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URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS FOR BETTER DIETS, NUTRITION, AND HEALTH

Major shifts in our global food system, driven in part by rapid urbanization, threaten the urban poor's access to healthy diets and exacerbate malnutrition in all its forms.

The world is rapidly urbanizing. For the first time in history, more than half the global population lives in cities. This figure will rise to two-thirds by 2050, with up to 90 percent of the growth occurring in Africa and Asia. While rapid urbanization creates opportunities for economic growth, especially in low- and middle-income countries, it also comes with unique challenges. As cities expand, they struggle to ensure access to affordable and healthy diets, especially for the urban poor. Unhealthy diets are at the root of all forms of malnutrition and drive such problems as the persistently high rates of maternal and child undernutrition and currently booming rates of overweight, obesity, and diet-related noncommunicable diseases found in urban centers.

To address these issues, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) is launching a new research program on urban food systems, diets, and nutrition. IFPRI's strategic focus on food systems—from production, marketing, and consumption to governance—and its vibrant cross-cutting work on gender bring together the knowledge and expertise needed to examine, characterize, and holistically analyze the unique challenges facing urban food systems.

THE NUTRITION TRANSITION

As countries develop and incomes rise, traditional diets rich in coarse grains, staple cereals, and pulses rapidly give way to diets high in sugar, salt, fat, animal-sourced foods, refined grains, and processed foods. While this nutrition transition is happening everywhere, it is unfolding at a much faster pace in urban areas of low- and middle-income countries due to rapid rises in income and greater food availability, the brisk expansion of modern food retail systems, and the abundance of convenient and cheap processed, energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods.

The negative health effects of this nutrition transition are compounded by the often low physical activity of urban dwellers, which exacerbates their risk of overweight, obesity, and associated noncommunicable diseases. Lifestyle changes, time constraints (especially among working women), and the lack of cooking facilities also lead to heavy reliance on street foods and meals consumed outside the home, raising concerns about food safety and other health risks, especially in poor urban neighborhoods where clean water, sanitation, and waste removal are limited.

Overcoming the urban nutrition challenge will require urgent and decisive action globally, as economic growth alone could exacerbate rather than solve the diet, nutrition, and health issues facing the urban poor. We must therefore transform food systems into drivers of healthy food choices. Programs, policies, and investments will need to be tailored to the diversity of urban populations and take into account the realities of urban life. These include greater involvement of women in the labor force; limited time availability and the related need for convenience; the critical role of the informal sector in the livelihoods of vendors (often women) and diets of the poor; and the exposure to food environments that offer and aggressively market an abundance of cheap and unhealthy ultra-processed, ready-to-eat foods.

The evidence and data needed to guide the design of effective urban programs and policies are grossly outdated and incomplete. Information on where people source their food—from the informal sector, modern retail supermarkets, or urban agriculture—and how procurement patterns may differ by gender, household structure, socioeconomic factors, city size, place of residence, and food types (perishable versus nonperishable; healthy versus unhealthy) is lacking.

Despite a growing number of policy initiatives designed to encourage healthier food choices, evidence of the effectiveness of such policies remains scant and largely limited to high-income countries.

THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

Improving diets, nutrition, and health in urban areas demands a new understanding of the drivers of these outcomes. Food systems and food environments can be leveraged to tackle these issues, but up-to-date evidence and data are needed to guide the design of effective interventions and policies. Detailed information on urban dietary patterns and their drivers, and on the nutrition and health challenges of the urban poor in low- and middle-income countries, is surprisingly limited. Comprehensive, high-quality research, backed by adequate funding, is urgently needed to address the challenges that rapidly growing cities present for the urban poor and the food systems on which they rely.

FOOD SYSTEMS, FOOD ENVIRONMENTS, AND CONSUMER CHOICES

The food system includes four broad categories of processes: agricultural production; food storage, transportation, and trade; food processing and transformation; and food retailing.

The food environment is defined as the “collective physical, economic, policy, and sociocultural surroundings, opportunities and conditions that influence people’s food and beverage choices and nutritional status.”¹ The food environment is the “interface” between the food system and the consumer. It is affected by the food system, and in turn, the characteristics and policies of the food environment directly affect consumer food purchasing choices and diets. Key food environment drivers of food choices include prices and other economic factors; food availability, quality, and taste; and food promotion, marketing, labeling, and safety.

At the consumer level, major drivers of food choices include preferences, affordability, health and nutrition knowledge, time, and physical accessibility.

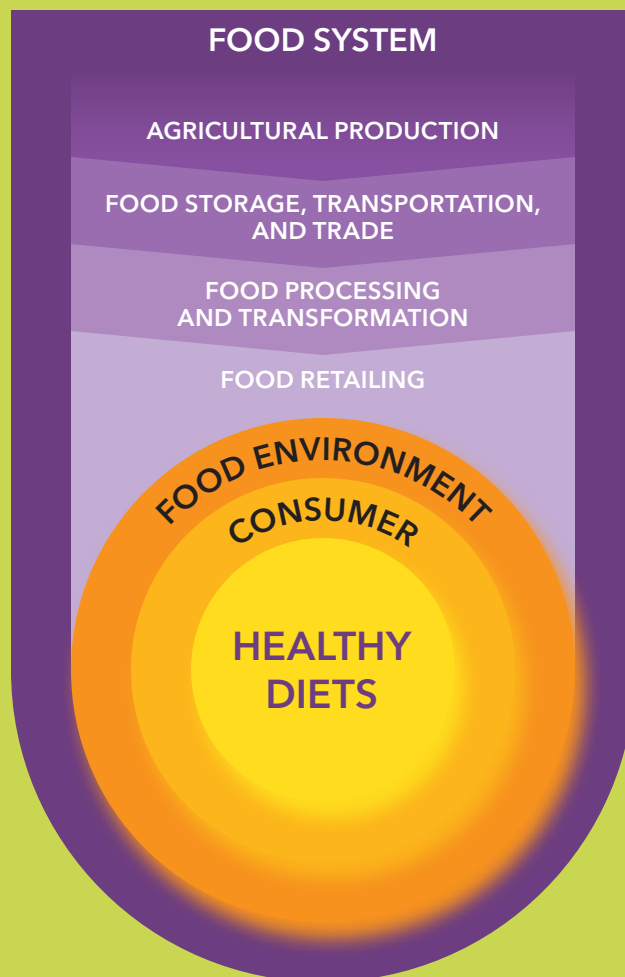


Figure: Adapted from GLOPAN (2016)

* Swinburn et al. (2013)

A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA

A growing number of local and international initiatives are striving to build sustainable and resilient cities in a rapidly urbanizing world. Most of these initiatives, however, focus on technology and infrastructure and fail to address the human dimensions of urban vulnerability, most critically as these relate to the urban poor and the problems they confront daily. IFPRI's new research program aims to fill these gaps and guide policymakers and other key actors in designing and implementing effective food system policies to support healthier diets and optimal nutrition and health for the urban poor. As a leader in food policy research, with national, regional, and global networks and partnerships, IFPRI is uniquely suited to spearhead this comprehensive, multi-country research program. The program will be organized in four research areas.

POLICY OBJECTIVES

Our first objective relates to **poor urban consumers and the food environment**. We will generate evidence on the diets, nutrition, and health of poor urban dwellers and how the urban food environment shapes these outcomes. We will learn how food environments can be reshaped to support the urban poor in achieving healthy diets and optimal nutrition and health. Research Areas 1, 3, and 4 will contribute to this objective. The second objective centers around the **urban food system**. Research Area 2 will focus on knowledge and tools to identify the policies and investments needed to develop healthy urban food systems that achieve the dual goals of improving the diets of the urban poor and contributing to economic transformation.

1 SHAPING URBAN FOOD ENVIRONMENTS FOR BETTER DIETS, NUTRITION, AND HEALTH

This research area will explore and document the unique characteristics of urban life to identify opportunities for, and challenges to, achieving healthy and safe diets and optimal nutrition and health among the urban poor. We will conduct extensive surveys to assess what urban dwellers eat and where they acquire their foods and meals. To understand individual drivers of food choices and document inequalities, we will also collect detailed information on characteristics such as male and female employment, time use, and participation in social protection or other development programs.

We will use demand analysis to assess price and income elasticities of different foods. We will also analyze how individual, household, and food environment characteristics affect household food consumption decisions and individual dietary choices, and how these factors differ by age, gender, and sociodemographic characteristics. We will also identify existing and potential program and policy options to support the urban poor—particularly women—and test, where possible, their effectiveness in achieving healthy diets and optimal nutrition and health. This research area will formulate recommendations on how social programs, policies, and innovations in food environments can be better designed and implemented to support the urban poor in achieving healthy diets and optimal nutrition and health.

2 LEVERAGING URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS FOR INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AND HEALTHY DIETS

Supplying urban areas with nutritious, often perishable, foods can create income and employment opportunities for small farmers and food processors, both men and women, who live in peri-urban and rural areas. Yet the effects of urban areas' changing food demand on agriculture and food processing in peri-urban and rural areas are not well understood. This research area will develop and use new methods to estimate pathways to nutritionally adequate diets while accounting for the urban poor's economic constraints, food preferences, and age- and gender-specific nutritional requirements.

We will analyze how value chains for select key nutritious foods (such as vegetables, eggs, other animal-sourced foods) can be modified to contribute to both inclusive transformation along the urban-rural continuum and affordable foods for the urban poor, with a special focus on women engaged at different stages of the value chain. Economywide analyses of urban food system dynamics and urban-rural linkages will identify policies that promote healthy food systems and inclusive value chains for both men and women, while aligning urban, peri-urban, and national development goals.

3 UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF MARKET STRUCTURE IN THE RETAIL SECTOR IN SHAPING THE URBAN POOR'S DIETS

A key development in urban food environments in low- and middle-income countries is the rapid spread of supermarkets. Even though supermarkets may help increase access to more diverse and nutrient-dense diets that include fresh fruits and vegetables and animal-sourced foods, they also increase access to energy-dense and nutrient-poor ultra-processed foods. We will use a market analysis approach to explore how market structure (that is, the number and type of sellers and their level of competition) in the food retail sector affects the price of "healthy" (fresh, nutrient-rich) foods versus "less healthy"

(processed or ultra-processed, energy-dense, and nutrient-poor) foods. We will also analyze how these pricing behaviors affect the overall healthiness of diets among poor urban consumers and identify the groups most affected, focusing on differences of gender, household structure, socioeconomic characteristics, location of residence, and city size.

The findings will help a variety of stakeholders to better understand how changing market conditions can affect consumption patterns of different segments of the population and will also provide the basis for policy recommendations aimed at promoting the consumption of healthier foods, especially among poor urban dwellers.

4 REFORMING THE GOVERNANCE OF FOOD VENDORS TO IMPROVE THEIR LIVELIHOODS AND DIETS

The informal retail sector is an important supplier of food for the urban poor and a significant source of employment and livelihood, especially for poor urban

women. Yet informal food vendors in low- and middle-income countries often fall victim to harassment by government officials that includes extortion, arrest, confiscation of merchandise, demolition of stalls, physical harm, and forced relocation. Such harassment is largely due to erratic governance of the informal sector, but little research has focused explicitly on the issue.

Research in this focus area will explore the mechanisms underlying government harassment of informal food vendors, focusing on incentives for officials to selectively enforce laws, government capacity to enforce laws, and the role of civic vendor associations. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods will then be used to determine how harassment affects the livelihoods, diets, and nutrition of vendors, and whether the effects vary between women and men. The research will identify potential trade-offs and policy options for reconciling the need to safeguard vendors' livelihoods and enable access to safe food for the poor while protecting public health and safety.

THE URBAN RESEARCH PROGRAM

IFPRI's new urban research program will generate a rich body of evidence and set of analytical tools to guide policymakers and other key actors in designing and implementing effective food system policies to support healthier diets and optimal nutrition and health for the urban poor. We will conduct in-depth case studies in cities of all sizes in low- and middle-income countries around the world. These will analyze all or a subset of the four research areas proposed to generate a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities confronting the urban poor. The findings will provide a comprehensive understanding of how food systems and food environment policies can be leveraged to respond to the unique needs of cities' most vulnerable populations.

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