

# Investing in nutrition

Building healthy households and prosperous societies



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## KEY MESSAGES

\_ Undernutrition is a product of entrenched inequality and poverty. It perpetuates a generational cycle of poverty and malnutrition with negative consequences for both individuals and their nations.

\_ Rural people are among the most vulnerable to undernutrition. Rural women, adolescent girls and children need targeted support.

\_ Targeted policies and investments in nutrition will yield long-term health and economic benefits.

\_ Investing in smallholder family farmers and enabling them to link with consumers in rural and urban areas contributes to improved nutrition and provides income-generating opportunities for rural people.

## WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

After years of decline in hunger, the number of undernourished people has been on the rise for several years in a row. There are more than 820 million hungry people in the world today.<sup>1</sup> In total, about 2 billion people suffer moderate food insecurity, including those who may not necessarily suffer from hunger but lack access to sufficient and nutritious food.<sup>2</sup> All countries in the world are facing a threat of undernourished populations and many developing countries now face a multifaceted burden of hunger, underweight, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight conditions.

This poses a major challenge to national governments in their efforts to realize the SDGs, most notably SDG 2 (zero hunger) but also other goals that will be impossible to achieve in contexts where hunger remains a factor. Undernutrition also poses a threat to economic development: for example, undernutrition is estimated to lead to economic losses on the African continent that vary by country from 2 to 16 per cent of GDP,<sup>3</sup> particularly as a result of health and education costs and productivity losses. Undernutrition and stunting in childhood lower an individual's physical and intellectual capabilities, diminishing future livelihood and income-generating potential. Further, the nutritional status of adolescent girls and women affects their growth and development, as well as that of their future children. The young age at which many girls first become pregnant, often combined with their poor education, inadequate decision-making power and poor control over resources, means that many begin pregnancy with low height and weight, and cannot support healthy foetal growth. This feeds a vicious cycle of undernutrition, poor health and poverty across generations.

Patterns of undernutrition are shaped by inequality. This is why some groups are more susceptible to experiencing hunger than others, and are less likely to benefit from economic growth. As well as income inequality, inequality in access to basic services and assets, combined with social exclusion and marginalization, is one of the main determinants of undernutrition.<sup>4</sup> Inequality between rural and urban areas are significant in this respect, not only because it results in rural people being more likely to suffer from undernutrition,<sup>5, 6</sup> but because the lack of integration of key food systems stakeholders – such as smallholder family farmers and other actors in agrifood value chains – impedes the promotion of food systems that are sustainable and inclusive. Indeed, when enabling conditions are in place, smallholder family farmers tend to produce food that is more nutritious, diverse, has fewer negative environmental externalities, and contributes more to local communities, compared with large-scale industrial approaches to farming.<sup>7</sup> These issues are the primary focus of this policy brief.

<sup>1</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2019) *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019*. Rome: FAO.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> African Union Commission, NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and United Nations World Food Programme, 2014. *The Cost of Hunger in Africa: Social and Economic Impact of Child Undernutrition in Egypt, Ethiopia, Swaziland and Uganda*. Addis Ababa: UNECA.

<sup>4</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2019) *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019*. Rome: FAO.

<sup>5</sup> "The majority of the world's poor and food-insecure people are rural, either farmers, fisherfolk, or labourers with direct or indirect dependence on agriculture for their income." (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO [2018] *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018. Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition*. Rome: FAO: p.91).

<sup>6</sup> Evidence shows that the proportion of stunted children in rural areas is higher than in urban areas (Development Initiatives Poverty Research [2018], *Global Nutrition Report 2018*, Development Initiatives Poverty Research: Bristol: p.35).

<sup>7</sup> FAO and IFAD (2019) *United Nations Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028. The future of family farming in the context of the 2030 Agenda*. Rome.



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## WORKING WITH AND FOR SMALLHOLDER FAMILY FARMERS TO PROMOTE BETTER OUTCOMES IN FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

While smallholder family farmers and other small-scale actors in food systems are especially vulnerable to undernutrition, they are also key agents of change in addressing the nutritional challenges the world faces. Food systems where smallholder family farmers are the main actors are already key contributors to food security and nutrition, producing most of the food in many regions of the world<sup>8</sup> and producing more food and nutrition in the world's most populous, and food insecure, regions.

Equally important, smallholder family farmers are key for maintaining nutritional diversity, with shifts to larger-scale industrial farming being associated with declines in the diversity of nutrient production.<sup>9</sup> It is an unfortunate reality, therefore, that food systems in many countries and at the global level tend to favour large-scale actors offering food that is less diverse, less nutritious, and in many cases can be associated with diet-related problems such as the growing prevalence of overweight and obesity. Much progress is possible by building on the role of smallholder family farmers, linking them to markets to improve both their own livelihoods

<sup>8</sup> Estimates indicate that systems dominated by smallholder family farming produce more than 70 per cent of the food calories produced in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and South and East Asia (Samberg et al., 2016. Subnational distribution of average farm size and smallholder contributions to global food production. *Environmental Research Letters*, Vol 11: 12).

<sup>9</sup> Herrero, M., P.K. Thornton, B. Power, J.R. Bogard, R. Remans, S. Fritz, J.S. Gerber and G. Nelson, see L. Waha K. and Watson R.A. (2017) *Farming and the Geography of Nutrient Production for Human Use: A Transdisciplinary Analysis*, *Lancet Planetary Health*, 1: 1: e33-e42.

and the quality of food available for consumers. In this respect, it will be important to ensure institutions and regulations do not disadvantage their interests vis-à-vis larger-scale and industrial models of farming – for example in the way land tenure rights are governed.

## WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS DO?

### 1. Invest in nutrition and gender-sensitive agrifood value chains to stimulate economic growth and end hunger and malnutrition.

There are several strategic entry points for improving nutrition outcomes of agrifood value chains. More broadly, enhanced efforts are needed to link smallholder family farmers to consumers, as well as to build the role of women in promoting better nutrition outcomes:

- At production: promote nutrient-rich varieties for planting (for example, vegetables and fruits and biofortified crops such as yellow-fleshed cassava), improve pesticide management and use.
- At processing: invest in transport and marketing to improve post-harvest management and transport to comply with food safety standards, develop nutritious complementary foods for infants and snacks for children, market a variety of local products between villages.
- At consumption: stimulate demand and consumption of nutritious foods through behaviour change communication campaigns, nutrition education and appropriate health, safety and environmental regulations so that the economic cost of food reflects the actual cost.
- Improve the physical and institutional linkages between rural and urban areas to better connect consumers with nutritious local food and enhance the livelihoods of smallholder family farmers.

### 2. Encourage responsible public and private investment in agrifood value chains

Responsible investment in agrifood systems is key to achieving the SDG targets on hunger and malnutrition. Policymakers can directly invest through public financing, and they can support responsible private-sector investment in nutrition-sensitive value chains through enabling policies, appropriate safeguards and regulations, and using blended finance to target critical gaps in financing. This is needed to enable uptake of new technologies, ensuring necessary infrastructure is in place, assisting businesses to reach new clients, including smallholder family farmers, and incubating early stages of business development. Priorities include:

- Give precedence to public investment in agrifood systems that target local smallholder family farmers as a key avenue for transitioning towards sustainable food systems and diets.
- Ensure that investment agreements are consistent with nutrition objectives and do not have a negative impact upon diets.
- Create incentives for responsible private actors to invest in agrifood systems, including through the use of blended finance, and safeguards against investments that are not in line with internationally agreed principles, such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-au866e.pdf>



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### **3. Raise awareness and provide education pertaining to nutrition and support the role of women in this area by advancing women's empowerment and gender equality**

Inequality can be intra-household, with different members of the family affected to varying extents. Gender inequalities remain persistent and pervasive. Poor rural women, especially those in female-headed households, typically have less access to resources than men, less control over household incomes, and less access to credit and financial services, land and other resources needed to improve their livelihoods and food security.

Nutrition education can influence the entire household, while addressing gendered cultural norms, including intra-household food distribution for women and girls. Education and training programmes can enable all household members to benefit from improved knowledge of nutrition, and specifically promoting maternal nutrition and the nutrition of adolescent girls, along with dietary intake and hygiene behaviours, which can eliminate the effects of undernutrition for generations. Further, advancing the economic empowerment of women is important both because it enables women to improve their own food security and nutrition, and because household income controlled by women is known to lead to better health and nutrition outcomes among children.<sup>11</sup> Action needs to be focused on the following:

- Integrate gender equality and women's empowerment objectives throughout the agrifood value chain by ensuring gender equitable laws are enshrined in law and in practice (for example related to inheritance and land tenure), and services (such as finance and training) are sensitive to the specific needs and challenges of rural women.

<sup>11</sup> Inter alia, see: FAO, IFAD and ILO (2010) *Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment: Differentiated Pathways out of Poverty*. Rome: p.74.



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- Support and recognize the value of unpaid household work, especially the preparation of nutritious food; support labour-saving technologies and innovations and gendered redistribution of household work, including through relevant education and training programmes.
- Support rural women's empowerment by enabling their participation in planning and policy processes, especially by working with and supporting women's groups and advancing the participation of women in farmers' organizations, especially in leadership positions.
- Integrate nutrition education into agricultural projects and programmes. For example, the IFAD-supported Rural Livelihoods and Economic Enhancement Programme has helped rural people across Malawi improve their families' nutrition through dietary diversification at the household level. The secret is a simple twofold approach: providing lessons in nutrition and encouraging farmers to eat the food they produce. The project, which has thus far reached 37,000 households, in addition to increasing agricultural production and connecting smallholders to value chains, is also ensuring that surplus income will benefit the health of all members of the family.

#### 4. Take a multisectoral approach to tackling nutrition

Addressing undernutrition in all its forms requires interlinked, multisectoral policy interventions. This is because the underlying causes (inequality and poverty) and their drivers (underinvestment in rural infrastructure and services, gaps in political voice/representation, inequitable ownership/access to assets, climate change, conflict and economic shocks) are complex problems that require a wide-ranging government response. Actions to improve nutrition for households and nations that require cross-government support include:

- Invest in smallholder family farmers by building a national plan for smallholder family farming in the context of national agriculture and food security policies and in line with the objectives of the United Nations Decade of Family Farming. Support climate-resilient agrifood systems, especially by investing in capacity development of smallholder family farmers as needed while also harnessing and documenting traditional knowledge and solutions, adapting and extending social protection programmes, providing local solutions for flood and drought management, and early warning systems for climate shocks. For example, in Bolivia, through the IFAD-supported Economic Inclusion Programme for Families and Rural Communities, 11,000 families living in the areas most affected by extreme climatic conditions and increasing aridity due to climate change, received technical support to adopt climate-resilient practices and technologies, reduce losses and improve food security and nutrition. Building on indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional practices, the project promoted the development of local agrobiodiversity and diversification as a means to adapt to climate change and reduce agricultural losses.
- Expand access to water and sanitation by investing in policies to balance and improve the supply and demand of water, including water supply treatment and distribution. Support rainfed agriculture and small-scale irrigation systems to safeguard water, in addition to improving the nutritional and commercial value of food production, increasing incomes.
- Promote inclusive dialogue, in particular involve women and youth in the decision-making process with regard to national and international responses to food security and nutrition. Encourage civil society and the voices of local and indigenous communities in local, national and global-level policy dialogue.

### **BUILDING SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE FOOD SYSTEMS TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION FOR ALL**

To respond to challenges the world is facing today in ending hunger and malnutrition, not least the recent alarming reversal in progress, food systems need to produce more nutritious food in a sustainable way, and that food needs to be accessible for the most vulnerable people. Smallholder family farmers are key protagonists and partners in this respect: they produce food that is more likely to be diverse and nutritious, they are more likely to sustainably manage the natural resources upon which their livelihoods rely, and their work is intimately linked with vulnerable local groups – including smallholders themselves – who may have difficulty accessing or affording food offered by large food corporations. These groups deserve wider recognition for the role that they play and that they can play to an even greater extent with the right support, in particular rural women, who often face multiple gendered barriers that impede their food security and nutrition and that of their children.



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Nutrition-sensitive approaches to building the food systems of tomorrow, therefore, need to be intimately linked to the livelihoods of smallholder family farmers in order to advance food security and nutrition for all. On a global policy stage, several products of the CFS, being endorsed by Member States of the United Nations, provide valuable guidance in this respect: in addition to the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems (see footnote 10) and the recommendations on Connecting Smallholders to Markets;<sup>12</sup> guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition, informed by the report of the High-Level Panel of Experts of the CFS,<sup>13</sup> are at an advanced stage and will represent an important addition to the body of policy products on this topic.



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<sup>12</sup> Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bq853e.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7846e.pdf>