

Profile Session 4: Sustainable Food Systems and Healthy Nutrition Patterns 3 September 2020

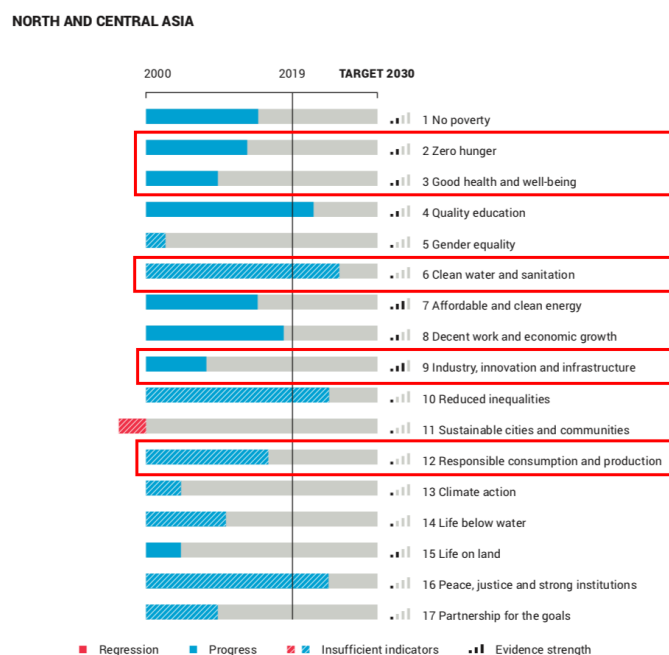
The 7th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) held on May 20th 2020, pointed out that progress towards the 2030 Agenda is not on track in North and Central Asia (NCA)¹ and has been further slowed down by the COVID-19 pandemic. This development reinforces the need for stronger cooperation and collaboration in strengthening efforts to accelerate progress. Accordingly, the APFSD emphasized the urgent need to focus on fast tracking the SDGsⁱ. This document provides an overview of the current progress and key challenges for acceleration of the relevant SDGs in the NCA within the context of a sustainable food systems approach. This is an input to a session of the NCA SDG Forum, which will further report to APFSD and the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2021.

I. SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS AND HEALTHY NUTRITION IN NORTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

Food systems play a key role in the healthy functioning of our daily lives. With the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic it is all the more important to strengthen sustainable food systems in order to maintain and accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

Strengthening sustainable food systems and healthy dietary patterns integrates SDG 2- Zero Hunger; SDG 6 - Clean water and sanitation; SDG 9 - Industry innovation and infrastructure; and SDG 12 – Sustainable consumption and production. It also has a major influence on the attainment of SDG 3 – Good health and well-being and is an important link among all the other SDGs. This document will analyze particular challenges and trends of sustainable food systems on a country-level basis in NCA (see figure 1)ⁱⁱ.

Figure 1: Snapshot of SDG progress in 2019 in the NCA subregion



¹ The North Central Asia countries covered by UN ESCAP are Armenia; Azerbaijan; Georgia; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Tajikistan; Uzbekistan; Turkmenistan and Russian Federation.

II. GENERAL OVERVIEW

The NCA sub-region has made some progress towards eliminating hunger over the last two decades. Undernourishment has declined significantly but challenges remain, particularly with respect to obesity and micronutrient deficiencies. The sub-region has made good progress in providing clean water and sanitation. Further progress will require a food systems approach in order to attain the 2030 Agenda.

Socio-economic inequalities, and socio-cultural and gender relations make it difficult to achieve food security and nutrition goals, as does the lower productivity of agriculture resulting from underinvestmentⁱⁱⁱ. The growing impact of climate change and now the COVID-19 pandemic, has added to the problem by straining food and agriculture supply chains including financing and transportation as well as input availability such as fertilizers.^{iv} Loss of income and remittances due to the pandemic adds to the food insecurity risks of local populations and especially rural women.

III. COUNTRY LEVEL ANALYSIS

Overview

Dietary quality and undernourishment, undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies remain critical issues in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Agriculture still accounts for almost 15% of total GDP, and around 42% of total employment, on average. Agricultural productivity is relatively low in these countries.

While stunting in children under 5 has declined in recent years in Armenia and Kazakhstan, obesity in adults has increased significantly. The Russian Federation has lower prevalence of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, but the prevalence of overweight and obesity is higher than in the other countries of the sub-region. The share of agriculture in GDP and employment is lower in these countries – in line with their higher GDP per-capita. Agricultural productivity is also higher in these countries and Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation are major food exporters in the region.

Production and supply chain

There are indications of a slowdown in production growth in several countries in the NCA region, especially in Central Asia. Moreover, output growth seems to have been more volatile in recent years, presumably due to shocks related to climate, trade, migration and remittances, and economy-wide fluctuations. Many NCA countries need to improve both the quantity and quality of production, address the viability of small farms, improve technologies and efficiencies along value chains, strengthen policies to support farmers, strengthen systems to prevent and manage food value chain risks, minimize food loss and waste, and focus on local markets and export trade.

Food supply chains after the farm gate (storage and distribution, processing and packaging, retail and markets) provide numerous entry points for public and private actors to attain sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition.

Agri-food trade and nutrition

Among the NCA countries, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan are major exporters of agrifood products, which supply regional and global markets. Turkmenistan's agricultural exports remain relatively low. Agrifood exports from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are smaller, but have increased during the last decade. Agrifood exports from three Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) are often destined for the Russian Federation and the European Union, while the major export destinations from five Central Asian countries include China and other NCA countries in addition to the Russian Federation and the European Union.

Accelerated agri-food trade in most of the countries in the NCA region has the potential to increase the diversity of national diets by increasing the availability of different types of foods. Agri-food trade also allows production of foods to switch from higher to lower cost producers, so in theory enabling food prices to decrease for consumers. If agri-food trade positively impacts incomes of farmers and processors, their economic access to food could also improve. However, there is very little evidence available on how these changes link through and affect nutritional status on the ground.

Food environment and nutrition

Only a few countries in NCA have implemented major policy measures to influence consumer behavior such as developing dietary guidelines and restricting the availability and marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages. For example, all countries in Central Asia lack national food-based dietary guidelines and regulations of the marketing of ultra-processed foods and sugar sweetened beverages to children. Media campaigns and nutrition counselling are commonly implemented.

Gender

In the NCA region, the prevalence of moderate to severe food insecurity in adults appears to be slightly higher in women than in men^v. Various studies in the NCA region indicate that rural women disproportionately experience poverty and exclusion, face constraints in accessing decision-making opportunities, resources, services, technologies, assets and face multiple forms of discrimination^{vi} and violence.

Empowering rural women economically and improving their access to nutritional knowledge, skills and markets can lead to improvements in the quality of diets for children and households.

Effects of COVID 19

Within the NCA region, as in other parts of the world, measures were taken to limit the spread of COVID-19 including restricted movement of people, restrictions on exports and imports and closure of wet markets, restaurants, food stalls and hotels. These policies and measures disrupted agri-food value chains, while the full impact of the virus on the food systems is not yet known. Overall domestic food prices remained fairly stable but with variations from country to country and commodity by commodity. The most significant price increases were recorded in Tajikistan, whilst there was a relatively small increase in Kyrgyzstan and almost no change in the Russian Federation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the supply of and demand for food and reduced the purchasing power of rural households and the capacity, especially of women farmers, to produce and market their produce. Women have a critical role in ensuring food and nutrition

security of household members, particularly in low income households with limited budgets for food. A number of studies have shown that providing social benefits to the women of the family makes it more likely that these resources will be used to meet daily food expenditures. The impacts on food systems and food security and nutrition are thus different for women and men, girls and boys.

Successfully tackling the impact of COVID-19 will require attention across the entire food system, including in agricultural production, food chain operations, trade and distribution patterns, management of food safety, animal health and plant health, and consumer education programmes adapted to the needs and priorities of various social groups.

V. THE WAY FORWARD

Addressing current challenges of food systems and healthy nutrition patterns requires multi-sectoral action and regional cooperation that would include various sectors and actors from agriculture, healthcare, social protection and more. Food systems need to be reformed to increase access and availability of quality foods to ensure nutrition and food security. Public investment in agriculture and food systems would benefit both producers and consumers by increasing productivity and incomes and decreasing food waste.

The Forum will provide an opportunity for stakeholders from the region to debate these issues and provide suggestions for the way forward.

ⁱ UN ESCAP, “Fast-Tracking the SDGs: Driving Asia-Pacific Transformations,” p4.

ⁱⁱ UN ESCAP, “Asia and The Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020,” p65.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.fao.org/3/ca7153en/ca7153en.pdf>

^{iv} https://unitednations.sharepoint.com/sites/2020SubregionalSDGForum/Shared%20Documents/General/Session%204/profile/Background/Regional%20Food%20Market_COVID-19_FAO.pdf

^v Europe and Central Asia Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition. FAO. 2019.

<http://www.fao.org/3/ca7153en/ca7153en.pdf>, p.10 , p.2

^{vi} FAO. 2019c. Gender, agriculture and rural development in Uzbekistan. Country gender assessment series. Budapest. 88 pp.