Institutional Market: FAO perspectives on the inclusion of fish in school meal programs

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In recent years, focus on fish as a source of food containing most of the nutrients needed for growth, development and well-being has been increasing. Foods from the aquatic environment are recognized as an excellent source of most macronutrients and micronutrients needed for a healthy diet. However, whether people eat fish or not, is strongly linked to traditional food habits as well as its purchasing power.

Fish plays an important role in nutrition and food security, not only as a provider of high quality proteins, but also as a source of long chain omega-3 fats and micronutrients. Micronutrients such as iron, zinc, calcium, iodine, vitamin A and vitamin B12 are found in significant amounts in seafood, particularly in shellfish and small fish eaten whole. The fat in fish is also a good source of vitamin D. This has got an increasing attention, particularly among populations not exposing their skin to sunlight. More than two billion people are deficient in one or more micronutrients, and fish could play a much more important role in reducing the number of people suffering from malnutrition.

Fish and fish products play a key role in food security and nutrition, and is of particular importance in infant nutrition. Children are particularly vulnerable, and a healthy diet is essential for their physical development, as well as their mental development. Fish is recognised as an important element in a healthy diet. Two major nutrients vital for an optimal development of the brain are naturally found in fish; iodine and long chain omega-3 fats. These two nutrient are difficult to find naturally in most foods, the exception is seafood. Children

suffering from malnutrition have difficulty or impediment to resist disease, grow normally, and the capability to learn drops significantly.

In order to ensure a healthy diet among the young population, many governments support the provision of foods at public institutions, such as through school feeding programmes. However, despite existing knowledge on the benefits of fish on our diets, fish products are seldom included in for example school meals. This lack of including fish and fishery products in institutional meals could have various reasons, such as:

- Lack of policies on including fish in institutional meals
- High cost of fish products
- Limited shelf life of fish products
- Logistical challenges linked to transport and storage
- Little tradition of eating fish
- Knowledge on the benefits of eating fish is limited

However, if governments decide to include fish as part of their institutional meals, challenges for not including fish could be overcome, and the institutional market for fish products could be strengthened. Availability of affordable fish products is key to reach this market. Whenever possible, local production and purchase of foods for school meals should be encouraged, local fish production included. Locally available low cost fish, and low cost parts of fish (such as head and back bones), could be processed and encouraged to be used in school meals. This would contributing to improved nutrition among school children, and at the same time contributing to economic activity at local level.

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