

Concept note

UNSCN Discussion paper “aquatic foods in sustainable healthy diets” Draft

One function of the current UNSCN and the future UN Nutrition is aligned advocacy and policy coherence for nutrition as well as emerging issues, knowledge management and innovation. Effective advocacy (and communication) efforts require building a **robust narrative**, defined as a convincing and engaging story around the topic of interest that does not allow space for diverging conclusions or recommendations.

A good example of a **robust narrative** in global nutrition is the narrative constructed to promote breastfeeding. A clear, unequivocal message on the importance of breastfeeding was put forward in the 1970s by the breastfeeding promotion movement. This led to a wide variety of advocacy and communication tools, approaches, and actions at all levels.

Currently, efforts to promote healthy and sustainable diets still lack such a robust narrative. This is illustrated by “big food” companies that readily appropriate the healthy and sustainable diets discourse and incorporate it into their marketing strategies, even for ultra-processed foods, that are energy-rich but micronutrient poor. In late 2019, FAO and WHO published guidelines for sustainable healthy diets. This document, developed during an expert consultation, is a very important positive development, filling a gap in knowledge and helping to create understanding and support for the need to switch to more sustainable healthy diets. It clearly lays out a set of principles that help make choices towards the transition to more sustainable healthy diets and food systems. While the guidelines have helped tremendously to sketch the generic concept of sustainable healthy diets, there are areas about which there is continued disagreement and debate. Animal-source foods is one such area. Principle 4 in the aforementioned publication states: “Sustainable healthy diets can contain moderate amounts of eggs, dairy, poultry and fish and small amounts of red meat” (FAO, WHO, 2019). The background document underpinning this advice, does mention fish, but without recommended amounts. The Principles also state that contexts matter and recommended amounts can vary according to context.

Fish and other aquatic foods¹ form a special case within the group of animal-source foods: more often the debate is about meat or dairy without including the potential of diverse aquatic foods. This is unfortunate as aquatic foods have many essential qualities that are not found in

¹ ‘Aquatic foods’ includes finfish, crustaceans, mollusks and aquatic plants such as seaweed, harvested from capture fisheries and aquaculture production in marine and freshwater environments.

A more expanded version of Aquatic foods include: finfish, shellfish (e.g. shrimp), mollusks (e.g. oyster), aquatic plants (e.g. water cress), algae (e.g. seaweed); other aquatic foods: e.g. sea cucumbers, aquatic mammals (e.g. whales)

terrestrial plant-source and animal-source foods. A nutrition-sensitive food policy should recognize these qualities. For example, the 2017 High Level Panel of Experts report reiterated that fish is one of the best sources of essential fatty acids, micronutrients (vitamins A, B12 and D, as well as calcium, iron, iodine, zinc, selenium, phosphorus), necessary for a healthy diet. Moreover the micronutrients in fish are highly bioavailable (WHO, 1985). In many developing countries, aquatic foods also provide a cheap and locally available food source, especially for vulnerable population groups. Moreover, consumption of aquatic foods provides an opportunity for increased sustainability, as production of aquatic foods have a lower environmental impact than most terrestrial animal-source foods (Hilborn et al. 2018). However, there are areas of concern such as over-fishing, degradation of inland water bodies and food safety.

The above-mentioned FAO/WHO guidelines barely mention fish; as is the case of the EAT-Lancet Commission summary report, published in early 2019.

Based on the HLPE report no. 7 the CFS recognized the important role of aquatic foods for food security and nutrition and adopted recommendations for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture for food security and nutrition, the CFS. As a follow up of this, the "Global Action Network on Sustainable Food from the Oceans and Inland Waters for Food Security and Nutrition" was initiated by the Government of Norway, under the Decade of Action on Nutrition and to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), acknowledging the need to create more understanding about the role of aquatic foods in healthy diets and as part of sustainable and climate friendly food systems. This discussion paper will contribute to the Global Action Network's objective of increasing knowledge and awareness for sustainable aquatic foods for improving nutrition.

AIM: This discussion paper is part of a broader effort to analyze current narratives on healthy and sustainable diets and to build a consensus among UNSCN members around the most robust storytelling for use on several communication, information, and capacity development activities.

Objectives:

- To provide an overview of current major nutrition and health benefits, opportunities and possible trade-offs of sustainable production and consumption of aquatic foods;
- To take into account the environmental impact, such as climate, CO₂ footprint and feed efficiency;
- To take into account several contexts to better understand local opportunities and trade-offs; and
- To contribute to reaching consensus about the role of aquatic foods in sustainable healthy diets.

UNSCN aims to work together with several relevant knowledge centers and partners to develop and publish this paper: CGIAR, WorldFish; Fisheries & Aquaculture Department, FAO; Wageningen University and Research Centre (WUR); Government of Norway. UNSCN proposes to work on a discussion paper about animal-source foods from land (meat, dairy, eggs) at the same time. The two papers will refer to each other's findings but each will have its own focus.

Nutrients can be found both at land and sea. Integration of aquatic foods in food policy advice is pivotal to changing our narrative on food systems. A nutrition-sensitive, integrated food systems framework is imperative. A circular economy which optimizes resource use and efficiencies, considering connections between land, oceans and inland waters demands a holistic approach. "Greening the blue and bluing the green" is an important element for ensuring adequate and sustainable supply of nutritious foods within planetary boundaries.

Timeline:

- Finalization of draft concept note. First quarter 2020
- Identification of consultant. First quarter
- Drafting discussion paper with inputs from several actors. Second quarter
- First round of inputs from members. Third quarter
- Finalisation and final round of approval. Third quarter
- Finalisation, publishing. Fourth quarter

References

CFS HLPE report no. 7 Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture for food security and nutrition

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