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REPORT OF THE ROUND TABLE

The nutritional situation in the African Region: Challenges and Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

1. The Round Table discussion on “The nutritional situation in the African Region: Challenges and Perspectives” was held on 3 September 2004 under the overall chairmanship of Dr Brian Chituwo, Minister of Health, Zambia as determined by Decision 9 of the fifty-third session the Regional Committee.
2. The objective of the Round Table was to improve awareness of the nutrition situation in the Region and define specific action needed at the community, national and regional levels to redress the situation.
3. The participants were divided into three groups:
 - (a) Group 1 made up of French-speaking countries, was chaired by Mr Mohamed L.O. Selmane, Minister of Health, Mauritania; the facilitator for this group was Dr Aristide Sagbohan, Regional Adviser for Nutrition;
 - (b) Group 2 made up of English-speaking countries, was chaired by Dr Brian Chituwo, Minister of Health, Zambia; the facilitator for this group was Mrs Julia Tagwireyi, Director for the Food and Nutrition Council, Zimbabwe;
 - (c) Group 3 was a group of Portuguese-, French- and English-speaking countries chaired by Dr Albertina J. Hamukwaya, Minister of Health, Angola; the facilitator for this group was Dr Funke Bogunjoko, Technical Officer, Country Analysis and Support Unit, Regional Office for Africa.
4. Prior to group discussions, Dr Rufaro Chatora, Director, Health Systems and Services Development Division, made a brief presentation in plenary which outlined the gravity of the nutrition situation, the framework for action, the challenges and the main issues for discussion as indicated in the background document “The nutritional situation in the African Region: Challenges and perspectives” AFR/RC54/RT/1.

DISCUSSION POINTS

5. The Round Table deliberated on the following issues and questions:
 - (a) How can nutrition be better prioritized within health and other development sectors to ensure that appropriate policy and institutional frameworks are established or strengthened in a sustainable manner?
 - (b) What should countries do to improve technical capacity for nutrition programmes, mobilize financial resources and strengthen national nutrition information systems?
 - (c) Given the various challenges, including the low status of women in society, how can communities be supported to attain food and nutrition security?

MAIN CONCERNS

6. The contributions made by the delegates during the Round Table group discussions highlighted various issues. These include promotion of fast food at the expense of nutritious traditional food; prevalence of nutrition supplements which cannot be medically substantiated; the need to promote indigenous knowledge systems with information about food production, processing, preservation and preparation; the need for technical guidance on the use of genetically-modified foods; nutrition guidelines for the care of people living with HIV and AIDS; promotion and enforcement of food fortification.
7. The main concerns centred around how nutrition can be better prioritized within health and other development sectors. The discussions culminated in suggestions for evaluation of the magnitude of the nutritional situation at country level; development of national food and nutrition policy and legislation; adoption of multidisciplinary and multisectoral approaches for interventions and coordination within a high-ranking office; nutrition advocacy within the health sector; integration of nutrition into the other development programmes and projects; implementing policies on nutrition support to vulnerable groups such as school children, women and victims of emergency situations.
8. It was further suggested that to improve technical capacity for nutrition programmes, countries could train trainers and health workers in nutrition; develop human resources in nutrition; strengthen capacity of traditional leaders, extension workers and NGOs in implementing nutrition programmes; and strengthen nutrition content of other training programmes (e.g. agriculture, education, health).
9. In addition, to mobilize financial resources, countries could strengthen advocacy with key policy-makers; integrate nutrition into other development initiatives, policies and strategies (New Partnership for Africa's Development, millennium development goals, poverty reduction strategy papers); integrate nutrition into other health programmes horizontally; conduct campaigns and promote continuous nutrition education at all levels.
10. To strengthen national nutrition information systems, it was suggested that countries develop a regional nutrition information system with standardized indicators and disseminate it to countries; create community-based nutrition information systems; allocate resources for national nutrition surveillance systems; and conduct timely analyses and use nutrition information to facilitate decision-making by relevant policy-makers and the community affected.

11. Given the various challenges, including the low status of women in society, communities can be supported to attain food and nutrition security in various ways. Suggestions included promotion of a gender dimension in nutrition programmes; integration of nutrition in HIV and AIDS strategies; and promoting the income-generating activities of various women's groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

12. Participants in the Round Table recommended that Member States:

- (a) develop food and nutrition policies and plans within a multisectoral setting;
- (b) advocate for a nutrition budget line within the national budget;
- (c) establish or strengthen school health programmes;
- (d) provide resources for applied nutrition research to facilitate evidence-based nutrition programming;
- (e) integrate nutrition into the national development agenda.

13. They also recommended that WHO:

- (a) advocate for increased Regular budget allocations to nutrition;
- (b) mobilize resources among partners for nutrition programmes;
- (c) provide technical support for the development and strengthening of nutrition surveillance systems;
- (d) provide support to countries on timely nutrition issues.

14. Considering the limited time available for discussion in the Round Table and the importance of nutrition to health, it was suggested that nutrition be included as a substantive Regional Committee agenda item in the near future.