**Lifestyle changes towards sustainable food systems**

**A National Dialogue**

**Report**

9th July, 2021

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| ­­­**Opening Remarks** |
| **Message from UN Secretary General Special Envoy – Dr Agnes Kalibata** |
| Introduction by Moderator - **Mr John Busuttil**, Director of Global Issues, said that in the lead up to the UN Food Systems Summit UN Members have been asked to hold National Dialogues and 136 Countries around the world have heeded this call, now including Malta. The objective of these Dialogues was to identify some of the paths/strategies we need to adopt, to achieve national sustainable food systems by 2030. It is important to identify our priorities for the coming decade, only in this way can we agree where our food future lies, and how to ensure our efforts are sustainable, and with a positive impact on the environment. |
| **Welcome Speech - The Hon. Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Evarist Bartolo:** noted that sadly we still we live in a world were 690 million people suffer from hunger. The Minister remarked that in Malta we have an obesity problem particularly in children, and with the pandemic and the resulting restrictions, things might not have improved. The Minister highlighted that our role is to set in place an effective strategy to continue to invest in sports, education, health and well-being while also encouraging the production and consumption of healthy and fresh products. |
| **Discussion First Round – Main challenges for a sustainable food system in Malta** |
| ***What are the needs of consumers in terms of accessibility, availability and affordability of healthy food for children****?*  **Ms. Lucienne Pace** – Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Ministry for Health: The National Obesity Prevalence Study showed that between the ages of 4.7 and 17 years, 40% of children were overweight or obese, with a tendency for obesity to peak in 5-8 year olds. Dr. Sarah Cuschieri’s study in 2016 found that around 70% of adults in Malta are either overweight or obese. Recent evidence shows that the major contributor of obesity are poor eating habits characterised by the consumption of of highly processed food, which is high in salt, sugar and fat and thus very palatable and addictive. These foods also cause tooth decay, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, arthritis, etc. A survey in 2014 showed that the level of nutrition knowledge had increased, yet people were still refraining from eating what they should be eating. Ms. Pace underlined that it is necessary to make the healthy food choices, the natural and easy choice for both adults and children.  **Ms Lorraine Dimech Magrin** – Ministry for Education: A key factor that needs to be addressed is eating behaviour. Schools have an obligation to ensure that our young generation have access to healthy sustainable food. The education level within households can also lead to better eating behaviours. Ms. Dimech Magrin argued that although the statistics are disheartening one positive indicator is that the level of education is a determinant factor and therefore it is imperative to educate children at a young age to ensure that they adopt healthy eating practices.  **Ms Sonya Sammut** - Ministry for Agriculture, Food, Fisheries and Animal Rights: consumers need to have the right type of food at the right place and at the right time. Processed food does not fill the stomach and leaves individuals craving for more. Ms. Sammut stressed that it is therefore crucial to ensure that healthy and wholesome food is easily accessible, available and affordable.  **Prof. Suzanne Piscopo** - Associate Professor, Home Economics, Department of Health, Physical Education and Consumer Studies (HPECS), Nutritionist; European Health Promotion Practitioner: Research confirmed that children’s diets are normally restricted to 15 foods. What is more worrying is that children are not pushed to try new food. ‘Gate keepers’ those who prepare food for children also need to be addressed. Prof Piscopo noted that when teenagers prepare their own meals, they are more likely to establish a healthy relationship with food.  **Mr Alex Meilak** - Chairman of the Food & Beverage Business Section, Chamber of Commerce: It is believed that around 90% of food consumed in Malta is imported. For the industry to go down a route of developing and producing nutrient dense foods instead of high energy food, there must be a demand for such products. Industry can reformulate existing products, however this is a costly exercise which would need to cater for the interest of the brand by retaining the current quality, appearance and organoleptic properties of the product intact. Mr Meilak argued that it is pointless to develop a healthier product if the demand is not there and therefore it is important to curate a demand for healthier foods and adoption of active lifestyles.  **Karl Scerri** -owner of St Mary’s Farm: noted that despite the fact that fresh food is available the demand is low. Mr. Scerri pointed out that if the demand increases farmers have the capacity and will be encouraged to produce more fresh food. Mr. Scerri also remarked that the cheaper price of frozen food may affect the choices of the customers.  **Prof. Simone Borg** – Ambassador for Climate Change and Chair of Malta’s National Post Pandemic Strategy Steering Committee: Malta is witnessing the impacts of desertification. A lack of rainwater is contributing to soil erosion and so does the lack of worked soil. The ocean is also being impacted as it is becoming more acidic which in turn affects the sustainability of seafood chain, Prof. Borg cautioned that the security of our food systems is being threatened by climate change. |
| **Discussion Second Round – Current national initiatives** |
| ***What are the actions that Government can take in making healthy food for children more accessible, available, and affordable?***  **Ms. Sonya Sammut** - announced that the Ministry is working on a national policy on food systems in their entirety. The very first thing the government can do to support farmers is to take the necessary actions to make sure that farmers have access to property, the market and finance. Government can also take steps to make sure that the food which we are consuming is sustainable and being produced in line with animal welfare standards.  **Ms Lorraine Dimech Magrin** –Children need nutritious food from a young age, they also need to understand the interconnectedness of food, health and the environment. The Breakfast Club National Initiative, which provides school children with an opportunity to have a healthy nutritious breakfast in a secure environment, has been running since 2014. Furthermore, vulnerable children from deprived backgrounds are also provided with a healthy daily lunch. Aspects of food nutrition and health are included in the Home Economics curriculum. Our programmes need to address current and future needs.  **Ms Lucienne Pace –**The national food consumption survey shows that the vegetable and the dietary fibre intake is significantly low, such that the nation needs to double its intake. Fat and sugar need to be reduced significantly. A pilot study about nutritional foods for infants between 6-36 months showed that only 36% of tested food products met the nutritional standard criteria set by the WHO. Ms. Pace highlighted that infancy is a key stage to develop a healthy relationship with food, otherwise it would be very difficult to enable children to vary their food choices in adulthood. In this regard, the Ministry is engaged in ongoing health campaigns to urge families to adopt healthier options. Ms. Pace remarked that we need to move away from assuming individual responsibility to a society where the right food decisions are easy to make.  **Mr Alex Meilak** - Pointed out that a lifestyle change is needed. One of the initiatives which the industry would like to see is the promotion of active lifestyles.  **Prof. Simone Borg** – stated that the linkages between physical health, obesity and exercise, highlight the importance of greenspaces. Prof. Borg also remarked that it is important to identify areas where the government can assist the farmers and food producers to help them fight against the impact of climate change.  **Karl Scerri** - argued that farmers should be able to sell their products on their property. This would allow people to buy fresh food from the farms and to directly support the local community. Mr. Scerri noted that while in the past we suffered from a lack of education, nowadays education on agribusiness has improved significantly. This will enable prospective farmers to make the right decisions.  **Prof. Suzanne Piscopo** - suggested that more research is needed to learn about what people are eating and why they are eating such foods. Although eating healthier is slowly becoming more acceptable, Prof. Piscopo proposed the following solutions: moving unhealthy food away from the checkout isles at supermarkets; assist sport groups, scouts, youth and catechism centres to promote healthy eating; provide low income families with vouchers which can be redeemed from health shops and farmers. |
| Alexandra Cuschieri, Ministry for The Environment, Climate Change and Planning: highlighted the initiatives taken by the Ministry, including the Long-term Waste Management Plan, published for public consultation in 2020, which has a strong focus on food waste prevention and management. |
| **Discussion Third Round – Choosing a healthier lifestyle: the Path towards a sustainable food system by 2030** |
| ***What are the actions that citizens and consumers can take in making healthy food for children more accessible, available, and affordable?***  **Mr Alex Meilak** – stated that the manufacturers are well equipped in terms of technical expertise to reformulate and develop new products to meet the new wants and needs of the customers, however, at the end of the day increased awareness on the need for a change in lifestyle including for the choice of food and adoption of regular physical activity, is necessary to drive consumer choices.  **Ms. Lucienne Pace** – highlighted the need to invest in young people, also by improving the quality of the products designed for children. Ms. Pace reiterated that we need to move away from highly processed food.  **Mr Karl Scerri –**Mentioned that we must ensure that farmers sell their produce directly. Furthermore, due to the high temperature in Malta it is necessary to invest in better storage capacity to keep products fresh.  **Prof. Suzanne Piscopo** – Pointed out that we need to empower parents to be able to prepare healthy food quickly. Chefs must also be trained to cook healthier foods from local produce. Prof. Piscopo also suggested that food products should be labelled in a way which makes it easy for customers to opt for the healthy options. This labelling could perhaps also be extended to restaurant menus.  **Ms. Sonya Sammut** - stressed the importance of incorporating a healthy relationship with food throughout our life. Ms. Sammut reiterated the need to empower the consumers to prioritise healthy options.  **Ms Lorraine Dimech Magrin** – argued that we need to overcome the physical and psychological distance between what is on the plate and the sources of our food. Children do not have a clear concept of where the food is coming from and therefore this aspect needs to be addressed through education.  **Prof. Simone Borg** – pointed out that if we successfully implement the SDGs we would also solve all the food system related issues. Prof. Borg mentioned that in Malta we have worked on several campaigns on environmental issues and perhaps it is time to initialise campaigns which target the corporate industry. |
| **Concluding Remarks - Mr. Sharlo Camilleri, Permanent Secretary, Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries, Food and Animal Rights:** stated that we need to work on a strategy which prioritises the needs of the consumers and to adopt a system which is more conducive to healthier food decisions. The Permanent Secretary announced that in the coming days as part of the ongoing Pitkalija Reform the Ministry is going to launch a Malta Food Agency which is expected to adopt measures and mechanisms which safeguard our food systems while promoting the consumption of local produce. |