

133 Set poverty lines and safety nets to support affordability of healthy diets

The Solution: To make healthy diets affordable in each country, national governments and development agencies can use data on the cost of healthy diets and meal preparation to adjust poverty lines and eligibility for safety-net assistance, accompanied by investments to ensure that needy households can acquire enough foods to meet global dietary standards. Safety nets designed around access to a healthy diet can be the foundation for social inclusion and sustainable food systems, moving rapidly towards food security for all.

Source(s) of the Solution: Our focus on poverty lines and safety nets designed for nutrition security emerged from ‘true cost of food’ analysis conducted by Science Group. This analysis of nutritional safety nets builds on past research using market prices to calculate diet costs and affordability. We reviewed recent findings on the cost of growing or buying locally available foods needed to meet international standards for food security and nutrition. This is a first step towards extending previous work published in [SOFI \(2020\)](#) and elsewhere, which showed that improving agricultural production and supply chain performance can increase access to more diverse food sources and lower market prices to some degree, but not enough to bring an overall healthy diet within reach for all people, at all times. To extend that earlier work, we investigated how hidden costs of meal preparation affect affordability, comparing the lowest-cost items in each country that could be used to prepare a basic meal from raw ingredients, versus use of precooked items such as bread instead of raw forms of starchy staples, and use of canned beans, tomatoes, or fish instead of dry pulses, fresh tomatoes, and fresh or dried and salted fish. More detail can be found in the Scientific Group Policy Brief “Cost and affordability of preparing a basic meal around the world.” The result is a step towards more comprehensive analysis of the cost of nutritious diets, for the purpose of guiding food system interventions.

Recent improvements in data collection and analysis allow rapid identification of the most affordable locally available foods to meet dietary needs at each time and place. This in turn, allows agencies to target and deliver cost-effective nutrition assistance tailored to local needs. Scaling up nutritional safety nets implies use of food-based poverty lines to set related programme design parameters, using market prices for the most affordable, healthy, and sustainable foods to determine benefit amounts for each demographic group and delivering through locally adapted instruments including cash, vouchers, and in-kind assistance.

Problem addressed within food systems: The international poverty line of \$1.90/day is insufficient to reach even the lowest-cost items needed for a healthy diet. Using new data on consumer prices in 168 countries, around 3 billion people currently cannot buy or grow sufficient foods for lifelong health and physical activity (SOFI 2020). Food system investments to improve production and access to more diverse markets can expand access to some degree, but even at the lowest prices, many households are unable to reach minimally adequate standards of diet quality. Making basic meals affordable can be the foundation for social inclusion and safety nets. Clear, evidence-based poverty lines can be used to target and deliver aid in locally appropriate ways, from the World Food Programme’s (WFP’s) work in the world’s poorest places to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) electronic benefit transfer cards in the United States.

How this solution will address that problem:¹ Using local food retail prices and dietary guidelines, governments can examine food poverty thresholds. These thresholds can help understand if benefit

¹ Of note, being able to afford sufficient food is necessary but not sufficient for people to actually consume a healthy diet. For success, food-based poverty lines and safety nets should be complemented by efforts to improve the food environment as described in other game-changers – and those improvements are unlikely to succeed unless households can afford to grow or buy the healthy diets that may become available at each time and place. Consumption behaviour is another important consideration. Especially those who live on a limited budget

amounts allow purchasing healthy diets, and if consumption behaviour, supply constraints, or other issues would need attention in order to make interventions effective. Nutrition assistance can then be delivered through locally adapted instruments such as cash, voucher, and in-kind assistance.

Solution's alignment to the 'game changing and systemic solution' criteria: Targeting and delivery of social safety nets based on healthy diets are a game-changer because they recognise the universality of dietary needs, along with the location-specificity of how those needs are met at each place and time. This solution uses data and targeting technology to deliver on the fundamental promise of a healthy diet for all people at all times. Because all food groups are represented in the healthy diet, using safety nets to ensure access brings together all agriculture and food stakeholders around the common goal of creating a sustainable, inclusive food system.

Existing evidence: Many countries already collect sufficient food price monitoring data to estimate the cost of a healthy diet annually or monthly. Some countries already use thresholds based on diet cost to determine benefit amounts for assistance programs. For example, Myanmar uses a food poverty line that is determined from caloric needs and local food consumption surveys (Herforth et al 2020). Extending this to an overall healthy diet is increasingly feasible in LMICs, and is practiced in higher-income countries. In the United States, for example, households in need receive SNAP benefit amounts that are targeted based on the retail cost of a basket of foods that meets nutritional requirements and dietary guidelines, after accounting for the cost of housing and other unavoidable expenses.

Current/likely political support: Governments are rapidly transitioning towards safety nets that use a combination of cash, vouchers, and in-kind support, harnessing new data sources and modern technology to target aid for market purchases of goods and services required for a healthy life. Using food-based safety nets to make healthy diets affordable for all is politically attractive because it is a universal principle to be implemented in diverse, locally adapted ways. It enlists the private sector as food suppliers, targets public investment towards the most cost-effective actions, and ensures that aid is targeted to the basic needs from which people graduate as they rise out of poverty.

Contexts where this is well/not well suited: In the lowest-income countries, food-based safety nets (like other public services) will require some expansion and refocusing of current external assistance but are logistically feasible as long as targeting and delivery are adapted to local conditions. The approach is most valuable in middle-income countries, where the fraction of people who cannot afford a healthy diet is small enough for government budgets to support targeted aid. Some high-income countries provide sufficiently high levels of social support that all households are already able to afford a healthy diet, but in many wealthier countries like the United States, food-based assistance remains one of the principal instruments used for resilience against economic downturns, helping households at times and places where incomes fall below the levels needed to afford a healthy diet.

and constantly prioritise between competing essential needs might not allocate the necessary budget share to a healthy diet – even if they can afford it. Behavioural change campaigns and improving food literacy can thus be crucial elements to the success of food-based poverty lines. Moreover, we cannot consider affordability of healthy diets in isolation. Food and nutrition security hinges on meeting other essential needs such as being healthy and having access to adequate hygiene and sanitation. Therefore, we need to look beyond expenditures for healthy diets when designing safety nets or setting of eligibility thresholds – even if the primary objective is a healthy dietary outcome.