



SIDS SUMMIT FOR HEALTH:

For a healthy and resilient future
in Small Island Developing States



28–29 June 2021

POLICY BRIEF

Nutrition, food systems and biodiversity

The Challenge

The unique ecosystems of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) hold rich potential to support sustainable healthy diets thanks to their terrestrial and marine biodiversity. Yet, over the past 40 years, the impacts of **climate change, frequent natural disasters, land degradation, exploitation of oceanic resources and changing diets and lifestyles** (which include a growing intake of convenience foods, a growing reliance on imported foods, and changing consumer tastes) have meant **many SIDS experience multiple forms of malnutrition to such great extents that they are now faced with a health emergency.**

For many SIDS, **the coexistence of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity, and diet-related noncommunicable diseases is evident at the population, community and even household level.**¹ In the five least developed SIDS, over 20% of children aged under 5 years of age experience stunting, and childhood wasting remains a serious concern in some SIDS. Over 38% of women living in SIDS are affected by anaemia often caused by iron deficiency.¹ Although levels of undernutrition have dropped over the past decade, the rate of decline in SIDS is slower than that seen in low-income countries as a whole and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic threaten progress. Concurrently, 56% of adults in SIDS suffer from overweight or obesity.² In Caribbean SIDS, 33% of adults are classified as obese (twice as many women than men), while Pacific SIDS now account for eight of the world's ten most obese nations.³ This trend is apparent in children too. SIDS show a rapidly rising prevalence of children with obesity, increasing from less than 5% in 1980 to 20% in 2015⁴, and more than 30% of adolescents in Caribbean SIDS are overweight or obese. Malnutrition in all its forms is now the leading cause of ill health and mortality worldwide⁵ and a key, modifiable risk factor for the noncommunicable disease (NCD) crisis faced by SIDS.²

Changing dietary preferences and a growing reliance on imports has contributed to these trends in malnutrition. In Caribbean and Pacific SIDS, over 80% of food is now imported², and, the majority of them, more than 85% of adults do not consume the recommended 400g or more of fruits and vegetables each day.⁶ This reliance on imported foods has seen an exponential rise

¹ FAO, 2021. Global Action Programme: Key Facts and Figures. <http://www.fao.org/sids/en/>

² WHO, 2021. SIDS Summit for Health: Battling the NCD Epidemic in SIDS Policy Brief.

³ Hickey GM, Unwin N. Addressing the triple burden of malnutrition in the time of COVID-19 and climate change in Small Island Developing States: what role for improved local food production? Food Security. 2020;1-5. doi:10.1007/s12571-020-01066-3

⁴ Sobers N & Samuels TA, 2019. Diet and childhood obesity in small island developing states. The Lancet: Child & Adolescent Health. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(19\)30149-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(19)30149-X)

⁵ 2020 Global Nutrition Report: Action on equity to end malnutrition. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives.

⁶ WHO [STEPS Survey results](#) from SIDS



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in the consumption of highly processed food and drink products which are often energy dense and high in saturated fats, free sugars and/or salt, exacerbating dietary risk factors for NCDs.² Local food production continues to be challenged by the distinct vulnerability SIDS face to the impacts of climate change. This is further compounded by ongoing gender-based barriers found in many SIDS such as land access, fisheries resources, tools and credit, which impact the agricultural and fishery workforce, as well as the global overexploitation of oceanic resources which have threatened the SIDS blue economy and rich aquatic resources.

Commitments made

The urgent need to accelerate action on food and nutrition security is a key pillar of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) pathway.⁷ Through the SAMOA pathway, SIDS have committed to working together to support food sovereignty and realize the right of all people to safe, sufficient, nutritious and culturally appropriate food while conserving, protecting and promoting the sustainable use of land, soil, forests, water, plants, animals, biodiversity and ecosystems.

In 2017, the Global Action Programme (GAP) on Food Security and Nutrition in SIDS was developed to accelerate action and coordinate efforts.⁸ The GAP is a holistic framework that focuses on national, regional and global efforts to achieve three mutually reinforcing objectives: strengthening enabling environments for food security and nutrition; improving sustainability, resilience and nutrition sensitivity of food systems; and empowering people and communities. The GAP supports SIDS ownership and leadership in efforts to tackle all forms of malnutrition and create sustainable local food value chains, while providing a framework for SIDS to collectively anchor national, bilateral and regional efforts to in order to enhance coordination and guide global support.

The GAP aligns with the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the work programme of the Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016 – 2025). It includes complementary cost-effective and evidence-based policy initiatives including the WHO 'Best Buy' interventions for NCD Prevention and Control, the global sodium benchmarks, public procurement for healthy diets, recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children, the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes, the WHO Comprehensive Implementation Plan on Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition, recommendations of the WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity and regional commitments such as the WPRO Action Plan to Reduce the Double Burden of Malnutrition (2015-2020).

In 2019, at the Seventy-fourth session of the UN General Assembly, Member States reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen and support action to prevent all forms of malnutrition, and to the promotion of sustainable food systems in SIDS through the implementation of the GAP.⁹

⁷ United Nations, 2014. A/RES/69/15. SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway. Sixty-ninth session, General Assembly. https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/69/15&Lang=E

⁸ FAO, UN-OHRLS & UNDESA, 2017. Global Action Programme on Food Security and Nutrition in Small Island Developing States. <http://www.fao.org/3/i7297e/i7297e.pdf>

⁹ United Nations, 2019. A/RES/69/15. Sustainable development: follow-up to and implementation of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway and the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action



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Recent and ongoing actions

Building on the commitments made at the Second International Conference on Nutrition in 2014 that are being followed up under the umbrella of the Nutrition Decade, the upcoming United Nations Food Systems Summit (FSS) in July 2021 has brought global attention to the need for transformative action to create healthy, sustainable and resilient food systems. The FSS aims to identify transformative actions to achieve five key objectives, as follows:

- Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all
- Shift to sustainable and healthy consumption patterns
- Boost nature-positive production
- Advance equitable livelihoods
- Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress

The focus on food systems has highlighted the intrinsic links between human, animal and planetary health. It has brought global attention to the importance of protecting the biodiversity of plant and aquatic life for both human and planetary health as well as the need for integrated, multisectoral approaches to achieve this. The identified solutions are tightening the nutrition and environmental nexus, breathing new life into interventions such as the use of fiscal and trade policy instruments to support nutrition goals, and uniting actors behind holistic approaches such as ‘One Health’, which promotes animal welfare and the safe management of animal resources to deliver safe, healthy and sustainable diets.

These integrated approaches are not new to SIDS. **The small and unique ecosystems of SIDS mean they are inherently closer and more attuned to their food systems**, and the intricate linkages between food eaten and animal, aquatic and terrestrial resources used. SIDS citizens also experience first-hand the need to jointly address human and planetary health as they face threatened natural resources, the ever-growing burden of malnutrition and NCDs and the devastating toll of extreme weather events.

Many SIDS have been early adopters of multisectoral approaches and integrated policies to enhance the resilience of local food systems and address the burden of malnutrition. The GAP recognizes this action and provides a package of policy options for accelerating action to address the human, animal and planetary health nexus — but, to date, progress has been too slow to meet the SDG targets by 2030 and key challenges still remain.

Currently, only 13 of the 38 Member State SIDS have food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) to inform and guide policy work along the food system, and no FBDGs explicitly incorporate environmental sustainability elements.¹⁰ The absence of such nutrition benchmarks

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https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/74/3&Lang=E

¹⁰ Based upon the FAO [Food-based dietary guidelines](#) database and the 2020 Global Nutrition Report: Action on equity to end malnutrition. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives.



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and guidance has a flow-on effect, impacting on the comprehensiveness and direction of action to tackle malnutrition at all levels. FBDGs with sustainability criteria (covering all dimensions of sustainability, i.e., environmental, sociocultural and economic sustainability) can create a benchmark to intensify action on implementation of the GAP. This includes guiding the implementation of financial incentives/disincentives and reformulation efforts to reduce the presence of trans fats, saturated fats, free sugars and salt in the food supply, as well as the strengthening of initiatives to enhance food security and support SIDS blue economies through the sustainable use and diversification of aquatic food products.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has served as an urgent reminder of the need to safeguard the intimate and delicate relationship between people and planet to truly achieve health for all.¹¹ A One Health approach places these interlinkages at its core and provides a new lens through which to focus our actions. The FSS provides a platform to accelerate efforts to strengthen the linkages between malnutrition and environmental sustainability to ensure a healthy recovery from COVID-19.

Recommendations and deliverables: 2021- 2022

Coordinated, multisectoral action through coherent policies addressing nutrition, food systems and biodiversity is required to accelerate action that realizes the potential offered by the FSS and builds resilient SIDS food systems. There is no silver bullet solution to address the unique challenges SIDS food systems face, but there are distinct policy packages that can improve food systems to meet the collective and individual challenges faced by SIDS.

It is recommended that SIDS Member States:

- Develop or update **national food-based dietary guidelines** through the **full integration of environmental sustainability considerations** to address human, animal and environmental health in each of the guideline's recommendations, according to national contexts and based on the best available evidence.
- Implement policies and actions to **create healthy, safe and sustainable food environments** (such as strengthening of food control systems, restricting marketing of foods contributing to unhealthy unsustainable diets, nutrition labelling policies, fiscal policies, public food procurement policies, reformulation to gradually reduce saturated fat, sugars and salt/sodium and trans-fat from foods and beverages) with a focus on healthy, safe and sustainable **school food environments**. Ideally, these policies should be aligned with the national FBDGs.

The establishment of FBDGs which incorporate sustainability considerations serves as a catalyst for change by providing a country-led guide for integrated policy actions. Potential policy actions are detailed in the GAP and when implemented in comprehensive packages can act across the food system, from production and sourcing to consumption, in order to protect the natural

¹¹ WHO, 2020. WHO Manifesto for a health recovery from COVID-19: Prescriptions for a healthy and green recovery from COVID-19.



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resources of SIDS and deliver sustainable, healthy diets for all. This includes guiding the establishment of integrated policy packages to transform food environments and set positive change in motion by harnessing the potential of school settings to reach SIDS youngest generation. WHO is ready to support these recommendations with a suite of guidance documents and technical support to assist countries in prioritizing, strengthening and monitoring the delivery of prioritized policy interventions for food system transformation. FAO is also in the process of revising the guidance available for countries on developing FBDGs. The new methodology encourages countries to consider not only health and nutrition outcomes, but also outcomes relating to environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability. The methodology applies a foods system lens, which includes the implementation of FBDGs across various sectors and settings across food systems.

Case Study: Schools as a Setting for Healthy, Sustainable Transformation

Within SIDS, schools provide a unique setting to catalyze and showcase integrated policy action for food system transformation. Two distinct but complementary pathways for change present themselves, depending on country contexts. The first is to **use the opportunities provided by public procurement through school meal programmes.** Around the world over 368 million children benefit from school meal programmes every day, and while originally viewed as a social protection programme, recent advances have shown the potential of well planned, holistic school meal programs to improve education, gender equality and rural development and to address all forms of malnutrition. 'Home-grown' school meal programmes incorporate locally sourced foods, which strengthens local food systems, empowering local producers and providing greater opportunities to include sustainably produced and biodiverse, often underutilized, local crops. A focus on serving sustainably sourced and nutritious foods, by ensuring school food policies are aligned with national FBDGs, means school feeding programmes can take double duty action to tackle both undernutrition and childhood obesity. The potential of these programmes is already evident in SIDS; one illustration, the 'Farm to Fork' initiative in St Kitts-Nevis and Trinidad and Tobago, involves collaboration between institutions of agriculture, health and education and has supported local production to increase children's fruit and vegetable consumption through school meals.

The second pathway for transformation in schools involves creating healthy school food environments through comprehensive school food and nutrition policies. Such policies work to ensure the provision, sale and consumption of sustainable healthy diets in school settings on one hand while restricting harmful marketing on the other, to implement nutrition and health-promoting curricula and to establish supportive school nutrition and health services.

The WHO's Nutrition Friendly Schools Initiative provides a framework for these integrated policy packages, which has been used to inform action around the world, including in the Pacific region to develop initiatives such as the 'Be Smart Drink Water' guide for school principles to regulate the sale and marketing of sugar sweetened beverages.