Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition

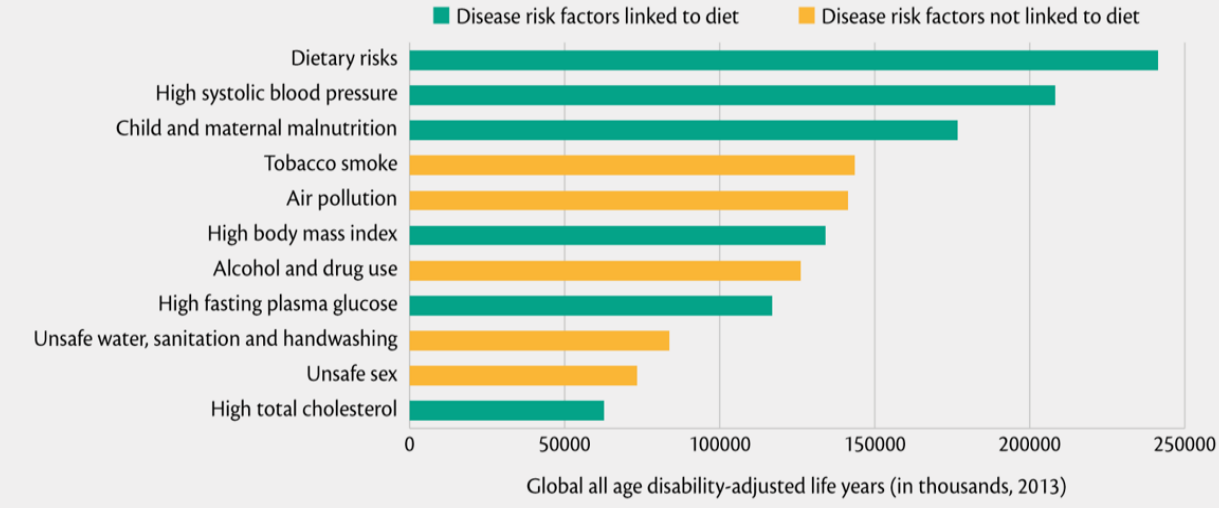
Better diets for a better future in Africa

Key messages from The Global Panel's Foresight report

A growing nutritional crisis

Despite substantial global progress in reducing hunger and undernutrition in the past 25 years, malnutrition in all its forms currently affects one in three people worldwide.[1] The risk that poor diets pose to mortality and morbidity is now greater than the combined risks of unsafe sex, alcohol, drug and tobacco use (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Six of the top 11 risk factors driving the global burden of disease are related to diet



Source: Global Burden of Disease Study 2013 Collaborators (2015), Figure 5

Note: The graph shows global disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) attributed to level 2 risk factors in 2013 for both sexes combined.

Besides its toll on human health and wellbeing, the impact on economies is severe. Across the African continent, the economic impact of malnutrition is estimated to be as high as US $25 billion per year, with countries losing between 3% and 16% of their GDP annually.[2]

The bottom line is that poor nutrition in all its forms, is a major brake on Africa's growth and prosperity.

Progress and challenges in Africa

Ghana: a success story

Ghana illustrates what can be achieved in improving nutrition through sustained political focus and effort:

- Undernourishment in the country is reducing as GDP per capita continues to rise - the proportion of the population experiencing chronic hunger declined from 47.4% in 1990-92 to below 5 percent in 2012-14.
- Stunting has reduced from more than 30% in 2003, to 18.8% in 2015.[3]
- The country is one of the few countries in sub-Saharan Africa that met the Millennium Development Goal 1C targets on hunger and poverty reduction.[4]

Much has already been achieved across the African continent to address undernutrition and the multiple challenges at the nexus of agriculture, food and nutrition. Indeed, there are particular success stories such as Ghana (see box). However, undernutrition and hunger are still declining too slowly. Worse, the continent is now facing the double burden of under-nutrition and overweight/obesity:

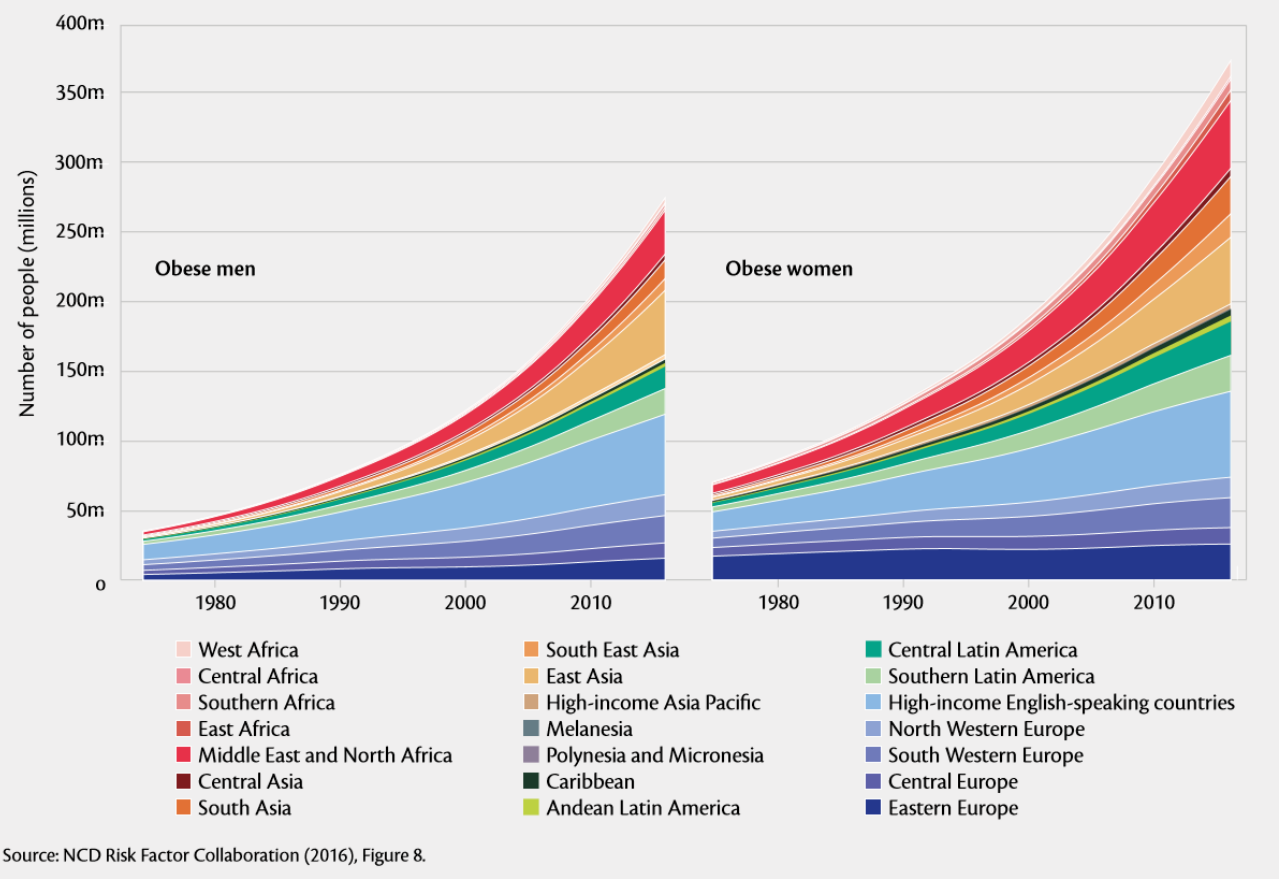
- In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of stunted children under 5 years of age is 58 million (36%) and is rising by 500,000 every year.[5]
- Chronic malnutrition was identified as the underlying cause of approximately half of the child deaths in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2015.
- If business continues as usual, there will still be 216 million undernourished people in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030.
- Rates of overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke) are increasing rapidly in all countries globally, but particularly in low- and middle-income countries. For sub-Saharan African men, the growth rate of overweight and obesity now exceeds that for underweight.[6] Projections of these indicators suggest that without decisive action, by 2030, sub-Saharan Africa's obesity rate is expected to reach 17.5%, or double that of 2005.

These statistics are especially worrying as malnutrition in all its forms has profound impacts throughout people's lifetimes and from generation to generation. For example, undernourished children are less likely to survive to see their fifth birthday, less likely to stay in school, less likely to escape poverty as adults and are more vulnerable to the onset of chronic and non-communicable diseases later in life. And if they are females, they are more likely to give birth to malnourished babies.

In Nigeria, the number of adults with diabetes is estimated to double between 2011 and 2030: from 3.1 million to 6.1 million.

In Ethiopia, the corresponding numbers will also double: from 1.4 million to 2.7 million.

Figure 2: Trends in the numbers of men and women affected by obesity in Africa and other parts of the world:1980- 2010



Source: NCD Risk Factor Collaboration (2016), Figure 8.

Longer-term challenges affecting food systems and nutrition

Over coming decades, countries across Africa will be affected by important drivers of change which will have profound implications for food systems and diets, but which are outside the direct influence of policy makers concerned with nutrition. Arguably, the stresses on food systems will be greater in Africa than any other part of the world:

- ***Population change:*** The greatest population increases worldwide will occur in Africa, where populations could rise from 1186 million in 2015, to 2478 million in 2050.[7] Feeding a possible 1.3 billion extra people will be a monumental challenge for African food producers and its food systems more generally. However, shifting age distributions of populations will also be important. For sub-Saharan Africa in particular, this could create a 'demographic dividend' - as the ratio of those of working age to those of non-working age reaches a peak. These new, young labour market entrants will be able to gain jobs that will help to keep households out of poverty as so help address undernutrition. This, therefore, is a further reason to focus on the diets of infants and young children - to support their cognitive development, so that they are best placed to benefit from opportunities in the labour market in future decades.[8]

- ***Income growth:*** This will be a double edged sword. Growth in per capita GDP in sub-Saharan Africa will enable people to buy and consume more food, thereby helping to address undernutrition. It will also allow them to purchase more high quality foods that will improve diet quality. But as in other parts of the world, higher incomes are also likely to lead to more consumption of 'junk' and ultra-processed foods which are less healthy for diets.

- ***Urbanisation:*** The percentage of the world's population that lives in urban areas is increasing steadily, and most rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.[9] This will generate both opportunities and challenges in terms of diet quality. For example, it will lead to better access to more diverse and better quality foods, but also unhealthy foods high in fat and salt. The challenge will be to find ways of strengthening the positive links between urbanisation and diet quality while not blunting its ability to help reduce hunger and undernutrition.

  Nigeria is one of the countries that is urbanising most rapidly. Estimates suggest at a Nigerian city of 4 million inhabitants would require one three-tonne truck of food supplies entering the city every 90 seconds to feed the population.

- ***Climate change:*** The effects of this on agriculture, food systems and diets will be myriad. For example, twenty years of global studies show crop yields to be negatively affected by climate change in the tropical areas where hunger is most widespread. Also, in a global review of models[10], most predicted a significant increase in food prices. By 2050, the estimated impact of elevated carbon dioxide on the zinc content of grains, tubers and legumes, could place 138 million people at new risk of zinc deficiency (and hence at risk of diarrheic diseases), with most of those affected living in Africa and South Asia.

- ***Depletion of natural resources:*** As populations and incomes grow, the natural resources of Africa will come under substantial pressure, thereby constraining food systems and diets. Soil degradation, freshwater supply, and the erosion of biodiversity (notably in pollinating insects) will all have potentially serious consequences for food production.

All of the above drivers of change, acting singly and in concert, will have profound implications for food systems. They underline the importance for policy makers in Africa - as well as other regions of the world - to look beyond the near term. Strategic low-cost decisions taken now, could pay dividends in the future. Second, it will be critical for governments to place nutrition-driven policies within the landscape of wider policy concerns. In effect, nutrition policy cannot be viewed in isolation.

Food systems are key to addressing the challenges of today and the future

The bottom line is that food systems in Africa are not delivering healthy diets. They are changing rapidly, but are not helping consumers to make healthy and affordable food choices consistent with optimal nutrition outcomes

Certainly, improvements in agriculture will help. These have the potential to be a strong driver of reductions in undernutrition. But increasing food production alone will not automatically lead to better nutrition and better health.[11]

African food systems - both regional and national - need to be repositioned from just supplying food to providing high-quality diets for all. The Foresight report shows that policy initiatives are needed that go far beyond agriculture - to encompass trade, the environment, and health. And crucially, they need to harness the power of the private sector as well as empowering consumers to demand better diets. Leveraging existing food systems policies towards diet quality is key.

A call to action

There is a need to extend the same level of focus and commitment to improving nutrition, as given to addressing HIV/ AIDS, malaria and smoking. The size of the challenges ahead mean that nothing less will do. In this context, the Sustainable Development Goals and 2016–2025 UN Decade of Action for Nutrition provide opportunities to place the improvement of diet quality through food systems at the centre of global action.

On May 23 2016, HE President John Kufuor and President Adesina of the African Development Bank, together with Kofi Annan, launched the **African Leaders on Nutrition (ALN)** initiative, calling on all African leaders and Ministers of Finance to champion and increase investment in nutrition.

Investing in better nutrition also makes sound financial sense. For a typical African country, every dollar invested in reducing chronic undernutrition in children yields a $16 return.[12]

It is important that decisive action is taken now and not deferred. Tackling increases in overweight and obesity is a clear case in point. Once they are allowed to establish in a population, they could take decades to address - indeed no country to date has successfully reversed growth in obesity once it has been allowed to develop.

For an illustrative set of 15 African countries, meeting the 2025 World Health Assembly target for stunting will add 83 billion dollars to national incomes.[13]

So how should policy makers in Africa proceed? Here the Foresight report provides clear guidance. In Africa, as elsewhere, action needs to be tailored to local conditions and challenges - including new and emerging problems. In this context, the report provides a toolkit to enable African policy makers to work through the challenges facing their specific countries. However, the report also sets out a number of priorities for action that are more generally applicable:

1. **Focusing food and agriculture policies on securing diet quality for infants and young children.** These are woefully inadequate in many countries across the world - not just in Africa. Improved policy choices are needed which recognise the central importance of high-quality diets for the youngest.

2. **Improving adolescent girl and adult women's diet quality as a priority in all policy making that shapes food systems.** Women are particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of low-quality diets because of their higher nutrition requirements and because of their disempowerment in some cultures. For example, over half of adolescent girls in low and middle income countries fail to get sufficient micronutrients that are vital for their health and any babies they might give birth to.[14]

3. **Ensuring that food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) guide policy decisions to reshape food systems.** FBDGs are largely absent in low-income countries throughout the world (2 out of 31), and limited in lower middle-income countries (12 out of 51).

4. **Policy support for animal source foods (e.g. dairy, eggs, fish and meat) should be pragmatically evidence-based, rather than driven by ideology.** Infants, children, adolescents and women of reproductive age living in low-income contexts can find it extremely hard to meet nutrient requirements in the absence of these foods. At the same time, some groups in low-income contexts are consuming levels of these foods in excess of recommended levels.

5. **Making fruits, vegetables, pulses, nuts and seeds much more available, more affordable and safe for all consumers.** They offer considerable benefits in terms of diet quality.

6. **Making policies which regulate product formulation, labelling, advertising, promotion and taxes a high priority.** Policies are needed to create disincentives for companies to allocate resources to forms of food processing that undermine diet quality. Also, policies to educate consumers of the adverse health effects of consuming these products more than occasionally are also needed.

7. **Improve accountability at all levels.** Governments committed to reshaping food systems toward healthy diets need to set targets and publish transparent scorecards of their results. Private sector actors also need to acknowledge their far-reaching roles in influencing nutrition.

8. **Break down barriers associated with the longstanding division of jurisdictional responsibilities within many governments** - between agriculture, health, social protection and commerce.

9. **Institutionalising high-quality diets through public sector purchasing power.** Food provided in schools, hospitals, and across the armed forces should be of the highest dietary benefit to the consumer. This approach has the potential to shape the norms around foods that contribute to high-quality

diets and incentivise suppliers and contractors to align their value chains accordingly.

10. **Refocus agriculture research investments globally to support healthy diets and good nutrition.** Global and national public research organisations need must rebalance their priorities to reflect a focus on high-quality diets. Also, much more investment in research on fruits and vegetables, animal source foods, legumes, nuts and seeds is urgently required.

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