Unhealthy diets contribute to morbidity and mortality from several non-communicable diseases and directly impede growth and development. The burden of diseases associated with unhealthy diets is a worldwide concern. Many countries, particularly low- and middle-income countries, now grapple with nutrition and health issues caused by co-existing undernutrition and overweight and obesity. Therefore, healthy diets are critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, including 1, 2, 3, 10, 12, and the World Health Assembly global nutrition targets. Yet there are no dietary intake indicators among the Sustainable Development Goals or World Health Assembly tracking.

Robust data on what people eat should be the foundation for the design and implementation of targeted actions, policies, and messaging to address how to achieve healthy diets. Most countries track food availability, and many generate such data at household level, but not many have nationally representative individual dietary intake data. Even where dietary data exist, they are often outdated and are not collated, harmonised, and shared in a manner that can catalyse policy change. The limited uptake of dietary data is due, at least in part, to the lack of consensus on measures and indicators that capture the essence of healthy diets with validity across settings and populations. This lack of consensus deters countries and donors from investing in data collection and use, hampering the tracking of their progress towards improved diets.

These data gaps have been well recognized in the nutrition community for some time but resolving them gained further urgency in 2021, following the United Nations Food Systems Summit and the Nutrition for Growth Summit, where the need for actions towards healthy diets were highlighted.

In collective recognition of this challenge and the need for action, WHO and UNICEF, through their Technical Expert Advisory Group on Nutrition Monitoring (TEAM), have joined forces with FAO to resolve these issues and chart a way forward through the Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative. The Initiative is guided by a Strategic Planning Group that includes the Nutrition Division Directors from the three UN agencies, as well as TEAM co-chairs and secretariat, and key donors. The Strategic Planning Group is responsible for providing overall strategic guidance, planning, and coordination of the global effort to advance assessment of healthy diets for global monitoring. It will also provide strategic guidance and oversee the activities of the TEAM Diet Quality Working Group. The TEAM Diet Quality Working Group, which includes representation from several organizations with relevant expertise, is tasked to provide technical inputs and recommendations to the Strategic Planning Group.

The overall objective of the Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative is to enable country and global monitoring of the healthfulness of diets to inform policies and programs across a wide range of sectors. Specifically, the Initiative will:

1. Determine the components of a healthy diet and how best to measure healthy diets for different purposes
2. Build consensus with national and global stakeholders on healthy diet metrics that are suitable for specific purposes
3. Promote uptake and use of measures and indicators of healthy diets among national and global stakeholders
Achieving these objectives will require identifying the essence of healthy diets that, aligned with WHO recommendations, needs to be captured; appraising the current state of data collection systems, methods, measures, and indicators for assessment and monitoring of healthy diets; and developing operational guidance on data quality, methods for data collection, and indicators suitable for national and global assessment and monitoring of population dietary patterns towards healthy diets.

The work of the Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative will be phased over three to five years, with the initial planning and priority-setting occurring during summer 2022 and a first technical consultation in late 2022, with further work to follow in 2023–24. The Strategic Planning Group has responsibility for overall planning and coordination of this global initiative to address the three objectives, including strategic planning, connecting with and seeking input from stakeholders, building technical and political consensus, planning technical consultations, and identifying and coordinating funding. The TEAM Diet Quality Working Group has responsibility for oversight of the technical work for objectives 1 and 2 during summer and fall 2022 (and further technical work that may be needed later).

Inclusion of and engagement with the broad community of stakeholders who work on, are concerned with, or are users of the assessment and monitoring of healthy diets will be crucial to the success of this Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative. We welcome input from and engagement with anyone who would like to be part of the process to achieve these objectives.

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