



Ensuring economic access to healthy diets during times of crisis

An additional 1 billion people would be unable to afford healthy diets should their incomes be reduced by one-third

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was not on track to end global hunger and malnutrition in all its forms by 2030. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021* finds that, in 2019, nearly 3 billion people could not afford a healthy diet that protects against malnutrition in all its forms. This is the result of the high cost of healthy diets and persistently high levels of poverty and income inequality.

The COVID-19 pandemic came to expose the already existing fragilities of national agrifood systems. Yet, the biggest threat to food security and nutrition during the pandemic has not come from disruptions to food availability, but from the often severe reductions in poor households' economic access to food, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

Low-income countries are the ones most unlikely to be able to afford a healthy diet. However, middle-income countries are also at risk. Indeed, *The State of Food and Agriculture 2021* reveals that, on top of the 3 billion people who cannot afford a healthy diet, an additional 1 billion people are at risk of not being able to afford it if a shock reduces their incomes by one-third. The burden of this additional challenge would fall mostly on lower- and upper-middle-income countries. This underlines the importance of building resilient agrifood systems that ensure continuous access to healthy diets for all amid any disruption.

The potential impact of shocks on the affordability of healthy diets around the world

Figure 1 analyses the extent to which countries face the challenge of unaffordability of healthy diets in normal times (horizontal axis) and/or the challenge of risking unaffordability in the face of a shock (vertical axis). The first challenge is one of development and poverty reduction while the second challenge is one of building resilience. The two challenges are separate but still interlinked since development and poverty alleviation



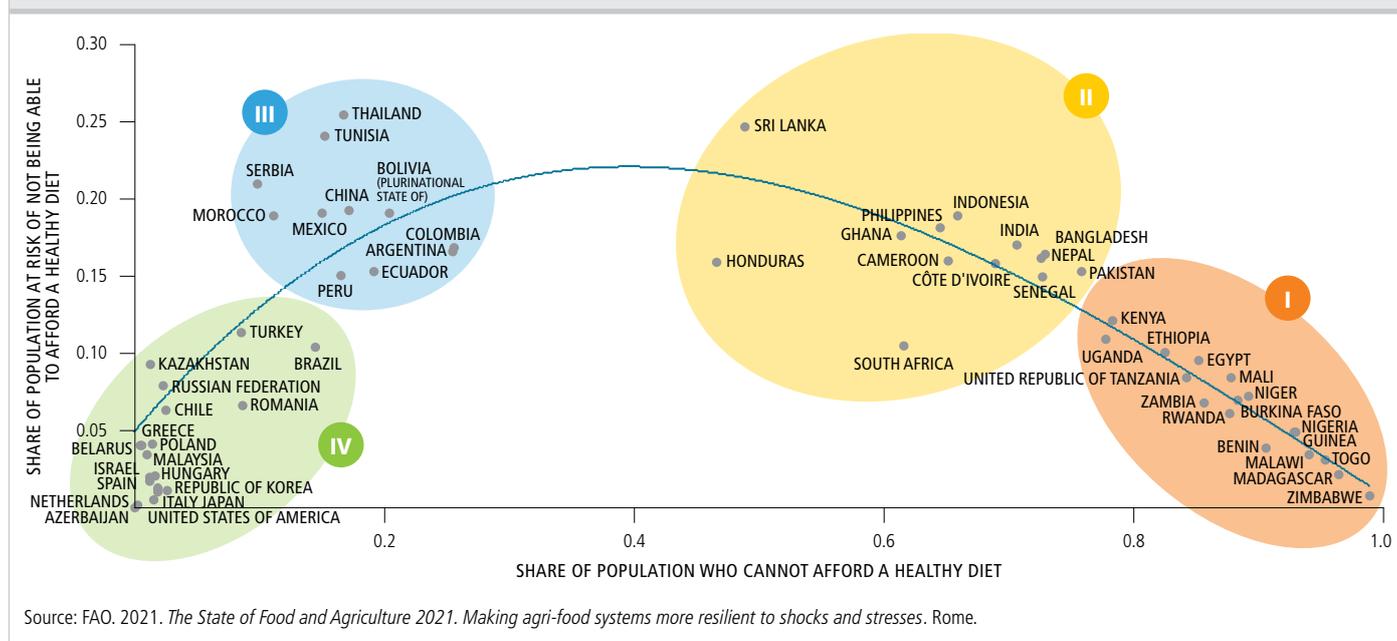
KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ Healthy diets would be out of reach for another 1 billion people – in addition to the 3 billion people for whom healthy diets are already unaffordable – should a shock reduce their income by one-third.
- ▶ Resilient agrifood systems – through inclusive policies for poverty reduction and risk management strategies – prevent shocks from reducing access to healthy diets.
- ▶ Social protection programmes can protect against consumption shortfalls during shocks, especially if they are designed to be gender-, nutrition- and risk-sensitive, as well as shock-responsive.

will tend to reduce vulnerability to shocks, while resilience to shocks contributes to poverty reduction. Where a country falls in the graph depends on, inter alia, the overall level and distribution of income, and the incidence and depth of poverty. The distribution of countries along an inverted U-curve allows to identify four broad categories:

- I. **Countries in dire need of improving affordability of healthy diets.** These are mostly low-income countries located in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 80 percent of the population cannot afford a healthy diet (orange oval).
- II. **Countries where many still cannot afford a healthy diet and many others are at risk.** This is a particular concern for lower-middle income countries in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (yellow oval).
- III. **Countries where many can afford a healthy diet but a large share of the population is at risk.** In particular, upper-middle income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, where over half of the region's workers are in the informal sector with lower-quality and more vulnerable jobs (blue oval).

FIGURE 1. Unaffordability of healthy diets in selected countries in 2019



IV. Countries where affordability is generally guaranteed, even in times of crisis. These are mostly high-income countries (green oval).

Pathways to address accessibility issues will differ by countries' challenges

Improved access to a healthy diet can be achieved from the demand side, by raising or stabilizing incomes, or from the supply side, by lowering or stabilizing the cost of food. Above all, countries in the categories I–III face challenges in terms of access to healthy diets, but these challenges differ. For countries in category I, the key challenge will be to reduce poverty and lower the cost of the nutritious foods that make up a healthy diet. These countries should focus on adopting long-term approaches that, by targeting both demand and supply, help raise income levels and improve productivity and efficiency to lower the cost of nutritious foods. Yet, efforts to build resilience are also important in these countries to avoid that shocks can further worsen already precarious situations.

For countries in category III, resilience should be the key focus instead, as these are mostly upper-middle income countries where many are at risk of not being able to afford a healthy diet. Stabilizing incomes is thus a priority. On the supply side, risk management and diversification of food sources and of actors in food supply chains will also be important, along with redundant and robust transport

networks. Countries in category II – mostly lower-middle income – are somewhere in between categories I and III and should likely opt for a combination of the two approaches.

Social protection programmes should be designed with the key challenges in mind

Gender and nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes can be effective policy tools to support livelihoods and ensure access to healthy diets during times of crisis. However, their design must depend on the nature of the countries' challenges in terms of access to healthy diets. For countries in category I, the key challenge is one of ensuring resilience to shocks as opposed to ensuring accessibility in normal times, social protection programmes should be shock-responsive and buffer income shocks that prevent poor households from accessing healthy diets. For countries in category II, these measures must be combined with a longer-term development perspective that raises incomes and reduces inequality. The latter is the central focus for category I. In these countries, promoting economic inclusion in social protection programmes is essential to reduce poverty and ensure their long-run fiscal sustainability. This requires a longer-term approach, with gradual interventions providing intensive support for a certain period with the objective of ensuring the gradual progression of the rural poor along economic inclusion pathways.

