

Book review

Reshaping Food Systems to Improve Nutrition and Health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

by Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh and Alexa L. Meyer

Reviewed by: Shamim Ghazi¹

1 Department of Speech Therapy, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran

Email: shamimghazi1997@gmail.com

The book titled “Reshaping Food systems to improve nutrition and health in the eastern Mediterranean Region,” written by Ayoub Al-Jawaldeh and Alexa L. Meyer points out that to make healthy and sustainable diets accessible to all, we need to significantly change current methods of food production and consumption, also in the face of climate change. Therefore, the United Nations have convened a Food Systems Summit in September 2021 to offer a platform for exchange and cooperation between countries and actors in the food system and they are organized into five courses of action that include: 1. Ensure access to safe and nutrition food for all, 2. Shift to sustainable consumption patterns, 3. Boost nature-positive production, 4. Advance equitable livelihoods, 5. Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress. The aims of this book are to eliminate malnutrition and food insecurity and increase access to safe food in order to achieve high priorities in the fight against poverty.

The first part of this book is consists of following sections food system: concept, definitions, and approaches and it has four subsections that include 1. The Food Systems Approach: Definitions and Concept 2. Challenges to Current Food Systems 3. Food Waste and Losses and Water Use 4. Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets of the Future. A review of a food system implies the entire food and nutrition chain, from production to consumption, and its impact on the environment. This chapter also addresses classifications of the food system as "traditional" and "modern", with several stages between the two. In the following subchapter, Challenges to Current Food Systems, we are told that food systems should provide healthy eating for all, in particular for marginalized groups who are at risk of malnutrition like women of child-bearing age, children and adolescents, low-income groups and refugees. This point is treated in more detail in the next subchapter, Food Waste and Losses and Water Use. In this subchapter, about another contributor to unsustainable food systems is said to be the high percentage of food lost and wasted. It is important to emphasize that free access to clean water and adequate health infrastructure is essential for infection prevention and improved health, which also improves nutritional status. Insufficient access to potable water and inadequate sanitation contribute to a high prevalence of anaemia. These properties help enhance the sustainability of food systems and facilitate access to healthy eating. The last subchapter, Sustainable Food Systems for Healthy Diets of the Future, talks about the achievement of a healthy diet. This goal requires a multispectral approach that includes all parties involved in the food system. It is introduced in more detail in the third part of this book.

The second section of the book presents information about the nutritional and health situation in the countries of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean region. It consists of five subsections. The first one is about undernourishment, common in the region. Despite the high prevalence of underweight and micronutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity are on the rise in the region. While this was mentioned in the previous section, in this section the wealthier countries and those where nutrition transition where the problem is more advanced are discussed in detail. Micronutrient deficiencies are discussed in the third subsection. Worldwide, iron, vitamin A and iodine deficiencies have long been recognised as common causes of health and well-being problems, in particular in young children, expectant mothers and women of childbearing age. But more recently, other essential micronutrients have been added to the list, such as folic acid, zinc and vitamin D. Although the availability of certain essential micronutrients at the population level is monitored on a regular basis, there is less data on others. Healthy nutrition is important for young children and infants in order for them to achieve full growth and development, while avoiding excess weight and obesity and developing healthy eating habits for the rest of life which is discussed comprehensively and completely under the fourth subsection. In the final sub-chapter, dietary intake and consumption patterns of adults and adolescents discussed. Improving these and other actions are presented in detail and the progress of their implementation in the region is reviewed.

In part three, food system actions as 'GAME CHANGERS' are presented, with a special focus on regional aspects and effects. It is divided into six sections. The first one discusses fiscal policies for safe and sustainable food. These consist of agricultural and food subsidies, incentives, pricing and taxation policies, each of which provide an effective vehicle to modify food systems and make eating habits healthier and more sustainable. Since food prices are an important determinant of the range of foodstuffs offered on the market on the one hand and of consumer choices on the other, agriculture and food subsidies as well as price policies and taxes can be used to promote the sustainable increased production of more nutritious products, to growth access to healthy foods and incentives for purchasing them, counteracting the falling consumption of healthy foods. Food subsidies and tax policies provide the government with powerful tools to steer food purchases towards healthier diets. However, in the case of subsidies, we need to move away from traditionally subsidized staple foods to foods that are higher in nutrient content and lower in energy intake. In addition, allocating tax revenues toward subsidies, along with more effective subsidy models for social health programs, makes measures more palatable and increases public support. In second section, we get information on how the commercialization of food and drink has a significant impact on what people eat and, as a result, on public health. Regulating the marketing of food to prevent the promotion of high-energy, low-nutrient foods that are high in fat (in particular saturated and trans fats), sugar and/or salt (HFSS foods, high in fat, salt and sugar) offers a strategy to reduce the consumption of unhealthy foods. Children are especially vulnerable to advertising, so such regulation could have a particularly large impact on their health. In addition to HFSS foods, the promotion of breast milk substitutes is another area of concern as it aims to discourage mothers from breastfeeding and contributes to low breastfeeding rates.

In the third section, food labelling was recommended as a tool to allow consumers to better understand the composition of the foods they eat and to make healthier choices when purchasing food in section three. This is especially important in light of the increasing consumption of industrial products, highly processed foods and ready meals in most parts of the world. Summarizing this information offers an important tool to help consumers make healthier food choices and its efficiency is greatly enhanced when it takes on a simple and salient form that is easy to apprehend and understand and provides warnings on

unhealthy foods. Different approaches to labelling have thus far yielded promising results in many countries around the world. Conversely, their use in the eastern Mediterranean region of the WHO remains restricted to a few countries and should be expanded with other nutritional policies.

Section four is Reformulating Food Products. For example, several countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have not yet taken action to reduce the amount of salt in the diet of their populations, even as the consumption of processed foods high in salt is increasing. They should take advantage of the knowledge and experience available from other members of the region.

The fifth section discusses public food procurement and service policies to support healthy sustainable diets, arguing that governments too often have one-size-fits-all ways to change the food system to make it healthier. However, governments are influencing not only the food system (through legal and regulatory frameworks), but also take direct action as a public food provider, including government offices, public schools and universities, public hospitals and nursing homes, day centres, military institutions, prisons, etc., as well as emergency food and social programs. This applies especially to school feeding, which accounts for much of the public food supply in most countries. However, initiatives in favour of healthy public procurement should not be limited to this framework, but should also concentrate on the health sector, military and criminal institutions, among others. Developing clear regulations and guidelines for food served in public spaces is critical to the successful implementation of food supply policies, and as such should be subject to regular monitoring and review.

Finally, food fortification, including biofortification is discussed as the last topic of this book. Although diet diversification should be the first option for increasing the consumption of micronutrients, fortification of food during processing or biofortification during crop growth, provides valuable means of providing essential micronutrients, especially when access to safe and varied foods is limited.

In summary, the three sections of this book investigate the current situation and the potential impact of the implementation of specific food-systems related actions within the countries comprising the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO.