FAO Podcast *The Work We Do*
Special Episode
The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2026

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Transcript

Intro
Hi, I'm Katrin Park. Today, we bring you a special episode on *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report. Published by five UN agencies every year, the report is the most comprehensive global evidence base on food security and nutrition.

Healthy diets have become so expensive that one third of the world's population cannot afford them. That's the focus of this year's report: why healthy diets cost so much and what to do about it.

We're recording this special episode in the library of the FAO Museum. Welcome to *The Work We Do.*

Katrin:
On my left, I'm joined by Maximo Torero, FAO's chief economist. And on my right, I'm joined by David Laborde, division director of agri-food economics and policy.

Maximo, what are the major findings of this year's report?

Maximo:
Thank you. Katrin. This year's report shows that for the third consecutive year, the number of hungry people is declining, which is good news. However, the improvements are uneven, and they vary by region, and they are fragile and insufficient to achieve the SDG2, which is what we want to achieve by 2030. But the important thing is that we keep accelerating the decline.

If we look specifically at the numbers, we find that 7.8% of the global population face hunger in 2025, down from 8.1% in 2024 and 8.6% in 2022. Now, what that means in terms of numbers is that in 2025, we have 645 million people still in hunger, which is 14 million less than in 2024, and 43 million less than in 2022.

So, the picture is complex, with heterogeneity across regions. The major improvement is happening in Latin America and the Caribbean, and specifically in South America and also in Asia. The progress in South Asia is mostly driven by the improvements in India.

Now, the report also shows that it's not just an issue of reduction of hunger. Improving the nutrition indicators also shows that it's important to look at the affordability and the cost of healthy diets, and how much people are consuming healthy diets.

In this report, we first look at affordability, and we show that 2.6 billion people are still not able to afford a healthy diet. But clearly, it's not just affordability itself, which is linked to income. It's also linked to the cost of a healthy diet, which is the second part of the report. And finally, something we still don't measure is how many people are actually consuming healthy diets.

Ultimately, what we want is greater consumption of healthy diets, because we want to reduce undernutrition and overnutrition, and to reduce non-communicable diseases — and that's what healthy diets will bring. So, again, the number 2.6 billion is still extremely high and is something that we need to tackle. And the second part of this report looks at the cost, specifically the cost of a healthy diet.

Katrin:
David, so, Maximo just talked about affordability. But there's more to it, no?

David:
Yes. And as Maximo said, we're talking about very large costs. The economic cost of diet-related non-communicable diseases is $8.1 trillion a year. So it's a huge cost to the economy. But it actually starts with a cost to people, because it's about how much it costs them to buy and consume a healthy diet.

And that's what we do in the report this year. We really try to understand the situation: why these costs are so high. And as you said and as Maximo has said, there's first an affordability issue. If we are all rich, the cost will not matter. But in the world today, it's not the case.

And rising inflation over the last few years has made the issue of cost — how much you pay at the grocery store — even more prominent. Over the last five years, the cost of a healthy diet has risen by 25%. Today, it's $4.28 in PPP. PPP is a way of adjusting for differences in the cost of living across countries because current exchange rates, for instance, can be misleading. If you look at the news, you'll see that some countries have currencies that are overvalued or undervalued. So simply looking at prices and using exchange rates doesn't do the job. We need to adjust for those differences.

So, $4.28 is already, unfortunately, much more than the extreme poverty line, which is $3.00 PPP. The conclusion is that we are pricing one third of mankind out of the consumption of healthy diets.

And that's what we want to solve. And that's what we explain in the report: what this number means. But $4.28, on average, also means very different prices around the world. And we actually have lower costs in high-income countries. In the places where people are richer, costs are lower.

And why? It's because these economies are more efficient. They produce food more efficiently. The transport food more efficiently. They process food more efficiently. At the opposite end, the number of lower-, middle-income countries the prices are higher. No, it's not all products that are more expensive everywhere. And we need to unpack this box. And that's why we see that animal-food products are expensive in Africa, when fruits and vegetables are more expensive in Europe or in Asia.

We will need to look at different solutions adapted to each context. The last part of the report, beyond the diagnostic, looks at solutions. What we can do, and what we can do to produce food more efficiently.

But to produce the right foods, we need much more investment in horticulture. And we need to reduce post-harvest losses, especially for perishable products. We also have to make sure that we have the right level of competition because, from the farmer to the consumer, there's a large gap. Basically, when you go to the grocery store, 75% of the cost is not about the primary production of food. So, we need to make sure that we intervene all along the value chain.

And we cover all these different aspects in the report.

Katrin:
Why are fruits and vegetables more expensive in Europe? And animal-source food more expensive in Africa?

David:
In Europe, fruits and vegetables are more expensive because they are labor-intensive. And also the weather in Europe is not tropical. So you have less water, less sun, and the people who harvest the food matter, because many fruits and vegetables are still harvested manually. So labor costs matter.

In Africa, it's different because in Africa, actually, fruits are still very inexpensive, even if there are a lot of losses along the value chain. Actually, the productivity is so high and availability are high, so these prices are low. But it’s very different for animal products. Milk, eggs, and meat are expensive. They are expensive because you don't have all the modern infrastructure in terms of cold storage for these products, but also in terms of vaccination for the livestock.

The modernization of the livestock sector is still not really scaled up in Africa. It's also because of the cost of feed. So having an agrifood systems approach is important. Understanding the specific value chains is important if we want to do the right thing in the right place.

Katrin:
And isn't the cost of healthy diets also expensive in Latin America? Which seems ironical because they export a lot of food.

David:
Yes. But also what Latin America exports the most is staple. It's soybean, it's maize, it’s wheat where the big exports are — and also meat. At the same time, you have some countries in Latin

America that are very good at exporting fruits and vegetables. So, beyond the regional average, you have a lot of differences. And when we think about Latin America, we also have to think about some islands in the Caribbean. And here transportation costs have a real impact on the cost.

Also, we have all these connectivity challenges. Within countries in Latin America, that can be a major issue. So, if you have a very export-oriented model, you try to be very efficient at exporting, rather than bringing some of those goods to your own population. And that's one of the paradoxes we need to address with the right balance of policies.

Maximo:
Let me add something there, because coming from Latin America, I know a little bit about Latin America.

One dimension that is important to capture here is trade. And even Europe imports high-value commodities. Asia imports high-value commodities from Latin America and also from other parts of the world — so the cost that we are observing in those countries is even lower because of the supply coming through the trade part.

But specifically in the case of Latin America, when we refer to fruits and vegetables, the major countries exporting fruits and vegetables are basically the Andean countries: Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and Chile. The challenge there is that the industry, the agro-industry has focused on varieties of products which are for export specifically, which are too expensive for local consumers.

What we are measuring through the cost of a healthy diet is how expensive those commodities are. That raises an important question. I don't think it means we should reduce our export-oriented approach. Rather, it means we need to start thinking seriously about how we can ensure there are local supplies of these fruits and vegetables in these countries, so that we can begin lowering their cost.

It's important to bring this balance between domestic production and export-oriented production, because we need the revenues and we need to diversify markets, so that we can also lower the cost of the healthy diet.

David:
And in the report, you will see how we do this “matching” between what intervention and where. In the case of Latin America, actually additional connectivity to global market is not a priority, but the priority is focusing more on domestic market integration. For other parts of the world, we still need to increase this connection because actually what we will see in a landlocked country today, the price for their healthy diet is much higher than countries where they come from.

Maximo:
And that's exactly what we are seeing also in SIDS, because SIDS import most of the fruits and Caribbean islands are the most expensive in terms of the cost of healthy diets.

Katrin:
SIDS — Small Island Developing States.

So, Maximo you talked about trade, supply and demand. There is an example that has to do with quinoa, I know. Would you like to tell us about that?

Maximo:
An example that happened in the past few years. As you know, there was an increase in the demand for quinoa. It's superfood, very nutritious, with proteins and so on. People internationally started to like quinoa, and that created a boost in demand. The challenge was that the supply was not ready, and therefore it increased their prices locally, which was a staple that was extremely important in reducing anemia and malnutrition in parts of Latin America, especially in Peru and Bolivia.

We have learned from that. And now we need to understand that we have to look at the supply and demand at the same time, simultaneously. Although it cannot be so simultaneous, you have to start preparing the supply, so that you can respond when the demand rises. Because what we saw in quinoa is the demand comes very quickly and then it moves up, and you don't have the supply. And then local price increases.

Then you start to move into areas which are more complex, and you create pests and diseases. Again, it's a lesson learned. As David was saying, we need to focus on both supply and demand and we need to be prepared, so that the local consumption is not affected at the same time.

Katrin:
Maximo, the report finds that the rate of hunger has slightly declined in Africa, but it's more complex than that. Is it?

Maximo:
Yes. Look, for me, it's extremely good news that finally, although very fragile, we are seeing a stabilization of numbers in Africa in terms of rates from 20.3 to 20.0%, which is an improvement — but it's a very small improvement. But the point is not the magnitude necessarily. The point is that we are no longer having an increase in rate now.

But in terms of numbers, the story is different. And why? Because Africa is growing at a very high population rate, more than 2%. Asia is not. Population rate growth in Asia has declined substantially. And as a result of that, today, we have 309 million people that are in hunger in Africa, compared to 282 million people in Asia. So, despite this small decline in the prevalence of hunger, this is the first SOFI report in which the number of people experiencing hunger in Africa is higher than in Asia.

Now, that's something that we need to work on carefully because we need to and try to find structural solutions to this. We need to take advantage of this reduction — small reduction or stabilization of the rate — and we need to accelerate this progress. But for me, this is good news. And it's especially good news because we've been facing significant challenges over the past year.

The counterfactual is a world where there was no Covid, a world where there was no war in Ukraine, a world war, there was no Strait of Hormuz crisis. And a world where there was no cut of ODA for Africa of more than 20% or 25%.

Katrin:
ODA — Official Development Assistance.

Maximo:
So, given that counterfactual, the fact that we're still seeing a slight improvement is good news. But we need to accelerate that progress. That does not mean at all that we should continue reducing all the aid. On the contrary, we need to use all the aid in the best possible way to be able to accelerate that rate and to reduce the absolute number.

Katrin:
We spoke to some consumers in a market in Nairobi. And the general sentiment was that the cost of food was going up — healthy foods, including fruits, vegetables and animal-source foods.

Take a look.

Consumer 1:
The prices of things have gone up. Some things go down a little, while others go up. But right now, prices are high.

For example, right now these tomatoes are KES 5,000. Before they used to be KES 4,500 or KES 3,500. The price of cooking oil has also gone up. And other things like sugar, meat, and flour.

Consumer 2:
The prices of basic necessities, things people need every day, such as sugar, cooking oil, and even milk have become very expensive, especially milk. You know, it is something every family needs.

Consumer 3:
What I like, I am someone who likes fish and meat. But those things have become very expensive. I cannot eat meat.

Katrin:
David, how should we understand this based on the report?

David:
What you have just heard is the reality. Consumers are facing these increased prices. Now, Africa is a very diverse place. So, it doesn't mean that all these prices increase at the same speed everywhere. But what we see is that first, the average cost of healthy diets in Africa is $4.33. So, actually it's higher than the average cost in the world, which is $4.28 PPP.

Behind this average number, what we see is that animal-source food is pretty expensive. Actually, it represents 35% of the cost of healthy diets in Africa, compared to 28% globally. But we see also that, yes, fruits and vegetables in some locations, in particular, in cities are very expensive because there's a lot of post-harvest losses. Once again, we should not make general statements about Africa. But we see this pattern, and it's going to be important in guiding action and solutions.

As Maximo said, the number of people experiencing chronic hunger in Africa is still rising, even though the prevalence has begun to stabilize. At the same time, there is one aspect of the story that’s getting worse, including in Africa: obesity. Today, nearly 140 million people in Africa are living with obesity.

So, 310 million people, 209 in chronic hunger, 140 already obese. If we look at East Africa, it's 120 million people in chronic hunger and 120 million that are overweight. So, it's not as extreme as obesity, but we do have this double burden of malnutrition. And that's why the cost of healthy diets matters. And it even matters more in Africa today because the continent continues to urbanize very quickly. So, lifestyles are changing. And if we cannot get in the cities right cost of healthy diets, we will face this problem.

And having this rising obesity, having these problems of non-communicable diseases mean that health costs are going to increase in the future. It also means that labor productivity can go down in the future. And Africa needs more economic growth, not less.

Maximo:
And it's important to look at this through the three dimensions of healthy diets. The first is cost, as you were explaining. But Africa also faces significant income challenges. GDP growth is not strong enough, and income levels remain low, so affordability is a major issue. And then, of course, there's the third dimension: consumption.

So, I think that brings up the three dimensions.

David:
Exactly. And, of course, we need to bring down the costs for all consumers because in Africa, it's three-quarters of the people that cannot afford a healthy diet. But we also need to make sure we create the right demand condition, and we protect some of the more vulnerable groups with targeted intervention. Because when resources are limited, they need to be targeted where

they have the greatest impact, in terms of social protection and school feeding programs, for instance.

Katrin:
So, David, you mentioned school feeding programs. In many parts of Africa, school meals are actually mostly cereals with very little fruit and vegetables. Could you tell us more about school meals, Maximo?

Maximo:
Yes. Let me take a step back. If we look at why South America and Asia are improving, it's because of two broad sets of policies. The first is social protection, as David was saying, and how we can target it more effectively. That includes school feeding programs. The second is agriculture and how we can improve productivity and efficiency while using fewer inputs and producing more sustainably.

But if we focus on the social protection part and we focus on the cash transfers and conditional cash transfers, one of the meal programs that have been very successful on is one of the reasons why countries like Dominican Republic, for example, is reducing hunger a lot and moving out of the hunger map. Brazil and other countries in Latin America have shown that the quality of the food provided through school feeding programs can make a difference.

And yes, we still see a big challenge. If we look at the school feeding programs in the poorest countries, the immediate priority is to supply the minimum number of calories they need. But we need to change that, and that needs to be changed structurally.

We need to learn from what happened in Latin America, Asia, and other parts of the world, and apply those lessons to ensure children everywhere have access to a healthy diet. And that means diversity. Of course, they will have some staples, but they also need to have fruits and they need to have vegetables. That's essential because it makes a difference not only today, but also in the future because these kids will have better micro-, macronutrients and they will be healthier in the future.

And that's what we're trying to achieve. The lesson is that we know this can be done, and we know what works. Now we need to learn from the countries that have done it.

Katrin:
David, we're facing many challenges. The input cost is rising. Extreme weather events and an El Nino event are developing. How does that change or affect the cost of healthy diets?

David:
They impact both the cost of diet and the fight against hunger. The numbers Maximo was discussing were largely driven by the COVID-19 crisis a few years ago. Since then, the pandemic has subsided, but hunger has remained persistently high. In other words, those shocks have slowed our progress and reduced our capacity to bring hunger down.

And the geopolitical shock that is conflict within countries. Across countries, we also see, how energy shock and fertilizer shock is impacting the capacity to produce food, produce, eat at a good price, including for some value chain like the one we discussed today in terms of fruit and vegetables, how they have been actually more impacted in some cases, because you need cold storage, you need energy, you need energy for irrigation.

And then there are geopolitical shocks, including conflicts within and across countries. We also see how energy and fertilizer shocks are affecting our ability to produce food at an affordable cost. Some value chains, such as fruits and vegetables, are especially vulnerable because you need cold storage for them, and you need energy, and you need energy for irrigation.

All of these make them particularly vulnerable to this type of shock. Looking ahead, even without any major new shocks, we project that around half a billion people will still be living with chronic hunger in 2030. The more shocks we face, the harder it will be to reduce that number or do better than those projections.

And in the report, we talk a bit about these figures. We show how the current situation could lead to 20 million more people living with chronic hunger by 2030. That's because these shocks accumulate. They not only increase the price of food, they also increase the cost of healthy diets and, as Maximo said, can erode economic growth.

If you have less income, all of this becomes more complicated. It becomes more difficult for individuals to pay for their food, but also for countries to scale up the right solutions.

Maximo:
We must understand that we will continue to face these compound risks. It's no longer just the increasing frequency and intensity of climate events. Apparently, we're also expecting a very strong El Niño. But we're also facing geopolitical challenges. In Africa, we're seeing increasing conflict, which is also reflected in the hunger numbers.

I think we've also learned from this. We're a little more resilient than we were before, even when it comes to El Niño. But we need more tools, including anticipatory action and forecasting tools, to help countries make decisions well in advance.

Countries are now getting ready for El Niño. India is working very hard because of the delayed monsoon. Latin America is preparing by accelerating harvests so it can better cope with the situation. FAO and other agencies also have more tools available. We have NOAA, early warning systems, and predictive tools that we can share. We also have stocks, which are important right now and can help us cope with these compound shocks.

But we need to be prepared. The conclusion, I think, for me is that the only way this declining trend will continue in the future — is if we are prepared and we are resilience, both in prevention but also in capacity of absorption. Prevention is early warning systems, insurance tools; capacity to absorb shocks means social protection, productive interventions, and innovation, including climate-resilient crops and crops that are more resilient to water scarcity.

And also trade. I think trade will be central. We just produced a report on how important it is for resilience. So that's the way we need to move forward. And that's the way I hope we can, despite all these shocks, continue to see hunger decline around the world.