



Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

The political economy of nutrition policy in Palestine

Technical report



Abstract

Malnutrition is a major public health challenge facing Palestine. The ongoing conflict and political context will play a key role in Palestine's ability to improve the nutrition and well-being of its population. Despite the recognition that political economy factors are critical to nutrition policy adoption and implementation, limited research has been conducted on the political economy of food and nutrition policy in Palestine. To address this gap, this report analyses the state-driven, multistakeholder and multisectoral exercise for the development of the National Investment Plan for Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (NIP) 2020–2022 to ascertain whether it presented a window of opportunity to give more importance to nutrition on the policy agenda. The political economy analysis of the NIP 2020–2022 was conducted using semi-structured qualitative (face-to-face) interviews with high-level food and nutrition experts in Palestine. The analysis was further complemented by secondary information obtained from a thorough review of key policy and programmatic documents from the government, UN organizations, civil society and the donor community. The report concludes that the NIP 2020–2022 successfully created an opportunity to elevate nutrition on the policy agenda. In addition, it concludes that a political economy analysis of food and nutrition policies in Palestine can provide a better understanding of the drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition.

Key Messages

- Employing a political economy lens to analyse food and nutrition policies and programmes can provide a better understanding of the drivers of the health and well-being of populations living in fragile contexts.
- Multi-sectoral and multistakeholder investment plans can be a useful vehicle for promoting coherence amongst health and nutrition-related policies and programmes at the country level.

Acknowledgments

This paper was prepared by Ahmed Raza, Food and Nutrition Division, FAO. The author would like to thank Tommaso Alacevich and Crescenzo dell'Aquila (FAO) for their helpful feedback. The document was edited by Jennifer Parkinson and Sangmin Seo (FAO) was responsible for the layout.

Table of Contents

BACKGROUND	1
TRENDS IN MALNUTRITION IN PALESTINE	3
DRIVERS OF MALNUTRITION IN PALESTINE	6
NUTRITION ARCHITECTURE AND GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS	8
METHODS	10
RESULTS.....	12
Issue framing: the inextricable link between malnutrition, food insecurity and poverty..	12
Varying degrees of cohesion in the policy community.....	12
Multiple policy guiding institutions.....	13
Considerable interest group mobilization on food and nutrition issues	13
Strong external influence	14
Limited resources for food and nutrition	14
DISCUSSION.....	16
An opportunity created to further implement and foster coherence	16
Expanding the discussion on nutrition	17
Implementation in the unique context of Palestine (political and external factors, funds, multiplicity of actors) remains key.....	18
Precarious political environment.....	18
CONCLUSIONS.....	19
REFERENCES:	20

Background

Political economy challenges at different levels of the policy reform cycle can affect the adoption and implementation of nutrition-related policies and programmes (Reich and Balarajan, 2014). However, these challenges, which relate to aspects of power, institutions, incentives, ideas and interest groups, are often underanalysed (Reich and Balarajan, 2014). Employing a political economy lens to analyse the food and nutrition situation is particularly useful in the case of Palestine, where a complex interplay of external and internal pressures restricts Palestine's capacity for improving the socio-economic well-being and health of its population.

The external pressures largely stem from the political and military conflict with Israel. The conflict is one of the longest-running in the world and affects every possible facet of life in Palestine. Due to the conflict, the Government of Palestine has limited ability to exercise its full authority and is hindered in achieving key Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition (UNDP, 2017). According to estimates by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Palestinian economy has the potential of producing twice as much Gross Domestic Product (GDP) compared with current levels, which could lead to positive impacts on poverty and unemployment reduction (UNCTAD, 2016). The root causes of food insecurity and malnutrition are also linked to the conflict (MoA, 2018).

The internal pressures in Palestine relate to political and administrative differences between the two territories, namely the Gaza Strip and West Bank. These differences, coupled with a weak parliamentary democracy, curtail the ability of Palestine to provide effective services and governance to all Palestinians (UNDP, 2017). Furthermore, Palestine is heavily dependent on external budgetary support and international humanitarian assistance to reach nutritionally vulnerable groups. As a consequence, there has been a greater engagement on the part of donors and development agencies in the arena of food security and nutrition, which has led to the creation of parallel initiatives in conflict with government programmes (MAS, 2017). In addition, the multiplicity of actors engaged in the two sectors has led to an overlap and duplication of efforts.

Worryingly, these external and internal factors have led to a worsening of the humanitarian, food security and nutrition situation in Palestine. Nearly 2.1 million Palestinians require some form of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2022). In addition, approximately one third of Palestinian households are food insecure (SEFSec, 2020), and the country suffers from a high burden of micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity (Development Initiatives, 2022).

Despite the seriousness of the food insecurity and nutrition situation in Palestine, there are limited in-depth analyses on the trends in and causes of malnutrition. Even less explored are the political economy factors that shape the design, adoption and implementation of food and nutrition policies, programmes and investments in Palestine. This report therefore aims to address these two gaps. Firstly, it presents an

analysis of the food security and nutrition situation, with a focus on nutritionally vulnerable groups (which include children under two years of age, pregnant and lactating women, and adolescents). The report then gives a brief overview of the nutrition architecture and governance mechanisms, providing a timeline of key nutrition-related processes and events.

Secondly, it undertakes a political economy analysis of a state-driven, multistakeholder and multisectoral initiative – the National Investment Plan for Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (2020–2022) – to ascertain whether it created an opportunity to elevate nutrition higher on the policy agenda. The national investment plans for food security and nutrition are country-driven and multisectoral tools that can act as catalysts for policy implementation at the country level (FAO, 2020). The Palestinian National Investment Plan (NIP) 2020–2022 represents the first ever attempt in Palestine at developing investment plans for food security and nutrition. It aims to support the implementation of the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) 2019–2030 by mapping investments in critical areas relevant to the Sustainable Development Goal 2, namely sustainable agriculture, food security and nutrition (Food Security Sector in Palestine, 2019). Both the NIP and the NFNSP were officially endorsed as a policy and investment package in October 2020 by the Cabinet (MoA, 2019a; MoA, 2019b).

Given that future operational efforts on nutrition would largely be driven by the NIP 2020–2022, it is imperative to analyse whether the investment plan presented a suitable window to put nutrition high on the policy agenda.

Trends in malnutrition in Palestine

The official numbers from Palestine characterize the nutrition situation with a double burden of malnutrition, as both micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity pose significant challenges to the health and well-being of the population.

The comprehensive Micronutrient Survey, conducted in 2013 and carried out by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund), pointed towards severe micronutrient deficiencies in vulnerable groups, pregnant women, lactating women and children between the ages of 6 and 59 months, as shown in Table 1. The prevalence rates of all micronutrient deficiencies (except for Vitamin A and E) were higher in the Gaza Strip compared with the West Bank across all vulnerable groups (PMS, 2013).

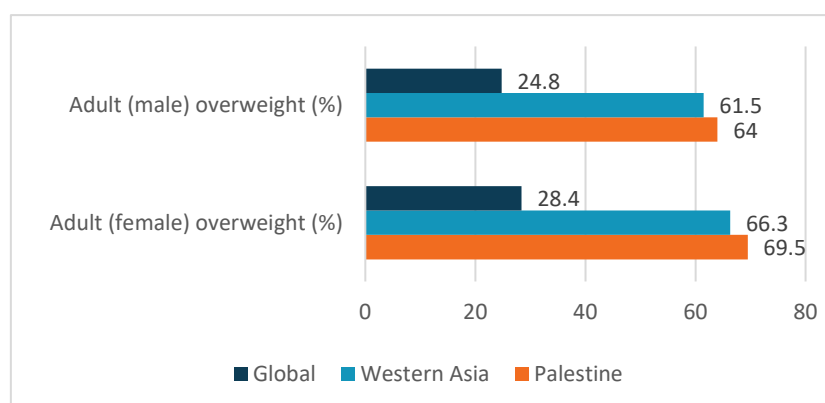
Table 1: Overview of micronutrient deficiencies in Palestine

Micronutrient deficiencies	Pregnant women (18–43 years)	Lactating women (18–48 years)	Children under five (6–59 months)
Vitamin A	54.8%	28.7%	72.9%
Vitamin B12	62.80%	20.60%	10.90%
Vitamin D	99.3%	98.7%	60.1%
Vitamin E	21.6%	44.1%	64.3%
Zinc	71.1%	90.7%	55.6%
Iron-deficiency anaemia	30.9%	29.0%	26.5%

Source: Ministry of Health (Palestine), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), University of Vienna. Palestine Micronutrient Survey 2013.

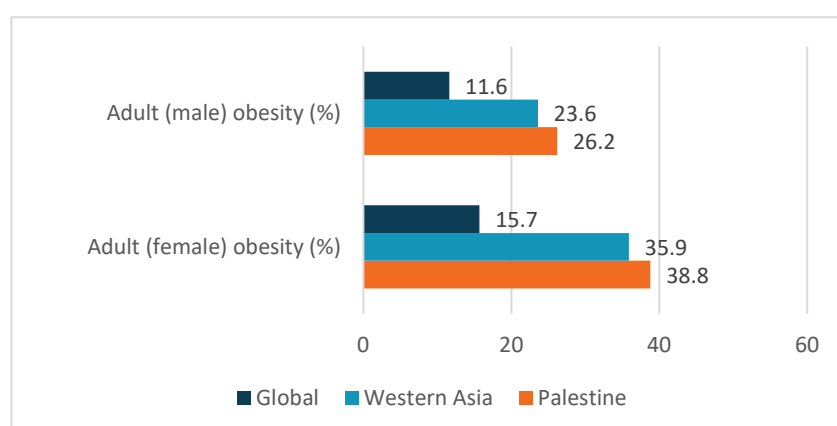
Overnutrition, overweight and obesity have been on the rise in Palestine over the last two decades (Development Initiatives, 2018). The prevalence of adult overweight for females increased from 61.5 percent in 1999 to 69.5 percent in 2015, whereas the overweight prevalence rates for male adults increased from 52.8 to 64 per cent during the same period. The obesity rates for female adults in Palestine increased from 29.9 percent in 1999 to 38.8 percent in 2015, whereas the obesity rates for male adults increased from 16.3 to 26.2 percent during the same period. Compared with both global and Western Asia averages, the prevalence of overweight and obesity in Palestine is higher (Development Initiatives, 2018), see Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Comparison of adult male and female overweight prevalence rates between Palestine, Western Asia and global averages



Source: Development Initiatives, 2018.

Figure 2: Comparison of adult male and female obesity prevalence rates between Palestine, Western Asia and global averages (data from 2015)



Source: Development Initiatives, 2018.

Evidently the overnutrition and obesity burden in Palestine is significant and requires attention. According to calculations by NCD Risk Factor Collaboration (NCD-RisC), at the current pace, obesity rates would increase to 45.7 percent for women and 34.8 percent for men by 2025 (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration, 2017). If nothing is done to curb the rising rate of adult obesity, it is projected that the probability of Palestine meeting global targets on obesity reduction is 1 percent for women and 0 percent for men (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration, 2017).

However, important gains have been made in reducing undernutrition. The prevalence of undernutrition, in particular, stunting (low height for age) and wasting (low weight for height) at the national level is lower than the global average and that of other countries

in the region. The prevalence of stunting (among children under five years of age) is 8.7 percent, well below the global and Western Asia averages (Development Initiatives, 2022). Similarly, the prevalence of wasting for children under five years of age is 1.3 percent, below both the global and Western average averages (Development Initiatives, 2022). The country has made impressive gains in curbing childhood stunting in spite of the challenges associated with the ongoing conflict. Over a period of fourteen years, Palestine saw a steady decline in the prevalence of childhood stunting, from 13.6 percent in 2006 to 8.7 percent in 2020 (Development Initiatives, 2022).

Drivers of malnutrition in Palestine

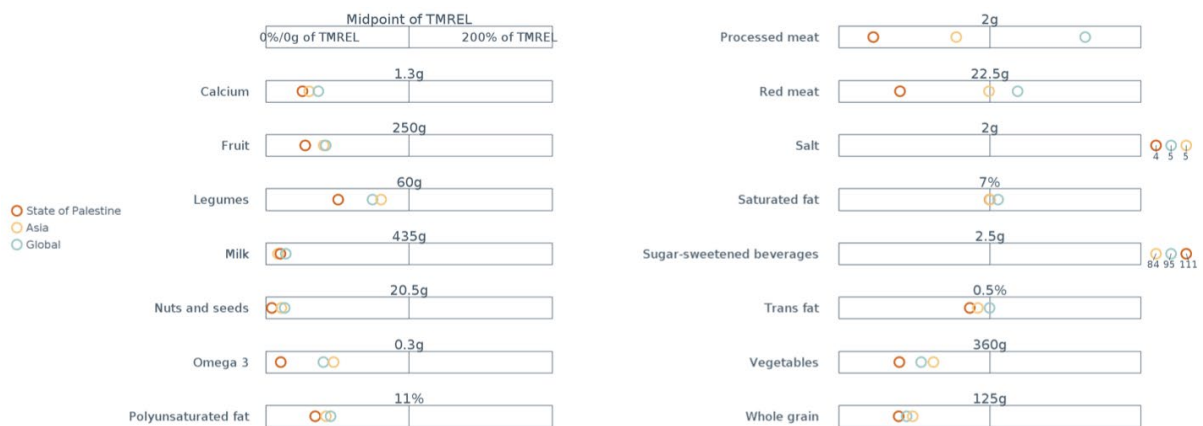
Food insecurity and poverty have been identified as key determinants of malnutrition in Palestine. The National Nutrition Policy, Strategy and Action Plan (NNPSAP) 2017–2022 states that addressing food insecurity and poverty is key for the improvement of nutritional status and well-being (MoH, 2016). The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) 2019–2030 identifies restrictions on movement and goods due to the ongoing conflict, high unemployment, dependence on external budgetary support and the recent decline in international assistance to Palestine as the underlying causes of food insecurity and malnutrition (MoA, 2019b).

Food insecurity amongst Palestinian households has risen alarmingly. Nearly one-third of all households (31.2 percent) were found to be suffering from food insecurity, according to the 2018 Socio-Economic and Food Security Survey (SEFSec, 2020). The prevalence of food insecurity has increased since 2014, when the number of households suffering from food insecurity was 30.8 percent (SEFSec, 2016). Food insecurity has tended to be higher in the Gaza Strip than the West Bank. The share of food insecure households in Gaza is 64.4 percent compared with 8.9 percent in the West Bank, and the rise in the national prevalence of food insecurity is linked with the deteriorating situation in the former (SEFSec, 2020).

Food insecurity and poverty have been found to be strongly correlated in the country. The lack of economic access to food in Palestine is the main cause of food insecurity, followed by the instability of food supply at certain times due to occupation, conflict and restrictions on movements (MAS, 2017). The food insecurity and poverty linkage is evident in the fact that 80 percent of households experiencing severe food insecurity were also poor (SEFSec, 2016).

The grave malnutrition situation has also been associated with poor dietary consumption, low awareness of food and nutrition education and a sedentary lifestyle (MoA, 2019b). A snapshot of the Palestinian diet (see Figure 3) reveals that components of a healthy diet, such as fruit, vegetables, omega 3, legumes, etc. are consumed below the intake levels that minimize the risk of death (Development Initiatives, 2018). For instance, fruit and vegetable consumption in Palestine is well below the minimum exposure level and lags behind global and Asian intake levels. The converse can be observed for the intake levels of salt and sugar-sweetened beverages, the consumption of which well exceeds the minimum exposure intake level. The SEFSec (2016) also revealed that approximately 24 percent of Palestinian households had insufficient dietary intake (SEFSec, 2016). It noted that approximately 86 percent of the study population consumed less than five servings of fruit and vegetables per day, and the consumption of pulses was also low (less than twice a week). Furthermore, it noted that for both food secure and food insecure households, carbohydrates and fats made up a higher share of the calories consumed.

Figure 3: Consumption of food groups and components in Palestine (data from 2016).



Source: Global Nutrition Report: Shining a light to spur action on nutrition. Development Initiatives (2018).

While food insecurity has been linked with income poverty in the country, the main drivers of the latter has been found to be unemployment (MAS, 2017). Unemployment among the heads of households in Palestine is more likely to be the case for food insecure households compared with food secure households (FAO, 2017a). Youth are disproportionately affected by the lack of economic opportunities in Palestine, including those with tertiary education, and by the youth unemployment rate of almost 40 percent (United Nations, 2016). The focus on adolescents and youth is an underlying theme in Palestine. Adolescents and youth are identified as a vulnerable group in numerous policy and strategy documents. This is for good reason as the Palestinian population is young. The proportion of youth (15–29 years old) relative to the adult population is at 30 percent, pointing to a significant youth bulge (UNFPA, 2017). The rise in adolescents (15–19 years old) represent a pressing development challenge as the proportion of the adolescent population compared with the adult population increased from 19.1 percent in 1980 to 22.6 percent in 2014, representing the highest increase among all Arab countries (UNFPA, 2017).

Refugees and female-headed households are also adversely affected by high food insecurity and unemployment in the country, making them vulnerable to malnutrition. The prevalence of food insecurity among households headed by women is 15 percentage points higher than that among households headed by men because of women’s lower participation in the labour market, higher unemployment rates and lower wages (WFP, 2017). The most vulnerable groups included refugees (35 percent food insecure), particularly those living in camps as well as female headed households (36 percent moderately or severely food insecure). The rates of food insecurity found in the abovementioned groups were significantly higher in the Gaza Strip compared with the West Bank.

Nutrition architecture and governance mechanisms

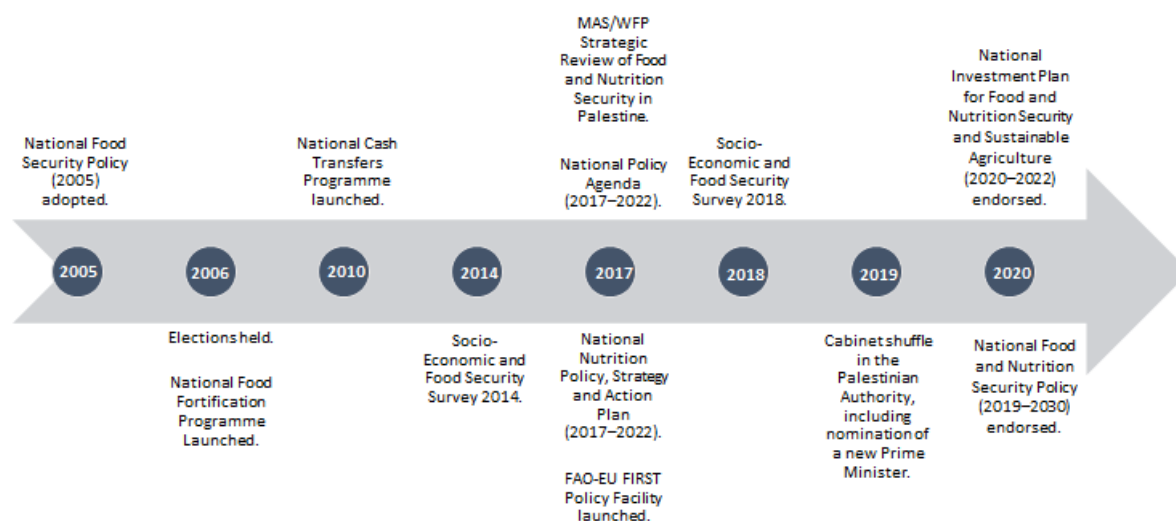
Nutrition is explicitly embedded in the Ministry of Health (MoH). The National Nutrition Policy, Strategy and Action Plan (NNPSAP) 2017–2022 states that the Nutrition Department in the MoH is the government entity responsible for developing strategies, regulations and action plans on nutrition. In recent years, policy discussions and advocacy have highlighted the need for a high-level body that can effectively address the multidimensional determinants of malnutrition and its inextricable link with food insecurity. Influential documents, such as the WFP-commissioned Strategic Review of Food and Nutrition Security in Palestine, 2017 and the NFNSP (2019–2030), suggest the creation of a council for food security and nutrition. The NFNSP (2019–2030) considers the council as key for improving the governance of food and nutrition security in the country (MoA, 2019b). However, it cautions that such a council should be empowered, with the authority to influence change, and representative, comprising representatives from the relevant ministries. An ambitious agenda has already been put forth for the council, envisaging that expecting it will cover a range of interconnected issues such as food production, trade, nutrition, poverty and food safety (MAS, 2017).

After the endorsement of the NFNSP (formally endorsed by the Cabinet in 2020), there are two policy documents which provide the vision, guiding principles and operation plan for improving nutrition. The NFNSP is to be accompanied by a series of investment plans, the first of which will cover the initial three years and mainstream nutrition, and propose nutrition-specific and sensitive interventions for the food systems. Likewise, the NNPSAP also proposed an action plan with budget figures. The development of these two nutrition documents was led by two different ministries. In the case of the NNPSAP, the lead was taken by the Ministry of Health with help from UNICEF, whereas, the development of the NFNSP was led by the Ministry of Agriculture in partnership with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the European Union (EU). While it may seem unusual to see that there are two documents providing policy, programmatic and investment guidance, the overlapping mandates and duplication of efforts on food security and nutrition have previously been documented by MAS (2017).

There are also other relevant documents that mention nutrition, such as the National Health Strategy (2017–2022), National Agricultural Sector Strategy (2017–2022) and the National School Canteen policy.

There is no explicit mention in the Palestinian legal system of the right to food (MAS, 2017). There is an implicit reference that can be found in Article 10 of the Basic Law of 2003, which talks about the protection of basic human rights and liberties, which could be interpreted as encompassing the rights to food and health (MAS, 2017).

Figure 4: Timeline of key events and processes relevant to food security and nutrition policies in Palestine (2005–2020)



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Methods

The analysis was conducted using process tracing, which is a qualitative method employed in social sciences research to assess and analyse complex processes where numerous factors may interact to cause effects (Bennett, 2005). The process tracing methodology can be effective in analysing policy processes and in understanding the historical events that shape these processes, and had been previously used to study political economy of health and nutrition policies (Balarajan, 2014).

The primary data for the analysis were collected using structured qualitative interviews with high-level food and nutrition experts in Palestine from government agencies, non-governmental organizations, the donor community and think tanks. To complement the primary data, secondary information was collected from a thorough review of key policy and programmatic documents relating to food and nutrition.

Primary data collection was undertaken in Ramallah over a two-week period in late March and early April of 2019. In total, nine high-level policymakers and influential experts were interviewed. Convenience sampling was used to select interviewees and an effort was made to interview key people from within government ministries relevant for food and nutrition policy, as well as from outside the government (see Table 2). The experts were selected based on: (1) their involvement in high-level national policy processes, in particular the National Investment Plan for Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (NIP) 2020–2022, and (2) snowball sampling through seeking recommendations from interviewees. Based on these criteria, eleven people were identified and contacted, out of which nine responded. Out of these nine, seven interviews were fully completed while two interviews could only be completed partially.

The interviews were conducted in person, and included questions on themes related to the problems of food insecurity and malnutrition, the associated policies and the political factors. The questions were based on the Rapid Assessment Tool for Food and Nutrition Policy: Political Prioritization and Agenda Setting (as proposed by Reich and Balarajan, 2012). There were several reasons behind opting for the aforementioned tool. Firstly, the tool places equal thematic focus on both food and nutrition. Second, it enabled a rapid and light political economy analysis. This was an important consideration, as Palestine has seen the application of several lengthy tools and processes in recent times in the arena of food security and nutrition. The application of another heavy tool might have run the risk of engagement fatigue among policymakers. Thirdly, the tool has thus far only been applied in one country, India, and its application in a conflict-affected setting would enable a better understanding of its wider applicability and relevance.

Table 2: Overview of interviewees who participated in the analysis

Food and Nutrition Stakeholders	Organization	N
Government	Governmental health and nutrition departments	4
	Governmental food departments	2
Non-Governmental	Civil society	1
	Donor community (partially completed)	1
	Think tanks (partially completed)	1
Total:		9

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Results

After the interviews with the experts were completed, the data were inserted in a spreadsheet and analysed to identify common themes. These themes are explained in detail in this section, and the statements made by the experts are corroborated with secondary analysis of the information found in key policy and programmatic documents available, such as the sectoral strategies, United Nations' contextual reports and reports by civil society organizations.

Issue framing: the inextricable link between malnutrition, food insecurity and poverty

Almost all of the experts who were interviewed, six out of seven, stated that proponents of food and nutrition initiatives frequently invoke the link between food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty reduction when framing the issues. This is consistent with existing analyses on the topic as, out of the four dimensions of food security – access, availability, utilization and stability – lack of (economic) access to food has been found to be the most pressing in Palestine. MAS (2017) notes that, while risks of restricted supply of food remain due to the uncertain political environment, food insecurity in the country ‘stems primarily from a lack of economic access to food that is closely related to poverty’ (MAS, 2017). SEFSec (2016) also notes that households with greater access and stability of income sources have been found to be more food secure (SEFSec, 2018).

Important policy documents on nutrition also identify poverty and lack of economic opportunities as obstacles to better nutrition (MoA, 2019b; MoH, 2016). In addition, poor access to proper nutrition education and inadequate food consumption practices have been associated with suboptimal diets, micronutrient deficiencies and increasing trends in overweight and obesity (MoA, 2019b).

Varying degrees of cohesion in the policy community

The interviewees classified the political support accorded to food and nutrition programmes in Palestine in the range of 4–8. The range is indicative of the varied levels of attention given to nutrition by the different levels of policy governance. For instance, the issues of food and nutrition have not been picked up by the head of the government (the President or the Prime Minister). The experts revealed that the highest level of officials that talked about food and nutrition issues publicly was the ministerial level. It was noted that the ministers and deputy ministers of agriculture, health and education regularly raised the issues of food and nutrition in their public meetings. One of the possible reasons why the President or the Prime Minister have not spoken about food and nutrition issues in their public meetings could be due to the fact both of these subjects are not adequately represented in the National Policy Agenda (2017–2022). The NPA 2017–2022 is an overarching policy and fiscal framework for the Palestinian government aimed at working towards “ending the occupation and development of strong, citizen-centres public institutions” (PMO,

2016). The document stresses the need to ensure food security and includes it as one of the ten national priorities – food security falls under national priority #10 on resilient communities (PMO, 2016). However, the document does not mention nutrition.

The policy community was found to be fragmented in the country when it came to agreeing on the framing of the problem of malnutrition and food insecurity. Of the seven experts, only two stated that the food and nutrition policy experts agree on a single framing issue to advance food and nutrition policy (e.g. right to food, women's empowerment, food insecurity). The interviewees were also asked about the cohesiveness of the advocacy community in Palestine on food and nutrition, and it was noted that the community was not very cohesive. With regard to the cohesiveness of the policy and advocacy communities, one expert stated that “everyone looks at the issues of food and nutrition... and organizing conferences and high-level events can help to kick-start [collaborative] thinking on these issues”. Another expert remarked that “in Palestine there is a beautiful match between SDGs and the policy agenda, but the policy making capacity is extremely low”.

Multiple policy guiding institutions

The interviews revealed that there is a mixed understanding in the country of the mechanisms that coordinate multisectoral food and nutrition programming. Most experts referred to the SDG2 Working Group (SDG2 WG) as the platform for multisectoral programming, with others mentioning the Nutrition Thematic Group, Fortified Food Monitoring Committee and the under-proposed National Food and Nutrition Council.

Even though the SDG2 WG was mentioned by most experts as a key mechanism for coordinating action on food security and nutrition, the NFNSP has pointed to its limited role and influence. The NFNSP considered the role of the SDG2 WG as being limited to monitoring progress of the work on SDG2, and “far away from an effective coordination role, both in terms of planning and management responsibilities” (MoA, 2019b). The NFNSP has therefore called for the creation of a politically empowered High-Level Food and Nutrition Council that complements the work of the line ministries and the SDG WG. Similarly, MAS (2017) has advocated for the creation of such a council, calling it the “best vehicle for pursuing several interrelated goals at once, and most efficiently” (MAS, 2017).

Considerable interest group mobilization on food and nutrition issues

All the experts remarked that the major stakeholders operating in the food and nutrition area, such as government ministries, United Nations agencies and donors either supported or remained neutral during discussions of the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy. It was noted, however, that criticism was raised by non-governmental organizations. Palestine has many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the food and agriculture sectors. The Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), which is one of the largest NGOs with the mandate to promote food security

and agricultural development through empowerment of farmers and enhancing food sovereignty, was critical of the National Food Security and Nutrition Policy (2019–2030), and thought that the policy did not capture the reality of the Palestinian context. UAWC believes in supporting farmers to strengthen their ‘steadfastness’ on the land as a means to counter the Israeli occupation (UAWC, 2014). The concept of steadfastness (*Sumud* in Arabic) is a regular feature in the national debates in Palestine. In the National Policy Agenda (2017–2022), steadfast resistance is linked to fulfilling the vision of ‘one land, one people’, which is to be pursued on all fronts (PMO, 2016). In the context of food security and nutrition, *Sumud* implies increasing the productivity, profitability and resilience of ordinary Palestinians so as to be able to cultivate their lands in the face of the occupation (UC Press, 2019). The NFSNP does not explicitly mention steadfastness and *Sumud*; however, it does refer to resilient communities in its vision of fostering “Food and Nutrition Secure Resilient Communities and Households in Palestine”, in line with the NPA.

Strong external influence

The donor and international development community has a strong influence in Palestine on the development and implementation of food and nutrition policies and programmes. Part of this influence is due to the fact that a significant proportion of Palestine’s activities in food and nutrition are supported by international humanitarian assistance programmes. Palestine is the highest recipient of humanitarian funding globally per capita, excluding Small Island Developing States (World Bank, 2019b). Most of the humanitarian assistance in Palestine is channelled through the food security cluster, most of which is in turn dispensed through food assistance and social protection programmes (SEFSec, 2018). Though the funding for food security has been on a downward trend since 2006, it is substantial compared to the health and nutrition sector, in line with what one of the experts mentioned: “donors do not talk about [mal]nutrition as a major problem”.

Limited resources for food and nutrition

The experts indicated that the current resources and funding for food and nutrition programming were inadequate. According to one expert “food security is only used in speech ... and the resources available for food and nutrition are insufficient”. These results were affirmed by the MAS (2017), which showed through a survey of key food security and nutrition stakeholders in the government of Palestine that the resources allocated to food security and nutrition responses are not adequate to achieve food security and nutrition targets. The resources available to the line ministries responsible for food and nutrition responses are also limited. For instance, the National Agriculture Strategy of Palestine acknowledges that the ministry has ‘historically suffered from weakness in financial allocation’ which has led to issues in the implementation of development activities and the upgrading of services and to inefficiencies in coordination within the sector. The interviews revealed that there is a budget line for nutrition in the budget and it falls under the health budget. The budget line concerns micronutrient supplementation and the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative.

Food and nutrition programming faces external pressure from other sectors. For instance, when interviewees were posed the question about how the government would spend an extra ILS 5 million for health initiatives, all of them noted that the priority funded would be something other than food and nutrition. Thus, given that the funding for nutrition and health is limited compared with food security, it is imperative that interventions in the food and agriculture sector integrate nutrition considerations, especially for working towards improving the underlying causes of malnutrition.

Discussion

An opportunity created to further implement and foster coherence

The interrelations between the development of the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) and National Investment Plan for Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (NIP) 2020–22 represents a unique opportunity to put food and nutrition issues higher up on the development agenda. The link signifies the emphasis placed on operationalizing the policy, and on avoiding repeating the mistakes made during previous processes. In 2005, a similar exercise was undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture to develop the National Strategy for Food Security, which was not sufficiently pursued for implementation, however, resulting in it losing relevance (MAS, 2017). The practice of closely linking investment plans and the development of national policies is consistent with the approach taken by other countries around the world. For instance, Bangladesh has begun to draft a national policy on food and nutrition security by building along the investment areas identified by the second Country Investment Plan on Nutrition-Sensitive Food Systems (CIP2 2016–2020) (FPMU, 2016).

The NIP 2020–2022 in Palestine has provided the possibility of bridging strategies and actions plans between the two nutrition policy documents: the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) and the National Nutrition Policy, Strategy and Action Plan (NNPSAP). Palestine does not suffer from a lack of policies and strategic documents. In fact, there are one too many. The issue has always been implementation and action. The implementation has been affected by lack of coordination. In 2005, a food security policy document was also prepared. The policy also envisaged the establishment of a Food Security Higher Council.

The need to develop a national document on food security and nutrition has been building up over the years. The MAS Strategic Review indicated that the time is ripe to develop a national document which signals the intention of Palestine to own its development programmes and assert leadership in the sector (MAS, 2017). The MAS Strategic Review led the way in pointing towards the need to develop a national approach for food security and nutrition to eliminate the fragmentation that currently exists between policies and institutions (MAS, 2017). The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy aims to address the concerns of a lack of policy coherence and weak linkages between ministries (MoA, 2019b). The Policy identifies the institutional set-up for food and nutrition security as a ‘complex cobweb of organizations and policy frameworks whose governance involves many [institutions]’ and this, coupled with the lack of an umbrella legal framework, has led to ‘functional overlap between authorities, thereby compromising the effectiveness of food and nutrition security interventions’ (MoA, 2019b). The National Food and Nutrition Security Policy therefore aims to be a strategic and overarching document that provides strategic guidance and an operational architecture for food and nutrition security with the key objective of promoting efficiency among existing policy frameworks linked to SDG2 (MoA, 2019b).

The need for an integrated policy framework has been worked on in the past: the National Strategy for Food Security of 2005 was intended to be one such document but it was not implemented in the true sense (MAS, 2017).

Expanding the discussion on nutrition

The NIP created a window to widen the debate in the country on nutrition. It led to the need to understand nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions to address the burden of malnutrition in the country. The NIP incorporates nutrition as a key component and mainstreams nutrition throughout the document. However, the window did not create an opportunity to bring about a food systems approach to looking at nutrition. The rest of the world is thinking about transforming food systems for better nutrition and healthy diets at the moment. In Palestine, the concept has not been able to gain traction. There was also less of a focus on healthy diets and fewer linkages with the recent debates on nutrition. In particular, a focus on food systems for better nutrition was missing in the debates, as has been stipulated in ICN2 and other such events (ICN2, 2014).

Employing a food systems approach could have produced a conceptual overlap between the two nutrition policies. A food systems approach is a holistic way of thinking that considers all the elements, actors and relationships in the system, in a way that addresses the limitations of traditional and sectoral approaches to improving food security and nutrition (FAO, 2018). The food systems approach has now been employed in various contexts to conceptualize linkages between food systems and diets (Raza *et al.*, 2020) and to suggest entry points for policymakers in designing interventions and actions that support better diets and nutrition (Global Panel, 2014).

While the two policies see nutrition as a multifaceted issue, acknowledging, however, that various sectors, such as agriculture, health, water, sanitation and hygiene, and social affairs each have a particular view on how to conceptualize the problem of malnutrition. The National Nutrition Policy, Strategy and Action Plan (NNSAP) identifies nutrition as a multifaceted discipline relevant to a range of different sectors and organizations, and identifies the determinants of nutrition broadly in line with the UNICEF Conceptual Framework, i.e. the underlying determinants, which include food, health and care, and basic determinants, including the political, economic and social environment (MoH, 2016). On the other hand, the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (NFNSP) 2019–2030 sets out the issues to be addressed in line with the four dimensions of food security along with a focus on building resilience and institutional environment. According to the vision of the NFNSP, nutrition is mentioned: “Food and Nutrition Secure Resilient Communities and Households in Palestine”. Nutrition is reflected within the food utilization pillar. One of the six strategic objectives, it involves ending malnutrition by recognizing the existence of multiple burdens of malnutrition and the cross-sectoral nature of the topic. The sectoral results in the NFNSP include implementation of nutrition interventions, promotion of nutrition education and awareness and promotion of food safety throughout the food supply chains (MoA, 2019b).

Implementation in the unique context of Palestine (political and external factors, funds, multiplicity of actors) remains key

Improvements in food security and nutrition in Palestine will ultimately depend on the implementation of the plan. Palestine faces a unique context of occupation. There are political and external factors that are critical for sustainable development in general. Humanitarian funding is important for Palestine to be able to implement the plan. Studies have concluded that the assistance provided by the international community has been beneficial in maintaining the current standards of living, as without it, the levels of poverty and food insecurity would be higher (MAS, 2017; FAO, 2017a). However, the humanitarian assistance programmes have also been criticized for not being able to support households in generating income, and it has been suggested that, for the impact on poverty to be sustainable in the longer run, more efforts need to be made, combined with development interventions, such as microfinance and livelihood development (MAS, 2017).

Precarious political environment

The political situation is routinely precarious in Palestine owing to the occupation by Israel. The period in which the interviews were conducted can be classified as eventful. The Prime Minister in Palestine was replaced, as well as the cabinet. On some fronts, the situation has remained the same. For example, elections have not been held in the country since 2006 and there is no indication of when new elections might be held (UNDP, 2017). The lack of trust between the two main political factions in the country, Hamas and Fatah, has meant that the Palestinian Authority has less than ideal control over the situation in Gaza, which is heavily influenced by Hamas.

The development of the National Food and Security Policy (National Investment Plan) saw a changing political environment in the country. During the development of the Policy and Investment Plan, there were two events which affected the momentum of the processes. First, the Prime Minister and the cabinet were replaced. During this shuffle, the Prime Minister who had been in the role for several years was replaced. The shuffle also saw changes to sectoral ministries, and the minister of agriculture was also replaced in the process. Second, there was a dispute between the Israeli customs office and the Palestinian Authority over clearance revenues. The clearance revenues have been estimated as close to 65 percent of the total revenues of the Palestinian Authority (PA), or amounting to 15 percent of GDP (World Bank, 2019a). The dispute over clearance revenues has led the PA to drastically cut the wages of civil servants and curtail expenditures for social assistance programmes (World Bank, 2019a). The grave impacts of the dispute were evident during the period when the data collection for the study was taking place (March–April 2019) when the government employees were only paid 50 percent of their monthly salaries. The employees were told that if the dispute continued their monthly salaries would be reduced to 40 percent of the normal amount. If the crisis continues, it is expected to leave the PA with a fiscal gap of over USD 1 billion, and to halt economic activity (World Bank, 2019a).

Conclusions

The paper concludes that the state-driven, multistakeholder and multisectoral exercise for the development of the National Investment Plan for Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (NIP) 2020–2022 successfully created an opportunity to elevate nutrition on the policy agenda. In addition, it concludes that a political economy analysis of food and nutrition policies in Palestine can enable a better understanding of the drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition.

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