



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

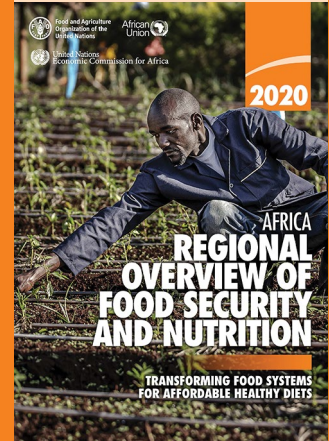


2020



United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa

AFRICA REGIONAL OVERVIEW OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION



Transforming Food Systems for Affordable Healthy Diets

Africa is not on track to meeting the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 targets to end hunger and ensure access by all people to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round and to end all forms of malnutrition. The number of hungry people on the continent has risen by 47.9 million since 2014 and now stands at 250.3 million, or nearly one-fifth of the population. Of these, 15.6 million people are in Northern Africa and 234.7 million in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, there are 426.0 million people in Africa who are moderately food insecure, i.e. they typically eat low quality diets and might have also been forced, at times during the year, to reduce the quantity of food they would normally eat.

The 2017, 2018 and 2019 editions of this report explain that this gradual deterioration of food security was due to conflict, weather extremes, and economic slowdowns and downturns, often overlapping. These shocks often affect populations already facing chronic poverty and limited social protection coverage and are exacerbated by policies that do not support equitable growth or poverty reduction.

A continued worsening of food security is also expected for 2020

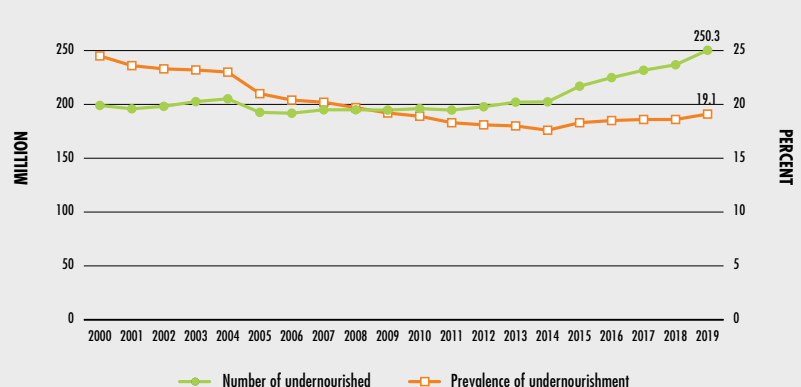
as the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated containment measures are causing a devastating social and economic crisis in many countries, with the consequences expected to last many years. A preliminary assessment by FAO indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic may add between 25 million and 42 million people to the total number of undernourished people in Africa in 2020, depending on the economic growth scenario.

In addition to hunger, across all countries in Africa millions of people suffer from widespread micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity are emerging as significant health concerns in many countries.

Overall progress in reducing malnutrition, as measured against the World Health Assembly (WHA) and SDG 2030 global nutrition targets, remains unacceptably slow in Africa.

Meeting the SDG and WHA targets will only be possible if we ensure that people are nourished with quality diets that address all forms of malnutrition. However, of all the challenges to achieving this, cost and affordability of food are among the most important, particularly in the case of nutritious food. Evidence presented in this report shows that “healthy” and “nutrient adequate” diets are considerably more expensive than “energy sufficient” diets. Across all income »

PREVALENCE OF UNDERNOURISHMENT IN THE WORLD, AFRICA AND ITS SUBREGIONS, 2000–2019



SOURCE: FAO.

KEY MESSAGES

- The number of people that are chronically undernourished continues to rise in Africa, reaching 250.3 million in 2019: nearly one-fifth of the population. Of these, 15.6 million are in Northern Africa and 234.7 million in sub-Saharan Africa. By this measure, the region is not on track to achieving target 2.1 of Sustainable Development Goal 2.
- The number of people affected by severe food insecurity, which is another measure that approximates hunger, shows a similar upward trend. In addition to the severely food insecure, though, a further 426 million people also experience moderate food insecurity, i.e. they typically eat low-quality diets and might have been forced, at times during the year, to also reduce the quantity of food they would normally eat.
- In 2019, 73 million people, 6 million more than in 2018, in 36 countries in Africa, faced acute food insecurity or hunger and required urgent food assistance: 37 million due to conflict, 26 million due to climate shocks, and 10 million due to economic shocks.
- Preliminary estimates indicate that in Africa an additional 25 to 42 million people may be undernourished in 2020 due to the economic recession caused by COVID-19. Furthermore, childhood malnutrition will rise, with perhaps 1.5 million children in sub-Saharan Africa under the age of five suffering from wasting.
- Progress towards the WHA and SDG nutrition targets remains poor. For stunting in children under the age of five, only eight African countries are on target, and sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world that has experienced rising numbers of stunted children in recent years. For anaemia in women of reproductive age, no country is on target. Only three countries are on track to meeting four of the five WHA nutrition targets, and another three are on track to meet three targets.
- In terms of Disability Adjusted Life Years, undernutrition and low birth weight remain the most significant health risk factors contributing to the burden of disease in Africa. However, these factors decline in importance relative to dietary risks and high body-mass in lower- and upper-middle-income countries.
- Poor nutrition outcomes are mirrored in poor diets which in turn are a reflection of current food systems which, through the availability, cost and affordability of nutritious food, are key determinants of consumption patterns and therefore also of nutrition outcomes. Broad food consumption patterns for different food groups show that intake of nutritious foods in Africa is relatively low compared to other regions, while intake of energy-dense foods with minimal nutritional value rises rapidly with income growth and is already relatively high compared to other regions.
- For Africa, large differences in intake levels for different food groups are observed between urban and rural populations and by household education levels. However, there are no differences in broad consumption patterns by gender.
- Access is a key determinant of healthy diets. Nearly three-quarter of Africans cannot afford a “healthy diet,” and 51 percent cannot afford a “nutrient adequate” diet. Even an “energy sufficient” diet is beyond the means of 11.3 percent of Africans (where the relevant reference diets are defined in the report). For the nearly 430 million Africans that live in extreme poverty, the “energy sufficient” diet costs about 50 percent of their food expenditure budgets. No household living in extreme poverty can afford a “nutrient adequate” or “healthy diet.” In low-income African countries, the energy sufficient diet costs about 56 percent of the food poverty line, and in lower- and upper-middle-income African countries, the share is 64 percent and 70 percent, respectively. The cost of nutrient adequate and healthy diets significantly exceeds the food poverty line.
- Policies and interventions aimed at transforming the food systems to make healthy diets affordable must be based on a careful assessment of the food security and nutrition situation, the food policy environment, and the key drivers of affordability, including food cost drivers. Solutions will be context specific and will involve not only the food systems, but also health, sanitation, education, social protection and other sectors.
- A common vision, strong political leadership, and effective cross-sectoral collaboration, including the private sector, are essential to agree on trade-offs and identify and implement sustainable solutions to transform food systems for healthy, affordable diets.
- A wide range of policies and interventions throughout the food system will be needed to raise yields, lower transaction costs and promote nutritious foods. Within the African context, essential interventions are in research and extension to improve yields, especially of nutritious foods, and in efforts to diffuse the adoption of modern technologies. Production must be intensified in a sustainable manner, and interventions to improve land governance, empower women and reduce the gender gap, reduce post-harvest losses and lower transaction costs by investing in road networks, transportation and market infrastructure are essential. In addition, complementary interventions that are either nutrition-specific or sensitive are needed to ensure food safety, improve maternal and child nutrition and care as well as change food consumption behaviour and create healthier food environments. Transforming food systems is a long-term goal and so support to the poor and vulnerable in the short term is essential.
- Current food production and consumption patterns have hidden health and environmental costs, and if these costs were included in food prices, they would add USD 0.35 to each USD spent on food in sub-Saharan Africa, or 26 percent of the total cost. Rebalancing diets towards a higher content of plant-based foods would lower the full cost (wholesale cost and diet-related health and climate-change costs), of diets by 11 to 21 percent in low-income countries.
- The food system is not only key in addressing the food security and nutrition targets of the SDGs, but also plays a role in achieving health and climate related SDGs (SDG 3 and SDG 13, respectively). Transforming the food system for healthy diets for all must consider the relevant trade-offs and synergies with other SDGs and in particular includes provisions for the environmental sustainability of food systems.

ALMOST THREE QUARTERS OF THE POPULATION IN AFRICA CANNOT AFFORD A HEALTHY DIET, 2017

	%	Total number (Million)	%	Total number (Million)	%	Total number (Million)
	Energy sufficient diet		Nutrient adequate diet		Healthy diet	
World	4.6	185.5	23.3	1513.0	38.3	3021.5
Africa	11.3	148.6	51.0	680.6	73.8	964.8
Northern Africa	1.4	2.9	29.2	84.3	46.0	136.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	12.5	145.8	53.4	596.3	76.9	828.8
Eastern Africa	9.4	28.9	53.9	224.2	75.3	325.1
Central Africa	18.5	27.9	59.8	112.5	78.5	142.4
Southern Africa	10.0	11.1	41.7	33.8	64.3	40.3
Western Africa	13.1	77.9	53.5	225.8	81.6	320.9
African Low-Income Countries	13.7	46.5	64.4	336.9	88.6	472.5
African Lower-Middle-Income Countries	10.9	91.3	45.5	310.3	68.4	441.9
African Upper-Middle-Income Countries	4.4	10.9	18.8	33.5	36.9	50.4

SOURCE: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP & WHO. 2020. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets*. Rome, FAO. (also available at <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca9692en>).

FAO uses the M49 country and regional groupings, available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49>.

» groups, the “nutrient adequate” and “healthy” diet are three to over five times more expensive than the “energy sufficient” diet, respectively. Nearly three-quarters of the African population cannot afford a “healthy” diet, and more than half cannot afford a “nutrient adequate” diet. Even the “energy sufficient” diet is out of reach for 11.3 percent of the continent’s population. Of the globally 185.5 million people who cannot afford the “energy sufficient” diet, 80 percent live in Africa. Moreover, in low-income African countries the cost of the “energy sufficient” diet amounts to 41 percent of average household food expenditures. For the majority of Africans to gain access to healthy diets, nutritious food must become considerably more affordable.

The situation is particularly dire for the nearly 430 million Africans living in extreme poverty who need about half of their food budget just to purchase the “energy sufficient” diet. Poverty lines reflect basic needs, including food, but they do not provide for having a nutrient adequate or healthy diet in most countries. It may therefore be important to revise national poverty

lines upwards to ensure food security and nutrition.

Current food consumption patterns also impose high health and environmental costs, which are not reflected in food prices. Including these costs would add USD 0.35 to each dollar spent on food in sub-Saharan Africa. Adopting a more plant-based dietary pattern would not only reduce the cost of diets but also lower the health and environmental costs. Compared to current average diets, more plant-based diets would reduce the full - including health and environmental costs - cost of diets by 11–21 percent in low-income countries.

The findings highlight the importance of prioritizing the transformation of food systems to ensure access to affordable and healthy diets for all, produced in a sustainable manner. A common vision, strong political leadership and effective cross-sectoral collaboration, including the private sector, is essential to agree on trade-offs and identify and implement sustainable solutions to transform food systems for healthy, affordable diets.

Policies and interventions throughout the food system will be needed to raise yields, lower costs, and promote nutritious foods, and to reduce health and environmental costs.

Within the African context, essential interventions are increased investment in research and extension to improve yields, especially of nutritious foods, and in efforts to diffuse the adoption of modern technologies. Production must be intensified in a sustainable manner, and interventions to improve land governance, empower women to reduce the gender gap, reduce post-harvest losses and lower transaction costs by investing in road networks, transportation and market infrastructure are essential. In addition, complementary interventions that are nutrition-specific or sensitive, such as micronutrient fortification of staple foods, better food safety, improved maternal and child nutrition and care, nutrition education and healthier food environments, are needed. Finally, government policy must promote access to nutritious food through social protection, poverty reduction and income inequality. ■



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