

Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases

Draft Report, March 26, 2002

(Obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, dental diseases, osteoporosis)

A joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation convened in January this year to update and review the scientific progress and disease mechanisms of the Recommendations made by a WHO Study Group in 1989. This Draft Report is a follow up to those Recommendations and reviews also the recommendations made at the 1990 Technical Report Series, 797, to help Member States, agencies and organizations to develop their own guidelines and strategies for action.

The Draft Report and its eight Annexes is very comprehensive; it is not easy for broad based NGOs to be able to make a very full report in the time available. NGOs do not always have the relevant technical backup, or resources available to make in-depth studies and reviews. Hence our comments will be of a more general nature, identifying some gaps, and pointing out some concerns to help reflect on the wider issues of diet and nutrition in their global context.

The first part of this paper covers general issues, followed by some specific reflections on the individual chronic diseases.

General Remarks

In many countries - developed and developing - the relationship of food and nutrition to obesity, disease prevention, NCDs and longevity is not fully recognized or exploited. It was interesting to note that at the recent World Assembly on Ageing (Madrid, April 2002), relatively little attention was paid to food and nutrition. Only one Panel Discussion out of over 500, was specifically held to address Nutrition and Ageing, and the impact on health and development. A change in attitude, historical thinking and concepts is needed. This could be a major factor in improving the current situation, see Page 4 of the Preface, that "concepts have not led to a change in policies or in practice."

The final document therefore could contain basic and concrete guidelines on how to achieve this shift in thinking and to put into a place a strategy for action. Experience shows that partnerships with Governments, UN Agencies and NGOs can be a very effective medium, for making these changes in attitude and behaviours and can help reverse negative trends and facilitate real progress.

We feel that a missing element is methods of transferring the recommendations and guidelines to the grass roots and communities and giving ownership of projects to them.

Recommendation

- Conceptualize implementation of effective and sustainable policies and strategies, translating them into user friendly and doable actions at the grass roots and community levels.

Role of Women and some Related Issues

Women are responsible for 80% of the world's food (production, harvesting, gathering, preparing, cooking etc.) and their role is not adequately documented in the Report. Rural women constitute the majority of the 1.5 billion who live in absolute poverty. Women head about one third to one fifth of rural households. Statistics show that almost 70% of economically active women in low income food deficit countries are in the agricultural sector. Rural women battle with hunger and poverty on increasingly marginal land with meager resources, and face many obstacles which prevent them achieving household food security. Yet they are precisely the ones who make sure that fruit, vegetables, pulses, etc. get onto our plates.

The essential resources of water and fuel need addressing to ensure their further use and to find systems to relieve rural women who spend many hours each day seeking out supplies of both.

Mountain peoples constitute 12% of the world's population. They are the world's largest population of undernourished and hungry. 52 of the 81 countries receiving WFP emergency assistance in 2000 were mountain countries. Mountains cover one quarter of the world's surface and their sustained presence is vital for the survival of mankind (water, energy, mineral resources etc.)

Mountain peoples are at risk of increasing disease and death from severe infections; millions suffer from goiter, and cretinism. Vitamin A deficiency is the leading cause of preventable blindness in children. According to FAO, malnutrition and food insecurity contributes to increased disease and disability, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people who flee drought and famine from mountain regions. Mountain women are doubly marginalized, undernourished, under compensated, with a life dominated by drudgery. Yet they are the guardians of the eco fragile systems, and play a key role in maintaining these mountain regions which are so crucial to the survival of global life.

Implementation of the kinds of interventions proposed by this Report would benefit from the involvement of international and broad based women's and youth NGOs who work with the communities and grass roots populations. Youth speaking to youth can give a powerful message, and be much more effective than a top down approach. Such organizations can be instrumental in helping to change attitudes, as documented by the case study on reduction of cardio vascular incidence in North Karelia in Finland.

The intergenerational effect (Page 17) of forced early marriage leading to early pregnancy, before the mother's body has reached maturity, results in underweight babies. Safe Motherhood policies can prevent "Too early, too late, too often, too soon Pregnancies". Reproductive health education is important for both girls and boys, men and women.

Recommendation

- *Establish policies to help women, especially rural women achieve household food security
- * Involve broadbased women's and youth organizations to help in decision-making , policies and implementation

Physical Activity

Whilst the inclusion of physical activity into daily life is essential for many, the contrary is indicated, for rural women, and particularly mountain rural women. The very last thing required is extra physical activity; on the contrary their health and nutrition needs require respite and relief from their heavy physical burdens.

The ability to undertake physical activity also depends on foot health, the right foot wear, possible foot supports etc. Painful conditions of the feet, due to bad posture, infection or inadequate shoes etc. are a deterrent to physical activity.

Agriculture

Agriculture figures on pages 10, 11, 12, 46, 52, 71, yet an indication of the vital role of agriculture for food nutrition and food security is missing. Farmers are the great majority of the world's population and they will make or break any strategy to achieve food security. The key to fighting hunger is to work with well organized farmers. Hunger has a negative impact on economy, disease, mortality etc. We need more awareness about the impact of the gradual land degradation and decreasing water resources,. Research is needed to examine the overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, the effects of increasing industrialization of farming on food and food safety, gradual land degradation, decreasing water resources

Experts need to document the benefits of organic farming and bio products; the value of farmers markets to ensure agricultural produce spends less time in crates and containers journeying from the farm to the table. Research should analyze the effect on health and prevention of disease from genetically modified and fortified foods.

Recommendations

*Ensure at all levels, conservation of natural resources and sustainable agricultural methods based on good and sound farming practices, as a basis for healthy food and nutrition

* Ensure natural resource management, sound veterinary practices, technology and know how on healthy management of herds, ways to combat animal diseases such as BSE, Foot and Mouth, scrapie, etc.

Food safety

Incorporate general principles of hygiene, (washing of hands), proper storage of food, covering of vessels, sanitation, uncontaminated water Food safety Guidelines need to be implemented in the retail business, restaurants, airlines, institutions, hospitals, and the family home. A recent Consumers Association report from the UK indicates that food labeling is misleading, "Light is not light, farm fresh is not farm fresh, and the overall contents are not correct". Collaboration with TV companies would be wise to ensure advertising is based on consumer education rather than commercial interests.

Education / Home Economics

Recognise the impact of health and nutrition education in schools, universities and Self Help Groups. The encouragement and expansion of home economics could be widely implemented. Youth speaking to youth can give a positive, powerful message. Education in schools, community groups, self help groups can be key to changing attitudes and mind sets

Health and Nutrition Literacy, Page 8 of the Preface.

Pages 45 and 47, health and nutrition education. Partnerships and collaboration with the Civil Society for example, could be very valuable. NGOs, Civil Society to be involved with WHO on drawing up sound policies and implementation strategies.

Some brief remarks concerning the specific Diseases

A cross cutting issue throughout the Recommendations is breastfeeding with its relationship to most of the chronic diseases noted in the Report, and imparts life long benefits to baby and mother. Substitutes are always a substitute and in the words of Maureen Minchin, a breastfeeding expert from Australia such substitutes are an untested and uncontrolled Risk for humankind. Attitudes about breastfeeding need to change in societies and health professionals be convinced of the superior qualities of both breastmilk and the physical act of breastfeeding in terms of emotional stability, jaw formation, muscular control, prevention of allergies. Include the WHO 10 Steps to Promote, Protect and Support Breastfeeding in the Report. Mothers and Fathers need to be encouraged and helped to make this right decision and supported in their wish to sustain it.

Obesity.

We need to look at the overall picture. Obesity comes about with changes in eating patterns and life styles, and the inherent stress and strain of today. Children no longer walk to school or play in their gardens, because of the danger of security and crime. Sports facilities in some countries are being dismantled or it is becoming increasingly expensive to participate. More mothers in the work force means time away from the home, more meals outside, more fast food outlets, take away pizza's. With the reduction of home economic curricular in schools, young people no longer consider nutrition values are important, or that home cooking is preferable, they no longer see the necessity to have a kitchen in their apartment.

Junk foods are popular with those who need fast foods for a fast life style. Demand creates Supply. People on the run have no time for breakfast, lunch etc. Commercial advertising has popularized TV "throw in the oven foods", quick Snacks, ect

Fruit and vegetable pricing policies need adjustment to ensure the "for all" principle.

Food in schools. and institutions needs to be imaginatively improved.

Preventing obesity needs a multi stakeholder approach, using education, awareness raising and simple clear indicators for women's organization, families and politicians to ensure implementation.

Diabetes

Look into epidemiology of causes north vs. south and the relationship of food to obesity, sport, and genetics

Cardiovascular diseases

Check out the high price of vegetables and fruit, Governments to approve new policies. Promote organic and bio foods, research the effects of GM foods, fortified foods, additives. Attitude changing, way of life and the role of nutrition in all aspects of life need to be documented in terms of heart disease. Composition of diets can vary in different geographical locations and climates. Families, schools ect. need clear information.

Cancer

Information needed on the benefits of prompt, adequate and sufficient elimination. Adequate daily intake of water plays key role. How does constipation and its medication affect bowel cancer. Special situation of the elderly (no thirst sensation, reluctance to drink, inability to eliminate adequately). Mental and emotional state can also play a role in cancer incidence.. Adequate exercise. Research into different factors is required.

Dental disease

Mastication and gum health Dental hygienist, teaching children how to brush their teeth correctly, use of floss. School and community dentists teaching brushing techniques. Eating the right amount of “hard” foods can prevent gum troubles. .

Osteoporosis

Effect of Calcium and Vitamin D. genetics, geography situation, sports and physical activity.

This report highlights a some general issues and background ideas which were not reflected in the Draft Report and which we feel have a relevance and importance particularly on the future implementation of the Guidelines.

We have not touched upon the many scientific and technical nutritional issues and trust that they are in line with current research. This will be an important document for future use, and we thank WHO and FAO for giving us this opportunity of sharing our views with you.

We look forward to receiving the final version and in the meantime are happy to clarify any parts of this response which might not be clear.

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