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Nutrition: BIAC Considerations for OECD Work

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I. THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

Sound public policy frameworks are essential to providing nutritional security and reducing the risks of illnesses related to poor quality diets and lifestyles. A comprehensive approach is needed to prevent malnutrition, including under-nutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and over-nutrition/obesity.

It is estimated that over 10% of the world's population suffers chronically from hunger or undernourishment, contributing to a range of severe health impacts which result in significant government health costs. Micronutrient deficiencies are estimated to affect 2 billion men, women and children worldwide.[1] This is not simply a developing country problem: micronutrient deficiencies in vitamin D and iron exist among the elderly in Europe as well.

Meanwhile, the WHO estimates that 500 million people worldwide are obese and 7% of children aged less than five are overweight.[2] Although obesity is often considered a problem specific to advanced economies, obesity levels are now rising in many developing economies as well. The rise in obesity is a multifactorial issue that poses a serious public health risk, and will require coordinated multi-sector and multi-stakeholder actions to help consumers lead healthy lifestyles.

These challenges have been recognized at the highest political level in the form of Sustainable Development Goal No. 2, agreed by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, which calls to *"End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture"*. Many other initiatives, such as the UN Zero Hunger Challenge[3] and the FAO/WHO International Conference on Nutrition[4], also draw worldwide attention to the importance of nutrition for development.

Evidence-based decision-making is essential to harness the power of advances in nutrition to fuel sustainable economic development. But scientific evidence on the relationships between nutrients and, indeed, diets as a whole, together with particular health-related risks, is often

[1] FAO and WHO (2013) "New Business Models to Help Eliminate Food and Nutrition Insecurity: Roadmap for Exploration".
[2] FAO and WHO (2013) "New Business Models to Help Eliminate Food and Nutrition Insecurity: Roadmap for Exploration".
[3] For further details, please see: http://www.un.org/en/zerohunger/#&panel1-1
[4] For further details, please see: http://www.fao.org/docrep/v7700t/v7700t02.htm

contradictory or incomplete. As a result, there is a risk that governments adopt policies based on inaccurate or poorly-constructed research, resulting in unintended consequences for public health, economic development, and sustainability.

II. BIAC CONSIDERATIONS FOR OECD WORK ON NUTRITION

The OECD is an ideal forum to improve understanding and evidence on cross-cutting issues in which the Organization identifies synergies and interlinkages across different policy areas. Taking a whole-OECD approach, we believe the Organization should apply its international and economy-wide expertise to develop sound analysis and advice to inform the development of nutrition policies that support improved health outcomes and sustainable, broad-based economic growth. The OECD's cross-cutting expertise in agriculture, health, economics, and taxation, make the Organization uniquely suited to holistically examine the costs and benefits of various policy responses.

BIAC's overarching recommendation for future OECD work on nutrition is therefore to foster close cooperation between the OECD Committees for Agriculture and Health, as well as other relevant OECD bodies.

As guidance for future analysis and policy advice in this area, we encourage the OECD to take into account the following key considerations:

1. **Improve the evidence base.** Recognizing the multifactorial nature of obesity and the complexity of the nutrition interactions involved, we need to better understand which factors most influence healthy diets and lifestyles, how to measure complex variables and their interactions, how to implement justifiable interventions, and how to carry out proper impact assessment of those interventions.[5] Such a systematic and internationally-consistent process is necessary to determine what policy responses are justified to support healthy diets and lifestyles in the context of sustainable food systems and sustainable, broad-based economic growth.

2. **Take a holistic approach to foods, food chains and diets.** Public health initiatives to combat non communicable diseases often focus on specific nutrients and increasingly on profiling individual products. Nutrition policies must instead take into account total diets and lifestyle factors, and should promote appropriate dietary balance and diversity[6] recognizing there are

[5] For instance, the European Commission (2014) *"Food taxes and their impact on the agri-food sector"* finds that there are no robust conclusions on the impact of food taxes on public health, meaning their effectiveness in curbing obesity is therefore uncertain.

[6] Campaigns targeting individual nutrients serve as an antithesis to balanced diets for health and nutrition. Many scientific statements issued in such campaigns have been contradictory over time (e.g. regarding eggs, butter, and other products), leading to consumer confusion.

no one-size-fits-all answers. This calls for looking at the entire food chain 'from farm to fork' to consider for example: improved soil health; clean water access/availability and sanitation as part of increased urbanization (especially in developing countries); and better food storage, preservation and processing.[7] Given the complexity of food supply chains and the need to improve their integrity to enhance consumer safety, international cooperation – and cooperation among OECD bodies and directorates – is particularly important. These are not just issues for OECD countries, but are significant worldwide.

3. **Examine the linkages between consumer behavior, sustainability and nutrition.** Food must be safe, tasty, affordable, accessible and nutritious. However, companies seeking to improve the nutritional qualities of the foods they consume are challenged to do so in ways that are sustainable. Consumers increasingly seek information about environmental sustainability and provenance. The synergies between nutrition, sustainability, and other drivers of consumer behavior therefore need to be better understood.

4. **Ensure that policies enable multi-sector initiatives to support healthy diets and lifestyles.** While government regulation plays an important role, multi-stakeholder approaches along the food chain (including those initiated voluntarily by the private sector) offer many complementary, efficient, and cost-effective advantages. With the right models of collaboration[8], businesses are an indispensable partner for change by supporting fortification programs, consumer information and education initiatives, responsible marketing and advertising, product reformulation, promotion of healthy lifestyles, supporting humanitarian aid programs, and fostering research.

[7] Trace elements important to human nutrition can be optimized in the diet by applying them to food crops. For example, IPNI and IFA (2013) *"Fertilizing crops to improve human health: A scientific review"* finds that bio-fortification of crops can effectively move large numbers of people from deficient to adequate levels of iron, vitamin A, and zinc. Nutrient fortification of staple foods, particularly bread, is practiced in many countries as some countries have also done for rice and sugar.

[8] Examples include the EU Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health; the World Food Program; the Scaling Up Nutrition network; and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition.