

PROGRESS REPORT ON THE INTER-AGENCY
FOOD AND NUTRITION SURVEILLANCE PROGRAMME (IFNS)

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Information Note on the Inter-agency
Food and Nutrition Surveillance Programme (IFNS)

I. BACKGROUND

1. The Inter-agency Food and Nutrition Surveillance Programme (IFNS) is a joint initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to assist a large number of countries and regional institutions to establish and strengthen food and nutrition surveillance programmes over the next five years. It was developed in response to an evident need for a renewed and concerted effort to strengthen food and nutrition surveillance systems in the light of the economic recession of the last few years and its associated negative effects, particularly on poor and vulnerable population groups. A recommendation for a \$10 million supplementary funded project to support the establishment and strengthening of food and nutrition surveillance systems through the IFNS programme was approved by the UNICEF Executive Board at its April/May 1987 session. 1/ In January 1988 the WHO Executive Board recommended the adoption of a resolution to support countries in establishing and making use of effective nutritional status surveillance systems in collaboration with FAO, UNICEF and other United Nations agencies. 2/ The IFNS programme has also been formally endorsed by the Sub-committee on Nutrition of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination at its 1987 and 1988 meetings. 3/

II. ORIGINS OF THE PROGRAMME

2. Food and nutrition surveillance is the regular provision of information and its use for decision-making on policies and programmes which, directly or indirectly, affect nutrition. The original concept of surveillance came from the public health field where surveillance of infectious diseases plays an important role in prevention and treatment of disease. At the 1974 World Food Conference a resolution was passed recommending the establishment of a global surveillance system by FAO, WHO and UNICEF "to monitor the food and nutrition conditions of the disadvantaged groups of the population at risk, and to provide a method of rapid and permanent assessment of all factors which influence food consumption patterns and nutritional status". This approach was established in international terms after the 1974 World Food Congress and a joint FAO/WHO/UNICEF committee in 1975 agreed on the general methodological basis for promoting such surveillance activities. 4/ By the early 1980s some 20 countries, supported independently by the respective United Nations agencies, were operating some type of food or nutrition surveillance system for the purposes of policy, programme planning and advocacy. 5/

3. The practical aim of the IFNS programme is to extend these approaches to many more countries in a collaborative manner in order to make data on nutritional status and related food and nutrition information more available

on a regular and frequent basis; and to encourage their use to guide economic and social policy-making and planning in tackling food and nutrition problems and reacting to the warning trends revealed. The participating agencies have been supporting countries in the development of sectoral information and analyses from their respective vantage points and will continue to support these programmes to interpret and predict changes so that appropriate interventions can be undertaken.

4. There has also been an increasing recognition in the last few years of the devastating effects of economic recession on poor and vulnerable groups, especially children, and of the importance of ensuring that the current structural adjustment policies that Governments are obliged to carry out are so designed that their potentially damaging effects are reduced to a minimum 6/. Monitoring nutrition, particularly of vulnerable groups, is one of the best methods of assessing how people are being affected and how compensatory measures are working. This growing concern with the human dimension of economic adjustment policies has underlined the urgent need to monitor changes in nutritional status in as many countries as possible. The nutritional status of young children is probably the most sensitive indicator of sudden changes in food security and health status, acting as an early signal of distress, ill health, famine and, eventually, death.

III. OBJECTIVES

5. The specific objectives of the IFNS programme are:

(a) To produce and analyse existing information on trends in a limited number of specified indicators of food and nutrition at national and subnational levels;

(b) To promote the prompt use of this information for national programming and international advocacy;

(c) To strengthen the institutional capacity of countries to produce, analyse and use food and nutrition data; and

(d) To promote widespread recognition and use of this information at country and regional levels in the development of policies, plans and programmes.

IV. ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

6. The IFNS programme provides a mechanism to co-ordinate the support of the international agencies to national institutions in strengthening food and nutritional surveillance and related activities. The programme is managed by a Management Committee with representatives from FAO, WHO, UNICEF and the Sub-committee on Nutrition secretariat of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination. Each agency, in the normal course of its work at the international level and in its activities with national Governments, has responsibility for a number of substantive areas related to food and nutrition surveillance. FAO's concerns include agricultural development and food

security; WHO's concerns include epidemiology and nutritional status determination; UNICEF is concerned with intersectoral planning, programming and support for the survival and development of children and women; and the Sub-committee on Nutrition secretariat is concerned with global and regional co-ordination issues in the area of nutrition. The Management Committee is responsible for the approval of country and regional projects.

7. Most recently the Management Committee met in Geneva from 16 to 19 February 1988. A work plan for 1988 was drawn up. The meeting also provided an opportunity to meet with representatives of the sponsoring donor agencies of the Netherlands and Switzerland who have agreed to support the programme.

8. The development of projects will be undertaken jointly by FAO, WHO and UNICEF with each agency's input determined on a country-by-country basis, taking into account specific country needs and identified priorities, with UNICEF overseeing the process. Once projects are approved they will be managed by the UNICEF field office.

9. A senior project officer joined UNICEF in mid-August 1987 to manage the contribution of UNICEF to the programme, and a project officer joined the Sub-committee on Nutrition secretariat in Rome in October 1987 to enhance the secretariat's capacity to play its co-ordinating role, with particular reference to the short-term programme of data gathering and analysis of current trends.

V. STATUS OF FUNDING

10. Following the approval of the programme by the UNICEF Executive Board, UNICEF approached a number of donor countries for contributions in support of the programme and the response has been most encouraging. In the case of two of these countries, formal agreements are being finalized. The Government of Switzerland is the first major donor of the IFNS programme, with a contribution of 3 million Swiss Francs (2.2 million US dollars). The Government of the Netherlands in turn is providing 372,000 Dutch Guilders (200,000 US dollars) as seed money to help get the programme under way.

11. With the contributions from the Netherlands and Switzerland, the programme is now in a position to develop country and regional projects which can then be submitted to interested donors. Several donors have already indicated their interest in receiving projects from their priority countries. It is also intended to use the IFNS programme to catalyze the development of country and regional projects which would be funded from the general resources of UNICEF country programmes, WHO and FAO resources and from other supplementary funds such as the Joint Nutrition Support Programme (JNSP) already supported by the Government of Italy.

VI. DEVELOPMENT AND FUNDING OF COUNTRY PROJECTS

12. In order to establish the priority of food and nutrition surveillance programmes within the context of overall national priorities and initiatives,

while trying to develop a number of target country projects in an accelerated time frame, the IFNS programme will take advantage of the UNICEF country programming process which involves a well established procedure of substantive consultations between Governments and the UNICEF country offices to identify priorities and develop projects for a five-year programme of co-operation. These discussions are undertaken in close consultation with the country representatives of FAO, WHO and other international and national agencies. Because of this country programming process and because of its comprehensive network of country offices and representatives, UNICEF is in the best position to co-ordinate the work of developing target country projects for the IFNS.

13. The elaboration of country projects is being fully co-ordinated and developed in a collaborative manner with the Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA) programme for countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The objectives of the SDA for monitoring the impact of economic recession and structural adjustment are similar to those of IFNS except that SDA intends to collect complete household-level data on determinants of living standards.

VII. REGIONAL WORKSHOPS

14. Wide consultations are being held within each region to establish the state of the art of national food and nutrition surveillance systems and to obtain input from the regions about their respective experiences to date with these systems. Several regional workshops are being planned by the agencies during the year in Brazzaville, Mexico City, Jakarta, Kinshasa, Bamako and Harare.

VIII. COMMON INDICATORS

15. The topic of appropriate common indicators to be monitored in national food and nutrition surveillance systems was the subject of several meetings during the initial months of the programme. The objective of these technical meetings was to move towards a greater consensus and more standardization in the collection and presentation of a minimum list of indicators which would be feasible to obtain and use in the circumstances of developing countries with limited statistical and information generating and analysing capabilities. As far as possible these indicators should be consistent with those being used by concerned international agencies in their regular programme activities. A preliminary discussion was held on the occasion of the meeting of the Advisory Group on Nutrition (AGN) of the Sub-committee on Nutrition secretariat in September 1987 in Washington, D.C.

16. A discussion paper on core indicators for the IFNS programme 7/ was prepared and distributed for comment and was the working paper for an inter-agency meeting held at UNICEF headquarters, 21-22 October 1987. Subsequently, a report of the meeting 8/ and the discussion paper have been circulated for comment to staff of the concerned agencies, experienced individuals in the subject and members of the AGN.

17. The inter-agency working group agreed that the IFNS programme should support countries in the use of a few common indicators that would monitor changes over time on a regular, frequent and standardized basis. These common indicators would include the anthropometric indicators proposed in the working paper, plus one or two food indicators to be selected after further discussion. Wherever possible, countries should be encouraged to aim for at least quarterly reporting.

18. The nutritional status indicators that were agreed as common outcome indicators for the IFNS programme are as follows, with the reasons elaborated in the working paper:

(a) Birth weight: as the measure of nutritional status of the child at birth; as a predictor of the child's likelihood to grow and develop; as an indirect measure of the health and nutritional status of the mother of the child; and, in aggregate terms, of pregnant women and mothers as a vulnerable group;

(b) Weight-for-age of children under five: for monitoring growth and development of this vulnerable group, disaggregated by more specific age groups and, where possible (as in household surveys), supplemented by weight-for-height and height-for-age, which are more specific measures;

(c) Height-for-age of primary school entrants: a measure taken at the end of the early period of growth and development which then becomes a cumulative indicator of the overall nutritional and health status of the child at the beginning of its school-going years and as an overall indicator of social and economic development.

IX. IFNS REPORT ON RECENT TRENDS

19. One of the short-term objectives of the IFNS is to produce information on trends in a limited number of specified indicators of food and nutrition. The first IFNS Report on Recent Trends, which will focus on recent trends in nutrition indicators, national or subnational, particularly with reference to economic adjustment, will be issued by mid-1988. It will contain country analyses and regional overviews and will assess key nutritional and socio-economic indicators for the 1984-1987 period in terms of (a) a description of the economic and agricultural situation; (b) a description of relevant public and international policy developments; and (c) an analysis of trends in food access indicators and nutrition indicators. The report, which will supplement the 1987 World Nutrition Situation issued by the Sub-committee on Nutrition, will be distributed widely.

X. IFNS DATA BANK

20. It has been decided to establish an IFNS Data Bank at WHO. This data bank would build upon the archives of nutritional status data already maintained by WHO as its nucleus. The IFNS programme will add the data being collected from

countries as part of the immediate objective of IFNS to publish annual reports on short-term trends; through WHO regularly requesting its regional offices to provide additional material on current data sets; by FAO and UNICEF adding available data sets through their regular collection programmes; and through the provision of data by other interested institutions and agencies. The IFNS will support this activity through a contribution to the salary of a professional staff person at WHO.

21. An important feature of this data bank is that for all information for each of three nutritional status indices, the same cut-off point (below -2 standard deviations) and reference population (National Center for Health Statistics) have been used. There has been a considerable effort by WHO and other groups to standardize the analysis and presentation of anthropometric data. This standardization not only allows for inter-country comparisons but for intra-country evaluations of trends over time. Work is also under way to analyse time-series data sets and an effort has begun to gather anthropometric information on children and adults to evaluate obesity and overweight prevalences.

22. The IFNS would be delighted to receive additional documented data to include in the data bank and would be pleased to make the currently available data available to interested parties.

Notes

1/ UNICEF, Executive Board, Forty-first Session, "Strengthening food and nutrition surveillance systems" (E/ICEF/1987/P/L.37), April 1987.

2/ WHO, Executive Board, Eighty-first Session, "Resolution of the WHO Executive Board: Infant and young child nutrition", EB 81/R16, 1988.

3/ ACC/SCN, "Proposal for expanding nutritional surveillance", Report of the ACC/SCN Working Group on Nutritional Surveillance, (unpublished), 1987.

4/ WHO, "Methodology of nutritional surveillance", Report of a Joint FAO/UNICEF/WHO Expert Committee, WHO Technical Report 593, 1975.

5/ J.B. Mason, et al., "Nutritional surveillance", World Health Organization, Geneva, 1984.

6/ Richard Jolly, "Recession, adjustment and nutrition: An overview", Food and Nutrition Bulletin, United Nations University 9 (1), 1987.

7/ Beverley A. Carlson, "Core Indicators for the Interagency Food and Nutrition Surveillance Programme", A paper for discussion. UNICEF, New York, 1987.

8/ UNICEF, "Report of the Working Group Meeting on Indicators for the Inter-agency Food and Nutrition Surveillance Programme", 21-22 October 1987.