Highlight 1: Mind the Gap: Comparing Food Intake and Dietary Quality

Food systems transformations are underway in many low- and middle-income countries, marked by increased safety standards and dietary diversity as well as changing consumer demand. As policymakers grapple with the changes this transformation brings, including additional public health challenges related to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and rising rates of overweight and obesity, it is critical to understand dietary patterns from a systems perspective, including where gaps in food and nutrition exist. Armed with such information, stakeholders can identify targeted interventions to provide high-quality diets for all.

To understand food patterns and what changes are needed to achieve healthy diets, A4NH researchers in the Food Systems for Healthier Diets (FSHD) flagship have undertaken a dietary gap analysis in four target countries: Bangladesh and Viet Nam in Asia, and Ethiopia and Nigeria in Africa. As recent food consumption data are often missing, data from Household Consumption Expenditure Surveys in Living Standard Measurement Studies were used. The researchers targeted several key aspects of consumption:

- Household dietary diversity, which looked at how many food groups were consumed by any household member over a recent defined period of time;
- Healthy reference diets, using the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension and the Global Burden of Disease scores, to see how diets compared to those identified as reducing risk of NCDs; and
- Nutrient adequacy, to reveal adequate consumption of key vitamins and micronutrients.

The analysis, completed in 2018, provides a road map for policymakers of existing issues and whether they are systemic or concentrated in rural or urban areas; what areas are most critical; and what types of interventions could be useful in targeting these challenges. Some recommendations applied across the four countries, including:

- Increase consumption of fruits and vegetables;
- Decrease consumption of products with added sugar; and
- Increase specific animal-sourced foods, including milk and fish.

Other recommendations applied only in certain contexts, either in a given country or among particular populations within a country. For example, for households in urban areas and those in the higher income quintiles, increasing consumption of red and processed meat was a cause of greater concern in urban than rural areas, while increasing consumption of legumes was targeted for Bangladesh and Viet Nam.

Researchers also identified issues to consider moving forward, including ensuring the standards and recommended portions used are appropriate to the different contexts; how conclusions can be appropriately drawn about individuals or specific groups from household data; and measuring out-of-home consumption of foods, which is increasingly common in low- and middle-income countries.

While this work reveals the importance of accounting for cultural and country-specific contexts when considering diet quality, researchers also emphasized the importance of assessing both healthy and unhealthy food groups to provide a full understanding of people’s diets, regardless of where one is looking. Failing to do so misses part of the story, and interventions require understanding of the whole story to be effective.

The research, to be published in 2019, will be shared with policymakers and other stakeholders in the target countries and elsewhere as part of FSHD work to support the development of healthy and sustainable food systems as those systems transform.

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