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Integrating sustainability considerations into dietary guidelines: country practices and global guidance

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Dietary guidelines have emerged as a key tool with the potential to inform the transformation of food systems not only towards better nutrition but also towards sustainability⁽¹⁾. In the last few years, some countries have integrated different aspects of sustainability into dietary guidelines. However, there is lack of clarity on what this means or on how countries go about this integration. While there are multiple suggested approaches⁽²⁾⁽³⁾, there is no agreed methodology on how to do it. The aim was to investigate countries' conceptual understanding and practices for integrating sustainability into the dietary guidelines' development process.

Using the FAO/WHO sustainable healthy diets guiding principles⁽⁴⁾ as a conceptual framework, FAO surveyed the 27 countries that had reported, into the FAO online repository, integrating at least one aspect of sustainability. The responses were coded, and common themes identified by two different researchers and reviewed by a third. The statistical methods used for analysis consisted of means and frequency distributions.

So far, 16 countries have responded to the survey (59% response rate), however, among these, 3 skipped most of the questions (48% effective response rate). Preliminary results show that, for environmental sustainability, greenhouse gas emissions (GHGE) (54%) and food losses and waste (FLW) (54%) were the most common aspects included. For sociocultural sustainability, the most common aspects were local food culture (92%), followed by consumption patterns (85%) and local culinary practices (77%). Affordability was included by 61.5% of respondents. Some methods used by countries to integrate these different aspects included consideration of additional evidence and including additional data when performing linear programming for optimizing diets. Methods varied significantly among countries, the need for additional guidance is evident.

These results reaffirmed the need for guidance that was expressed in a 2018 survey (FAO, forthcoming) on how to successfully integrate sustainability considerations into dietary guidelines. FAO is introducing a new methodology to develop, implement and use dietary guidelines with a food systems approach. Developed with inputs from multiple experts and stakeholders, it provides “step-by-step” guidance to countries on integrating the different aspects of sustainability across environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Several countries have already started using the Food systems-based dietary guidelines (FSBDG) methodology.⁽⁵⁾

References

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