

Under the theme “**Population, food security, nutrition and sustainable development**”, the 54th session of the Commission discussed how the global food system can produce adequate, safe, affordable and nutritious food for a growing human population within planetary boundaries.

This year’s theme addressed how food insecurity and malnutrition has spiked under COVID-19, resulting in increased stress that exacerbates gender-based violence and child marriage. Poor maternal nutrition, too, can lead to poor pregnancy and newborn outcomes and compromised lifelong health. The Commission’s debates will inform the preparation of the **Food Systems Summit**, to be convened by the United Nations **Secretary-General** in September 2021.

The COVID-19 crisis has added **between 83 and 132 million to the 690 million worldwide who were already undernourished**, casting doubt on the chances of meeting global targets on food security and nutrition and prompting calls for an overhaul of the world’s food systems.

Population changes and the demand for food

The continuing growth of the human population, which is expected to reach **9.7 billion by 2050**, together with the growth in income per capita will substantially increase the demand for food, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

The gradual ageing and urbanization of the global population will also affect food demand. The different food requirements of youth and older persons, as well as the different consumption patterns of urban and rural populations, will affect minimum dietary energy requirements and the demand for various types of food.

Current food systems are failing us.

Globally, **more than 3 billion people cannot afford healthy diets. Over 20% of children under 5 suffer from stunting and 7% from acute malnutrition. Meanwhile, 6% of children under 5 and 39% of adults are overweight**, according to a UN report released ahead of the Commission’s annual meeting.

Worldwide, only 19% of children aged 6-23 months eat a minimally acceptable diet, while inadequate nutrition and anemia among women of reproductive age contribute to poor health and development outcomes for mothers and children. Unhealthy diets are now estimated to be responsible for more adult deaths and disability worldwide than tobacco use, and older persons today face heightened risks of non-communicable diseases due to poor nutrition.

Impacts of food production on the planet.

Occupying 50% of the Earth’s habitable land, food production is a major driver of biodiversity loss, air and water pollution, deforestation, soil degradation and water scarcity. **It accounts for 70% of freshwater consumption and produces around ¼ of global greenhouse gas emissions.** The impacts are especially severe in low, and middle-income countries, where many people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and where food security and adaptive capacity are low.



Food security and gender

On every continent, the prevalence of food insecurity is higher among women than men. This often occurs even in the same household and even if women are pregnant or breastfeeding. Food insecurity and malnutrition are also linked to child marriage.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further deepened women's vulnerabilities, undermining their access to food and disrupting important antenatal and postnatal services, including nutrition support for pregnant and lactating women. According to a recent UN report, food scarcity and restricted mobility due to COVID-19 lockdowns has increased the incidence of gender-based violence and child marriage and heightened the risk of sexual exploitation of women and girls.

While women make up over 37% of the world's rural agricultural employment, a figure that rises to 48% for low-income countries, they face disadvantages in access to productive assets, inputs and services, including land, inheritance, livestock, education and extension and financial services.

COVID-19 is exacerbating food challenges.

In 2020, lockdowns and other measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 disrupted food supply chains and unleashed an economic recession with massive loss of livelihoods and reduced spending on nutritious foods. School closures disrupted school feeding programs **for an estimated 370 million schoolchildren**. The pandemic has also increased humanitarian needs.

Urgent change in policies needed.

Government policies can create market incentives to encourage shifts in production, while also using consumer education and school curricula to affect consumption habits. Policy approaches including incentives, regulations and dietary guidelines can encourage people to adopt healthy diets based on foods that have lower environmental burdens.

It is estimated that the livelihoods of about 4.5 billion people globally are tied to food systems.

With food systems workers often affected by poverty and hunger, economic transformation must allow for expanded off-farm job opportunities, while improving employment conditions in the agricultural sector. The introduction of new agricultural technologies can raise the productivity and incomes of family farmers and help to ensure the sustainability of the agricultural sector.

Efforts to increase education, prevent child marriage, reduce adolescent pregnancy and improve nutrition and access to family planning can help reduce risks to women's and children's health. Programs for education, social protection, food security and health care, including for sexual and reproductive health-care services, should include nutrition education and assistance.

Targeted social protection programs, protections for vulnerable food system workers, including migrant workers, protections for import-dependent countries, and increased diversity and resilience of production and distribution systems, including temporary measures implemented during the COVID-19 crisis, can also contribute to a long-term transformation of food systems.

Source : UNPFA and UN-DESA

Martine Gayon - United Nations Representative, New York

