IX Meeting of WHO/SEA Nutrition Research-cum-Action Network – A Curtain Raiser

The IX meeting of the Joint WHO-FAO Southeast Asia Nutrition Research-cum-Action Network will be held at the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), Hyderabad, India from 24th to 26th September 2008.

The three-day meeting is an endeavour to promote effective exchange of information among the member countries and partnering organizations/ institutions. Participants drawn from diverse fields of food and nutrition like researchers, academia, and policy implementation of the 11 member states will take part in the meeting. Representatives from UN organizations like WHO, FAO, UNICEF, ICCIDD and World Food Programme will also participate in the meeting.

Alongside discussing the ways and means to revitalize the Network, the meeting would also focus on the rising food prices in the region and its impact on household food insecurity. The participants would also share some successful programmes and experiences in the management of mild, moderate and severe malnutrition using community-based strategies. Some sessions are also planned to discuss recent interventions to combat and control micronutrient malnutrition especially Iodine Deficiency Disorders (IDD) and Iron Deficiency Anaemia. Through the group activities that are planned for the workshop the participants would look into future research needs and evidence-based interventions for management of malnutrition; exchange views on making the micronutrient deficiency control and prevention programmes successful by bridging the gap between research and action and explore the possibility of behavioral change communication in control and prevention of anemia.

FAO meet discusses soaring food prices in Asian countries

The one day emergency brainstorming session on the Food and Agriculture Organisation’s (FAO) Initiative on Soaring Food Prices (ISFP) in select Asian countries was held at the FAO Regional Office, Bangkok, Thailand on 25th April 2008. Representatives of the Governments of Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, Timor-Leste and Thailand along with officers from the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (FAO RAP) attended the meeting. The aim of the meeting was to identify actionable country-specific plans to counter the ill effects of soaring food prices.

In a brief welcome session, the aims of FAO ISFP and its role in assisting the member governments to tackle the problem of soaring food prices was explained to the participants.

In a presentation on 'Agricultural price movements and their underlying reasons, the outlook for next year's crops, regional policy responses and areas of concern for Asia', the representative from FAO RAP observed that the international prices of fats/oils, cereals, sugar and meat products were all increasing while that of dairy products seemed to be declining in some countries. From the 1st quarter of 2007 to the 1st quarter of 2008, wheat prices increased by 131%, maize by 37%, rice by 222%, chicken by 16% and palm oil by 91%. Some of the factors responsible for rising prices were identified as increasing crude oil prices, energy costs, demand for cereals outpacing supply, droughts, influence of speculators and demand from the biofuels industry.
Representatives from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines and Timor-Leste reviewed the current situation of food price rise and its impact on the population. The participants also focused on various short-term and long-term policy measures introduced in their respective countries.

During the subsequent deliberations, participants emphasized the importance of focusing on immediate actions and identifying priority areas, especially those related to food production.

The proposal to hold the High-Level Conference on World Food Security: the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy in Rome in June 2008 was welcomed, particularly because it would put these issues on the forefront of the international agenda. Some speakers even advocated for a UN Task Force on soaring food prices, which would provide technical and policy assistance to countries in need. A proposal was also made for setting up an international centre in Bangladesh to study the adaptation to climate change.

The following were the priority actions that the participants recommended to curb soaring food prices:

- Stepping up public investments in agriculture and encouraging international community to provide resources to implement measures for enhancing food production and availability as well as for generating rural employment.
- Exploring ways to ensure uninterrupted supply of fertilizers. It was also suggested that FAO could organize a fertilizer conference to bring together fertilizer producers and consumers.
- Improving access to high quality seeds
- Providing credit facilities to the farming community. In this regard, the successful rural credit system of Bangladesh was suggested to be emulated in other countries.
- Enhancing availability of food by improving facilities for storage and reducing post-harvest loss.
- Not using staple foods for bio-fuel production.
- Providing nutrition education to encourage consumers to diversify their diets and thus end their dependence on a few staple foods
- Investing in agriculture research.

Country-specific activities to improve Food & Nutrition Plans and Policies – A follow up after the Policy Workshop 2007

During the WHO-FAO Inter-country Workshop on Food and Nutrition Policy and Plans of Action held at the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), Hyderabad, India from 17-21 December 2007, participants from Thailand, Maldives, Indonesia and Malaysia drew up workable action plans to improve and implement the existing plans and policies in their respective countries. NIN being the organizer of the training programme also took up the responsibility of following up the activities taken up by the participants in this direction.

Following activities have been reported by some of the participants:

**Indonesia:** A National Workshop on Food and Nutrition is planned to be organized in mid-August, 2008 with an aim to provide inputs to policy makers for improving inter-sectoral collaboration to effectively implement food and nutrition policies. Prior to this workshop, several pre-workshop discussions are being organized on specific topics such as Food Security, food safety, nutritional status of the population and human resource development in food and nutrition.

**Maldives:** National Nutrition Strategic Plan (NNSP) for 2008 – 2010 has been finalized. The existing National Nutrition Committee will be reconstituted by including more sectors in order to promote inter-sectoral implementation of the plan. Another important achievement that Maldives reported was the finalization and approval of “Regulation on Import, Produce and Sale of Breast Milk Substitutes in the Maldives”. The regulation will come into force from 1st August 2008. The aim of this regulation is to contribute to safe and optimal nutrition of infants and young children. This will be achieved by regulating the production quality, marketing and distribution, and also by dissemination of information for correct use of infant formula, follow-up formula, infant foods and complementary foods for infants and young children. The regulation also aims to contribute to the health of pregnant and lactating women by regulating the marketing of nutritional supplements for pregnant and lactating women. In addition, it also promotes exclusive breast feeding for the first six months of life and continued breast feeding for up to 2 years or beyond, with the introduction of new foods in to the infants’ diet after the period of exclusive breast feeding. A national campaign on breast feeding promotion and complementary feeding is also going to be launched soon.

Through Integrated Early Child Development (IECD), feeding of nutritious food for growth faltering children is being carried out in five select Atolls to start with. This will be expanded throughout the nation by including five Atolls every year.

**Thailand:** The Government has recently established a National Food Commission to push the National Policy
The Government of West Bengal is planning to extend the PD Programme in the rest of the State in a phased manner.

**Child Protection as a means to Nutrition Promotion – An initiative by INMU**

Child protection is a key strategy for preventing malnutrition and its consequences, especially among the vulnerable groups of children. Child protection links closely to nutrition and all other aspects of children's well-being. Lack of adequate protection, especially from neglect, often results in undernutrition, poor health and intellectual underdevelopment. Often, such children are prone to malnutrition and illness, deprived of early stimulation, out of school and more likely to be abused and exploited. Hence, the future significantly rests on investing in child protection as a means for nutrition promotion. Ensuring a protective environment for children requires establishing an effective monitoring system that records the incidence and nature of child protection violations and allows for strategic responses.

Given this background, the Institute of Nutrition, Mahidol University (INMU), Thailand established a child protection monitoring system with the support of UNICEF. This system is installed in 38 sub-districts in six provinces of Southern Thailand that were hit by the tsunami in 2004. The system allows local people: (a) to identify children in need of special protection or those at risk due to their family or living conditions; (b) to identify, plan and undertake effective child-centered, community, sub-district and higher level actions to respond to child protection cases; and (c) to monitor the ongoing child protection situation in order to prevent child protection violations.

Information for a core set of 22 child and household-specific risk factors that may reflect how well a child is being protected, are collected through a simple questionnaire. The data are then entered into the Mahidol Child Protection Management Information System software program that automatically determines the magnitude of each specific risk factor at individual, community and sub-district levels. Program users (e.g., Case Managers, sub-district officials, community leaders) then determine which specific risk factors require special attention, as well as the interrelationship between multiple risk factors. The program can also automatically analyze the information to identify those specific children living in different family arrangements, who are already victims and require immediate services, or those who are potentially at high/medium or low risk of becoming victims.

Based on the prevailing risk factors and the role they play in affecting child protection, sub-district officials, community leaders and case managers then plan and implement primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies for protecting children against the threats that give rise to and perpetuate child neglect, abuse and exploitation.
To date, the system has about 60,000 case records of children aged 0-17 years. This year, INMU is working on a provincial model for national expansion, including over 30,000 additional case records. These records will be updated yearly so that the changes in child protection trends at individual, community, sub-district and provincial levels could be tracked. This would in turn help in taking suitable actions to prevent child neglect and provide services/programs for child victims and those at risk.

Know your network partner – Department of Public Health, Republic of Maldives

The Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health, Republic of Maldives aims to improve the health and well-being of the people through prevention and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases, provide essential health care and promote health awareness. The activities of the Department encompass a wide range of programmes covering various aspects of public health like reproductive health, family planning and safe motherhood, integrated management of childhood illnesses, nutrition education and health promotion, Prevention and control of HIV/AIDS/STIs, TB control, Leprosy control, control of vector-borne diseases, food safety, port health and curative health services.

As regards the Nutrition Programme, the Department's main thrust is to sustain food security and to ensure that people are made aware of the value and importance of balanced diets. The program also focuses on the needs of people with specific nutrition and health problems like diabetes and obesity and provides them with the necessary information and guidance. Exclusive breastfeeding, supplementary feeding and Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative are promoted. Mass de-worming is regularly carried out among all primary school children through school health program. Vitamin A supplementation is also provided to pre and primary school children through the school health programme. The National Immunization Programme Provides Vitamin A Supplementation to non-school-going children. Usage of iodized salt at household level is also being promoted. The Nutrition Plan of Action 1997-2000 developed under the WHO /UNICEF collaboration is being implemented with multi-sectoral collaboration.

As regards Food Safety, the Department mainly works in three areas - food exports, food imports, and catering establishments. The Department is also responsible for enforcement of the regulation related to the food safety laid down by the Ministry of Health. This includes advertising and labelling of foodstuffs; inspection of cafés, restaurants, and teashops and other food take-away establishments; ensuring hygiene and safety standards in food manufacturing units. (Extracted from website: http://www.dph.gov.mv)

What's Coming?


40th National Conference of Nutrition Society of India (NSI) – “Nutrition Support by 2020: Conquering Challenges”, being organized in collaboration with the Indian Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (ISPN) from 20th to 22nd November 2008, Chennai, India. Contact: Dr Varsha, Organizing Chair at nutrifeast2008@gmail.com or drvarsha1@gmail.com. Visit: www.nutritionsoocietyindia.org

Regional Workshop on Monitoring and Evaluation of Population, Health & Nutrition Programmes, 24th November-12th December 2008 by Mahidol University. For details: Dr. Uraiwan Kanungsukkasem, Institute for Population Research, Mahidol University, Thailand. Ph: 66-2-441-0201 Ext: 230, Email: prukn@mahidol.ac.th.

International Conference on Iron Deficiency, 4th-8th December, 2008 at Mt. Abu, Rajasthan, India. Contact: Dr. BC Mehta at: iconid2008@gmail.com