

Agrobiodiversity key to healthy, sustainable diets, experts say on World Food Day

Dubai, UAE, 16 October 2019 – Agrobiodiversity and crop diversification are crucially important for the fight against hunger and malnutrition worldwide, experts said at a high-level roundtable meeting hosted by the International Center for Biosaline Agriculture ([ICBA](#)) in collaboration with The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Food Security Office of the UAE.

Dedicated to World Food Day, which is celebrated every year on 16 October to mark the founding of FAO, the meeting brought together around 40 representatives from international agencies, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions, including FAO, the UN, the World Food Programme, and the United Arab Emirates University.

High-level speakers and attendees included H.E. Ismail Dirie Gamadid, Minister of Environment, Agriculture and Climate Change (MoEACC), Puntland State of Somalia; Dr. Dino Francescutti, Coordinator of FAO's Sub-regional Office for the Gulf Cooperation Council and Yemen and FAO Representative for the UAE; Mr. Sarmad Khan, Head of the Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator in the UAE; Dr. Mageed Yahia, Country Director and Gulf Cooperation Council Region Representative of the World Food Programme; Prof. Bhanu Chowdhary, Dean of the College of Food and Agriculture at the United Arab Emirates University; and Ms. Maytha Jasim Shafi, Manager of Land Sector at the Department of Umm Al Quwain Municipality.

Dr. Ismahane Elouafi, Director General of ICBA, said: "World Food Day is an important day for all of us as unfortunately more than 821 million people are still going hungry to bed. ICBA is proudly hosting this event to stress the need to act and stop hunger and poverty by focusing on marginal environments."

In line with this year's theme for World Food Day, the meeting discussed ways to increase the availability and affordability of diverse and nutritious foods for healthy and sustainable diets with a specific focus on the UAE.

Dr. Dino Francescutti, FAO Sub-Regional Coordinator, remarked: "Each year The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations celebrates World Food Day to raise awareness for those who suffer from hunger around the world. This year, it also calls the general public to think about their food choices and the need to make healthy and sustainable diets available and affordable to everyone."

While hunger is often characterized by poverty, malnutrition is a more complex concept, which, in all its forms, includes undernutrition, obesity, and diet-related noncommunicable diseases.

After several decades of a decline in hunger, the world is witnessing an increase in the number of undernourished people. Today around 821 million, or roughly one in nine people, go hungry worldwide, and some 2 billion lack key micronutrients such as iron and vitamin A. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 1.9 billion adults are overweight or obese globally, while 462 million are underweight. Once viewed as a rich-world problem, overweight and obesity are on the rise in low- and middle-income countries, especially in urban settings.

In the UAE, for example, WHO estimates that today overall levels of adult obesity stand at 30 percent, with a peak of 39 percent for women, against a global average of about 13 percent. There is also a worrying trend of a growth in obesity in the country: from 2000 to 2015, the percentage of the

population considered as obese increased from approximately 17 percent to 27 percent and from 28 percent to 39 percent for men and women respectively. The trend is projected to increase.

There are serious social and economic implications of obesity for individuals, communities and countries. It is estimated that health problems linked to obesity cost national budgets worldwide some 2 trillion USD in treatment each year.

One of the main causes of the problem is that there has been a dramatic change worldwide in diets and eating patterns as a result of globalization, urbanization and income growth. Seasonal, mainly plant-based high-fiber foods have given way to high-calorie diets, which are rich in refined starches, sugar, fats and salt.

Globally, diets are also unhealthily skewed towards a few major crops like wheat, maize and rice. Of roughly 6,000 plant species cultivated for food throughout human history, fewer than 200 are produced at any significant levels globally, regionally or nationally. And only nine make up around 66 percent of the total global crop production. A mere 15 crops provide 90 percent of the world's food energy intake, of which two-thirds come from only wheat, maize and rice.

Dr. Ismahane Elouafi, Director General of ICBA, commented: "A few staple crops dominate our food production systems and diets. This needs to change as it is neither good for our health nor is sustainable for our planet. We must diversify the crops we grow so that we have more naturally nutritious foods and our food production systems are better prepared for climate change and other risks."

To change diets, it is important to change what and how is grown. Agrobiodiversity and crop diversification hold the key to sustainable food production and healthy diets. There are many neglected and underutilized crops which are more nutritious. Quinoa, a super crop from the Andes, is a great example. In recent years it has entered the menus around the world. It is higher in calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, potassium, iron, copper, manganese and zinc than wheat, barley or corn.

Crop diversification is also a way to climate-proof agriculture as major crops are ill-adapted to the effects of climate change. Global diets should include more and more of crops which are more climate-resilient and nutritious. For this reason, ICBA has been at the forefront of promoting agrobiodiversity and crop diversification for the past two decades. The center has introduced climate-smart and resource-efficient crops quinoa, pearl millet, sorghum and Salicornia, among others, in countries in Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

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About ICBA

The International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA) is a unique applied agricultural research center in the world with a focus on marginal areas where an estimated 1.7 billion people live. It identifies, tests and introduces resource-efficient, climate-smart crops and technologies that are best suited to different regions affected by salinity, water scarcity and drought. Through its work, ICBA helps to improve food security and livelihoods for some of the poorest rural communities around the world.

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