

FoodLAND Project Reveals Nutritional Recommendations for Addressing Malnutrition in Tunisia

Over the past four years, the FoodLAND project has worked diligently to address the pressing issue of malnutrition in six African countries in Northern and Eastern regions, namely Morocco, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The project's efforts culminate in a comprehensive set of 360 nutritional recommendations that are relevant, suitable and feasible to implement to combat the diverse forms of malnutrition prevalent in each of these areas, ultimately striving to contribute to the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly target 2.2, which calls for the significant reduction of all forms of malnutrition.

Decades of shifts in food systems have led to a concerning rise in specific forms of malnutrition, being the escalating rates of obesity and overweight the most serious problem in Tunisia, as a consequence of the profound change the country has experienced in recent decades, due to industrialization, urbanization, economic development and globalization of markets, and in line with demographic and social transitions, this has considerably influenced the diet patterns of Tunisians.

These trends underscore an urgent need to align food supply chains with nutrition goals, particularly in ensuring accessibility and affordability of nutritious foods, especially for vulnerable demographics like children and mothers. The food consumption transition in Tunisia is characterised by an elevated demand for meat and dairy products, a decline in cereal consumption and moderation in consumption of vegetables and fruits. In general, individual, and household food consumption data show a trend of increasing food intake and westernisation of the diet especially in urban areas towards higher consumption of dairy and meat products, sugar, fat and salt. Even though the consumption of fruits and vegetables is increasing, it is still below the WHO recommended level.

The stunting levels in Tunisia are generally under 10%, on the other hand, obesity is becoming a big public health challenge. With regard to deficiencies, the selected studies mention that diets fail to meet nutritional requirements for calcium, copper, iron, magnesium, potassium, vitamin D, B2 and vitamin E.

The nutritional recommendations put forward by FoodLAND aim to bridge the gap between existing food behaviours and optimal nutrition. The nutrition working group worked with three key data sources for the development of the recommendations: an extensive desk review carried out for all the African countries involved in the project, surveys conducted in both urban and rural settings, with a specific focus on women with children in their first 1,000 days, and inputs from significant nutrition stakeholders, involved in the validation of the recommendations generated, identification of gaps in those recommendations, and generation of recommendation to close the identified gaps.



Specific recommendations for children and women and rural and urban consumers

The nutrition experts of FoodLAND have generated a total of 67 nutritional recommendations for Tunisia, grouped into four sets: recommendations specifically addressing children's needs, the ones to ensure the nutritional needs of women of reproductive age and two separate sets of recommendations for urban and rural consumers. Not only are the consumers called to action to adopt these recommendations, but also are several recommendations to be implemented by policymakers, regulators and other stakeholders.

The main nutritional recommendations addressing children focus primarily on activities to elevate and protect breastfeeding, promoting exclusive breastfeeding to children below 6 months and continuing breastfeeding until they are two years old; administering iron supplementation to low-birth-weight children, and diversifying children's diet, especially increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables. Initiatives to include educational activities regarding healthy habits are also included in this set of recommendations.

For women of reproductive age (including pregnant and lactating women), the most significant recommendations concern the adoption of healthy habits, the need to consume the 5 recommended food groups and the reduction of highly processed snacks and sweetened beverages, together with doing regular physical activity, as well as intake of iron and folic acid supplements for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

The recommendations generated for urban consumers emphasise the importance of adopting healthy habits, on the one hand, by encouraging the consumption of the 5 recommended food groups, and on the other hand, by reducing the number of meals consumed in a day as well as the consumption of carbohydrates, salts and lipids highly present in processed food products. The promotion of urban farming is also recommended, as it helps raise the production and consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Regarding rural consumers, the FoodLAND experts recommend alerting them of the importance of consuming the 5 recommended food groups. Still, many of the recommendations call for action to governments and healthcare centres, encouraging them to implement traceability and control systems for agri-food products, setting up access to consumers of agricultural products through short distribution channels, promoting kitchen and school gardens, etc.

