



World Health
Organization

Western Pacific

UN agencies warn economic impact of COVID-19 and worsening inequalities will fuel malnutrition for billions in Asia and the Pacific

Child and maternal diets particularly vulnerable

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20/01/2021, Bangkok, Thailand – The economic impact of COVID-19 on the world's most populous region is threatening to further undermine efforts to improve diets and nutrition of nearly two billion people in Asia and the Pacific who were already unable to afford healthy diets prior to the pandemic, says a new report published today by four specialized agencies of the United Nations.

The report found that 1.9 billion people were unable to afford a healthy diet, even before the COVID-19 outbreak and the damage it has since caused to economies and individual livelihoods.

Due to higher prices for fruits, vegetables and dairy products, it has become nearly impossible for poor people in Asia and the Pacific to achieve healthy diets, the affordability of which is critical to ensure food security and nutrition for all – and for mothers and children in particular.

Food prices and available incomes govern household decisions on food and dietary intake. But the outbreak of COVID-19 and a lack of decent work opportunities in many parts of the region, alongside significant uncertainty of food systems and markets, has led to a worsening of inequality, as poorer

families with dwindling incomes further alter their diets to choose cheaper, less nutritious foods.

Making nutritious foods affordable and accessible

More than 350 million people in the Asia and the Pacific were undernourished in 2019, or roughly half of the global total. Across the region, an estimated 74.5 million children under 5 years of age were stunted (too short for their age) and 31.5 million suffered from wasting (too thin for height). The majority of these children live in Southern Asia with nearly 56 million stunted and more than 25 million wasted. At the same time, overweight and obesity has increased rapidly, especially in South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, with an estimated 14.5 million children under 5, being overweight or obese.

Poor diets and inadequate nutritional intake is an ongoing problem. The cost of a healthy diet is significantly higher than that of a diet that provides sufficient calories but lacks in nutritional value, showing significant gaps in the food system to deliver nutritious options to all at an affordable price. These costs are even greater for women and children, given their added nutritional needs.

The report calls for a transformation of food systems in Asia and the Pacific, with an aim to increase the affordability of, and families' access to, nutritious, safe, and sustainable diets. Nutritious and healthy diets need to be accessible to everyone, everywhere. To ensure that happens, the report recommends integrated approaches and policies are needed.

These steps are vital to overcome unaffordability issues, and also to ensure healthy maternal and child diets.

Improving maternal and child diets requires strengthening vital systems

Nutrition is vitally important throughout a person's life. The impact of a poor diet is most severe in the first 1000 days, from pregnancy to when a child reaches the age of 2. Young children, especially when they start eating their "first foods" at 6 months, have high nutritional requirements to grow well and every bite counts.

Mainstreaming nutrition-focused behaviour change campaigns throughout these systems should lead to greater knowledge uptake and sustainability of behaviours helping people to achieve healthy diets.

Education on what constitutes a healthy diet and how to create hygienic environments at home, in schools and in the community, together with investment in girl's education and infrastructure that underlies good water, sanitation and hygiene practices, are critical.

Therefore, providing a nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diet for all requires coordinating with partners in the Food, Water and Sanitation, Health, Social Protection and Education systems, to collectively create an enabling environment.

Greater attention is also needed to operationalize national policies and plans to improve the delivery of health services for maternal and child diets and good nutrition outcomes. Services to improve the diets of mothers and

young children should be prioritized as part of the essential package of health services needed to address undernutrition, overweight and obesity and to achieve universal health coverage.

In the meantime, social protection efforts can protect and stabilize incomes and improve access to healthy diets during disasters and crises. At least nine governments in Asia and Pacific have established a targeted mother and child COVID-19 component in their social protection systems. However, more data collection and analysis are needed to document the effectiveness of social protection in improving maternal and child diets in the region.

Bringing everyone to the table

Food systems play a critical role in achieving food and nutrition security for all. A sustainable and nutrition-sensitive food system is essential to produce diverse and nutritious foods for healthy diets. Improved efficiency and productivity of value chains can reduce the costs of essential foods to make them more affordable.

These actions are needed now more than ever because the face of malnutrition is changing in Asia and the Pacific, with highly processed and inexpensive foods readily available throughout the region. These foods are often packed with sugar and unhealthy fats and lack the vitamins and minerals required for growth and development. Consumption of these foods increases the risk of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Governments need to invest in nutrition and food safety in fresh and street food markets to promote healthy diets. Regulation of sales and marketing of food for consumers, especially children, is important to curb overweight, obesity and related diseases and illness.

The report also calls for action within the private sector, as it has an important role to play in supporting the transformation of the food system and its value chains for achieving healthy diets.

Leveraging these systems, in a coordinated fashion that expands the opportunities to address barriers to accessing and consuming healthy diets, will help countries and the people of Asia and the Pacific recover faster from the economic impact of COVID-19, and be better prepared for future crises.

The report, ‘[Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2020: Maternal and Child Diets at the Heart of Improving Nutrition](#)’ launched today in Bangkok, is jointly published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the World Food Programme and the World Health Organization.