, to support sustainable food systems that can provide healthy diets.

In practice, that could mean ending subsidies for producers of unhealthy foods and regulating industry in line with guidelines for nutrition and food safety.

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Nobody can accomplish these goals alone.

Only as a community, reaching across class, across borders and across sectors, can we meet this momentous and urgent challenge.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that life is fragile, that health is precious, and that healthy diets are not just a luxury for the wealthy; they are a human right and a basis of national and global development.

Thank you all for your commitment to ensuring all people have the food they need to flourish.

The best way forward – the only way forward – is together.

I thank you.

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