GUEST EDITORIAL

Policy responses to food insecurity in Africa

Africa is faced with chronic food insecurity, with attendant effects of consumption of unsafe food and inadequate nutrient intake. Despite this dire situation, food security, food safety and nutrition are not adequately reflected in national development plans and there is insufficient capacity and resources for interventions. The impact of adequate, safe and nutritious food on the health status of people remains under-appreciated, resulting in low prioritization for the food safety and nutrition and inadequate financial investment. According to the latest FAO estimates [1], the increase in food prices between 2007 and 2009 has plunged an additional 24 million people into hunger in sub-Saharan Africa, thus making Africa home to 15 of the 16 countries where the prevalence of hunger exceeds 35 per cent.

WHO recommends that all infants must be exclusively breast fed for six months. According to the World Health Statics 2012, only 33% of infants in the African Region were exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life [2]. The development of the growing child involves a stage when breast-milk alone is unable to satisfy the physiological needs for energy and specific macro- and micronutrients. Supplementary foods must therefore be provided to prevent nutritional deficiencies and secondary functional impairment. This makes the consequences of food and nutrition insecurity far reaching especially for the infant on mixed diet. About 35% of under-five mortality is attributed to undernutrition [3] and each year, children in Africa suffer an estimated five episodes of diarhoea [4]. This may lead to fatal or severe sequelae including micronutrient deficiencies as well as impaired physical and intellectual development. When food is in short supply, people tend to consume contaminated foods resulting in diarrhoea, aflatoxicosis, pesticide and cyanide poisoning. When people are hungry, they tend to default in taking useful medicines such as those for HIV/AIDS and TB. Consumption of unhealthy diets, which is a risk factor for noncommunicable diseases, is also on the increase. In 2008, thirty-five per cent of the total number of deaths in the African Region was due to noncommunicable diseases. The majority of these deaths were from cardiovascular disease and diabetes [5].

Food security is influenced by agricultural policies, food production, environment and trade in overall process of socio-economic development. A number of factors could negatively impact on food security including governance, conflicts, inadequate agriculture policy, food production-population imbalance; ecology, deforestation, climate change; poverty; disease burden; and certain harmful cultural practices. The economic perspective of food and nutrition insecurity highlights the overall effect on development which needs to be addressed by development planners and policy makers.

Food security, food safety and nutrition are cross-cutting issues that permeate the entire human life-course from conception to old age and require cooperation and collaboration among key stakeholders. The coordination of interventions that are

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based on country priorities is paramount. In particular, African governments have the responsibility and leadership role to address this scourge of food insecurity and hunger by developing the right policies and investing more in food control including nutrition and foodborne disease surveillance; and health promotion to ensure that consumers make informed safe, healthy and nutritious food choices. The boundaries of public health would need a redefinition to enable ministries of health to play their role in contributing to intersectoral policies, for more equitable health outcomes.

There have been several global and regional commitments aimed at tackling the chronic food insecurity situation in the Region, including the *Declaration on World Food Security* adopted by World Leaders, Rome, June 2008 and the *Sirte Declaration on Investing in Agriculture for Economic Growth and Food Security Doc.Assembly/AU/12 (VIII)* adopted by African Heads of States, at the 13th Summit of the African Union held in July 2009. The core functions of WHO, such as "Providing leadership on matters critical to health and engaging in partnerships where joint action is needed" together with the Strategic Direction 6 "Accelerating response to the determinants of health" in the document *Achieving Sustainable Health Development in the African Region: Strategic Directions for WHO 2010-2015* form the basis for WHO's work in addressing the health impact of the food insecurity in the African Region. Member States have also articulated their positions at the World Health Assembly (WHA) at global level and the Regional Committee for Africa in documents such as *Advancing Food Safety Initiatives (WHA63.3)* and *Infant and Young Child Nutrition (WHA63.23)*; the *African Regional Nutritional Strategy 2005-2015* and; *Food Safety and Health: A Strategy for the WHO African Region (AFR/RC57/4)*.

It is noteworthy that access to safe and healthy food was stressed as a fundamental human right by the International Conference on Nutrition in 1992 and the World Food Summit in 1996. These and other commitments call for urgent and decisive actions to maintain the momentum in ensuring the safety of food supplies and ending hunger and malnutrition. In this regard, a comprehensive, coherent and coordinated strategy is needed to make progress and contribute towards achieving Millennium Development Goal 1 and accelerate the attainment of MDG 4, 5 and 6.

The key interventions carried out jointly by WHO and partners are discussed in this special issue of the *African Journal of Food, Agriculture Nutrition and Development (AJFAND),* which calls for increased resources for the sectors involved in preventing hunger in Africa. In addressing the health problems associated with food insecurity, WHO has a Programme on Food Safety and Nutrition. The papers presented herein provide an overview of food safety interventions in the Region and specific activities in the area of nutrition especially landscape analysis for determining the preparedness of countries to tackle malnutrition. The health sector interventions require a shift from projects and provision of guidance to scaling up of interventions at country level to strengthen systems and programmes that address food safety and nutrition.

Using mainstreaming as an important tool will bring to the fore food security, food safety and nutrition as an essential developmental issue that relates strongly to poverty

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and rural development requiring urgent attention.   It is hoped that this special issue of the *African Journal of Food Agriculture, Nutrition and Development* will motivate all concerned to make the required investments to ensure the availability of safe and nutritious food for all people at all times to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

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