SESSION 1: DIETS

What should diets look like, what do they currently look like, and how does one know? From the household to the national level, how can knowledge of dietary intake inform strategies to achieve healthy eating habits? And what can be expected from the supply side: what are the major drivers that link or de-link the food supply and nutrition?

Evidence-based dietary guidelines emphasize nutrient-dense food groups that are often underrepresented in the diets of the poor: namely fruits, vegetables, and low-fat animal-source foods. As incomes rise and more attention is paid to diet quality, how might food supply and consumption patterns need to change to permit greater dietary diversity and healthier dietary patterns in low-income countries?

Kay Dewey (University of California at Davis) will describe an approach to assess country-level availability of foods that would be needed for the population to move towards a healthier dietary pattern, and will share results from one example country, Cameroon. The “Dietary Gap Assessment” approach translates existing food-based dietary guidelines into target quantities to be consumed from each of several different food groups. FAO food balance sheet (FBS) data for the target country are used to identify specific food items for each of the food groups in the sample diet scenario. The difference between the estimated national supply of foods within each of those food groups and the “target” amounts is then calculated. Opportunities for further application to other countries will be presented, as well as the limitations of this approach.

Jennifer Coates (Tufts University) will explore how information on diet quality is important to understanding the relationships between food systems, food access, and malnutrition/nutrition-related disease. Though stable access to sufficient, nutritious food is a fundamental element of food security, to date there are no internationally recognized, routinely monitored measures of secure access to, or individual consumption of, a high quality diet. A new indicator of women's dietary diversity, which correlates with micronutrient adequacy, has been adopted recently on the basis of validation work and expert consensus, and should be collected routinely in the future through platforms such as the demographic and health surveys (DHS). Though critical, nutrient adequacy is only a component of diet quality. With the rapid evolution of traditional diets, nearly
all countries are advancing along the ‘spectrum’ of nutrition transition toward diets typified by higher levels of added fats and sugars, while continuing to suffer from inadequacy of other nutrients.

A presentation collaboratively developed with Anna Herforth will review the relevance of existing diet quality indicators, highlighting the opportunities and limitations of key data sources—ood balance data, household consumption surveys, and individual dietary intake surveys—to yield information on access to and consumption of nutritious diets. Recommended steps forward include developing indicators of the multiple dimensions of diet quality and improving the international availability of dietary data to enable the construction of such indicators.

Can government policies and programs that are now focused on agricultural supply be aligned to improve nutrition outcomes for the population as a whole? Will Masters (Tufts University) will survey the differences between supply-oriented “agricultural” actions and health-focused “nutrition” measures from the framing that these are different pathways to help households meet common goals. Alignment will involve translation and mutual understanding between agriculturalists and nutritionists as the basis for identifying opportunities to inform and change each pathway. The presentation concludes with several hypotheses about those changes, as agricultural policies and programs become more nutritional, and as nutritional interventions take greater account of agriculture’s role. These hypotheses involve all four aspects of the food system to be discussed in this meeting: diets, markets, convenience and demand.