## A stronger inter-sectoral collaboration for improved food security and nutrition in Armenia

# About this consultation

This document summarizes the online consultation *A stronger inter-sectoral collaboration for improved food security and nutrition in Armenia*, which was held on the FAO Forum on Food Security and Nutrition in Europe and Central Asia (FSN Forum in ECA) from 11 June to 31 July 2019.

The seven weeks of consultation saw the participation of experts from Armenia and the United States of America.

The consultation was initiated by the FAO project “*Developing Capacity for Strengthening Food Security and Nutrition in Selected Countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia*”, funded by the Russian Federation and led by the FAO Agricultural Development Economics division. The facilitators were Ashkhen Shirvanyan, Head of the Food Safety Department of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Armenia, and Susanna Karapetyan, Economist-Statistician at FAO Armenia.

# Introduction

The Government of Armenia has made substantial efforts to create an institutional structure in which the case for social protection is strongly embedded. In order to ensure effective provision of social services, it has established mechanisms for inter-agency and inter-sectoral cooperation. However, inter-ministerial cooperation remains challenging in practice. In particular, it has proven difficult to implement joint efforts to provide appropriate nutrition education and to realize an environment that supports food security and nutrition.

Recent structural changes in the Armenian government, such as the reduction in the number of ministries, present additional challenges to efficient inter-ministerial collaboration and the adoption of multi-stakeholder approaches – aspects that are necessary for the implementation of social protection measures that benefit the poor and ensure positive nutrition outcomes.

During this online consultation, participants reiterated the need for a comprehensive approach and stronger inter-institutional and inter-sectoral cooperation. They also shared ideas on how governance and cooperation among ministries and other relevant organizations could be strengthened.

# A comprehensive approach to food security and nutrition

Some of the comments specifically discussed the role of social protection in addressing food insecurity, suggesting that shock-responsive and promotive safety nets need to be improved, while nutrition objectives should be more prominent in social protection programmes in general (Susanna Karapetyan). However, all consultation participants looked beyond social protection, and argued that reducing malnutrition requires adopting a broader development perspective that addresses issues such as inadequate market linkages and smallholder competitiveness (John McCormack), low agricultural productivity, limited opportunities in the labour market, large disparities in territorial development (Susanna Karapetyan), general inequality and climate change-related problems (Astghik Minasyan). More generally, the resilience and sustainability of food systems need to be improved in order to achieve better food security and nutrition outcomes (John McCormack).

As was stressed during the consultation, adopting a holistic approach to food security and nutrition entails strengthening inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral collaboration, with one of the participants stressing specifically that policies and strategies need to be linked in a sector-wide approach (John McCormack). Furthermore, some comments suggested that effective inter-sectoral cooperation is key as individual public, private and international organizations do not always adopt a comprehensive understanding of “food security” that considers all four dimensions (Karine Saribekyan). Participants pointed to the *National Strategic Review of Food Security and Nutrition in Armenia*, conducted by the Armenian government and the World Food Programme in 2017, which also recognizes the need for improved cooperation. The review provides six recommendations for achieving SDG 2, with one of them being to “ensure programmatic synergies that cover all pillars of food security in order to guarantee access to nutritious food for everyone, throughout the country” (Susanna Karapetyan, John Cormack).

In order to achieve this, a functional operational framework and organizational structures are needed that engage all relevant sectors, including social protection, agriculture, health, education, infrastructure and finance. A multi-stakeholder approach should ensure the engagement of national and local public authorities, research and development institutions, the private sector, civil society and local communities. The engagement of these actors is critical for the identification and implementation of crosscutting measures that are owned and valued by each respective sector, and that encompass all dimensions of food security (John McCormack). Furthermore, if policies are to achieve the desired results, horizontal and vertical coordination and cooperation between actors involved in policy-making and policy implementation are of crucial importance (Susanna Karapetyan).

# Improving inter-sectoral cooperation for better food security and nutrition outcomes

During the discussion, a number of issues were raised regarding the current state of inter-sectoral cooperation. For instance, during policy discussions, not always all relevant actors are involved. Furthermore, those who are present are not necessarily aware of the details of the issue under discussion or lack the knowledge to contribute professionally to the conversation. Sometimes, the fact that participants are not well informed is due to a lack of timely communication. In order to address these issues, clear rules on inter-sectoral cooperation need to be adopted, and mechanisms should be established to hold actors accountable for their (in)actions (Ghrant Sargsyan).

Some comments stressed that establishing effective inter-sectoral partnerships is a difficult task. Resources would need to be consolidated and their cost-effectiveness should be improved. This requires political will from government agencies and coordination among specialized UN agencies, both at the global and country level. Regarding the latter, a collegial board within the UN could serve as a mechanism for coordinated action.

In the context of improving inter-sectoral cooperation at the national level, a participant referred to the Regional Platform that was launched in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, in 2018 with the aim to increase the effectiveness of cooperation in the field of nutrition. Such a platform could be established at the national level and a relevant ministry or UN organization could initiate this process, involving all relevant public and private stakeholders, international organizations and civil society. The creation of such a platform for the coordination of programs and actions related to food security and nutrition should be included in Armenia’s United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) action plan (Karine Saribekyan).

Other comments pointed out that at the national level, adopting a sector-wide approach linked to wider rural development measures is needed. This involves the establishment of a coordinating body and setting up the framework through and around which the policy-making bodies operate and engage local actors. In this regard, it is critical to provide local development frameworks, and to engage agricultural producers, local enterprises and input service providers. If provided with access to information, services and tools for capacity development, groups of local people can work towards realizing the comparative advantage of different geographic areas in the production, processing and marketing of specific nutritious foods (John McCormack) – in fact, it is crucial to take the specific features and available resources of an area into account (Astghik Minasyan). Coupled with comprehensive awareness raising on nutrition that targets households as well as schools, this could contribute to healthier dietary habits, and improved market and food system engagement of producers (John McCormack).

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| **Strengthening local advocacy capacity for effective food security and nutrition policies**The primary focus of USAID’s Development Food Security Activity (DFSA) is to address systemic issues in local governance and to strengthen structures of administration and service provision. This entails the implementation of a range of integrated, crosscutting interventions that build upon World Vision’s Citizen Voice and Action approach (CVA). CVA is a methodology to promote advocacy at the local level by strengthening leadership capacity in communities and enabling local people’s participation in policy making with the overall aim to secure quality public services. The approach has already been used in Armenia: in 2016, the government introduced legislative changes to its local government laws to include a mandatory participatory governance process based on the CVA methodology. The methodology has also been applied in other countries. In Indonesia, for instance, a recent evaluation of a World Bank funded CVA-program for better health found impressive results in terms of improved health services, women’s and community empowerment and local power dynamics (John McCormack). |