

Healthy diet metrics: Monitoring of healthy diets globally

A call to action



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Monitoring healthy diets to achieve better health for people and the planet

The burden of disease associated with unhealthy diets is a worldwide concern. Many low- and middle-income countries are still grappling with undernutrition while facing rising levels of overweight and obesity. All forms of malnutrition have multiple causes, but unhealthy diets are common to them all.

Healthy diets (Box 1) are critical for achieving global nutrition targets and the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 2 – ending malnutrition in all its forms. Despite the importance of healthy diets for population health and well-being, not all population groups have valid indicators to assess the quality of their diets. Without these indicators, we have limited information about the foods that people are eating and whether these foods constitute a healthy diet.

The omission of healthy diet metrics from global monitoring is highly consequential. Without appropriate and globally comparable indicators, we cannot track countries' commitments and progress towards improving the diets of their populations. To track progress, we need reliable and timely data on what people eat and drink – and we need to use these data to design policies, programmes and messaging to achieve healthy diets. While most countries collect some data about foods available in the household, few countries routinely collect nationally representative information about the foods that people are actually eating.

Many critical contributions to advancing this agenda have been made at national and global levels. However, there is no consensus on the metrics that suitably capture the extent to which diets are healthy in a comparable way across settings and populations. Clear guidance and bold ambition are needed to put healthy diet metrics in the hands of the people and institutions who need them.

There is an urgent need to consolidate efforts, harmonize messaging and achieve consensus on what constitutes healthy diets and how to measure them. This is critical to guide the generation of actionable fit-for-purpose dietary data that can be used to inform evidence-based approaches, and ultimately, to accelerate progress towards monitoring and achieving healthy diets for all, leaving no one behind.

Box 1. What are healthy diets?

What constitutes healthy diets for each individual depends on age, sex, physiological status, lifestyle, physical activity, cultural context, availability and affordability of local foods, and dietary customs and preferences. The six basic properties of healthy diets,^a however, remain the same, because the underlying human biology is universal.

The four properties of healthy diets with highest priority for the purposes of assessment and monitoring are nutrient adequacy, dietary diversity, macronutrient balance, and moderation of unhealthy foods, based on the agreement at the Bellagio meeting.^b Monitoring these four properties of diets provides information relevant to all forms of malnutrition (stunting, wasting and underweight; micronutrient deficiencies; overweight and obesity) and diet-related noncommunicable disease risks.

Healthy diets promote growth and development and prevent malnutrition in all its forms.^c Current WHO recommendations for healthy diets^d include: exclusive breastfeeding from 0 to 6 months and continued breastfeeding until 2 years of age and beyond; balanced energy intake and expenditure; limited intake of total fat, free sugars and salt; and adequate intake of fruits and vegetables, legumes, nuts and whole grains.

a Arimond M, Deitchler M. Measuring diet quality for women of reproductive age in low- and middle-income countries: towards new metrics for changing diets. Washington (DC): Intake – Center for Dietary Assessment/FHI 360; 2019 (<https://bit.ly/3t2aiXQ>, accessed 11 April 2023).

b Bellagio meeting report. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023. (<https://bit.ly/3uwZAJs>, accessed 5 July 2023).

c Sustainable healthy diets: guiding principles. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations/World Health Organization; 2019 (<https://bit.ly/3RiK2lp>, accessed 11 April 2023).

d Healthy diet, Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020 (<https://bit.ly/47U5ouL>, accessed 29 June 2023).

Mission of the Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative

Recognizing the need for consensus and action, FAO, UNICEF and WHO, have joined forces to chart a way forward via the Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative.¹ Its mission, which was articulated through discussions at the Bellagio meeting,² is to **enable national and global decision-makers and stakeholders to monitor and achieve healthy diets for people and the planet.**

Monitoring and achieving progress towards healthy diets for people was identified as the priority need to be addressed, while monitoring and achieving healthy diets for the planet, especially with climate change, was identified as a longer-term need.

The achievement of this mission requires determining which healthy diet metrics are best suited to address which needs and why. Four metrics were identified as the most suitable for global and national monitoring: Global Diet Quality Score; Global Dietary Recommendations score; Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women; and Nova Ultra-processed Foods score.

In the context of global monitoring, each existing metric has strengths and limitations that could be addressed with further research. There are differences in what the metrics were designed to measure; the types of data required and their availability; the time needed for development, data collection and processing; the time and effort required of respondents; the validity of the metrics for different population groups and countries; and the ability to adapt the metrics for different country contexts or populations.

Taking the agenda forward

The Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative will develop a joint research agenda to strengthen the knowledge base on healthy diet metrics and tools and promote their uptake and use for monitoring.

We will actively seek input into this agenda from key stakeholder groups, such as national governments, United Nations agencies and international organizations, implementing partners, donors and funders, civil society organizations, researchers and others (such as those concerned about climate change and food systems). Our agenda will be stronger with an understanding of the specific needs, experiences and expertise of each of these groups. We intend to streamline global efforts and invite sustained government and donor investments in improving the monitoring of healthy diets. The ultimate intended impact is improved diets and nutrition and a healthier population and planet.

The Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative envisions a three-phase plan with the following intended outcomes.

1. Synthesizing evidence and understanding national diet information needs (September 2023 to December 2024):
 - Summarizing the current state of knowledge on healthy diet metrics for all stakeholders;
 - Contributing new knowledge about the validity of metrics and tools for a range of purposes through priority research;
 - Activating co-creation and co-ownership among key stakeholders, including country partners.
2. Development and dissemination of guidance to countries for monitoring healthy diets (January 2024 to December 2025).
3. Support to countries to implement guidance on healthy diet metrics and advocacy for valid healthy diet metrics in global commitment frameworks (January 2026 onwards).

1 Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative. (<https://bit.ly/HDMIinitiative>). In addition to FAO, UNICEF, and WHO, Dr. Jennifer Coates from the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy and Dr. Edward Frongillo from University of South Carolina are key technical members of the HDMI.

2 To achieve the objectives of the Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative, the group convened a technical expert meeting on 'Harmonizing and Mainstreaming Measurement of Healthy Diets Globally' with key stakeholders working on the assessment and monitoring of healthy diets, as well as expert users of such metrics and stakeholders at national level. The Bellagio meeting built on the outputs of a technical consultation convened by the WHO-UNICEF Technical Expert Advisory Group on Nutrition Monitoring (TEAM), FAO, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Advancing Nutrition in May 2021 on assessing healthy diets. The meeting was hosted by The Rockefeller Foundation at its Bellagio Center in Italy, from 28 November to 2 December 2022. See Annex for list of participants and meeting report for details (<https://bit.ly/3uwZAJs>, accessed 5 July 2023).

Call to action

We call on national governments, United Nations agencies and international organizations, implementing partners, donors and funders, civil society organizations, researchers and other key stakeholders (such as those concerned about climate change and food systems) to join the Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative. By joining the email list, you will receive updates on our work and ways to contribute to our mission. Please also let us know if you are interested to commit to one or more of the following actions:

- sharing needs, experiences and expertise as inputs into the process;
- advocating for and elevating the importance of monitoring population-level dietary intake and using these data to improve the health of people and the planet through policies and programmes;
- institutionalizing structures and processes for monitoring diets nationally and globally to track progress towards the achievement of healthy diets in populations;

- conducting joint research to fill gaps in monitoring healthy diets; and
- sustaining commitments, collaboration and investment through continued engagement with the Initiative.

We invite all interested organizations and actors to register their interest in the Healthy Diets Monitoring Initiative at the following link: [REGISTER HERE](#)

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