



# HEALTHY VOICES

youth driving change

WORLD  
OBESITY



# Transforming food systems:

Building a youth-led response





**When transformed with greater resilience to specifically address the major drivers, food systems can provide affordable, healthy diets that are sustainable and inclusive, and become a powerful driving force towards ending hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms.**

**FAO**



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## Introduction

The global prevalence of obesity has been consistently rising over the past decades and shows no signs of slowing down. While the root causes of obesity are complex, the way food is produced, marketed and consumed to the public has definitely contributed to this increase.

For example, today, we are surrounded by what we call ultra-processed foods (UPFs): soft drinks, packaged snacks, cookies, biscuits, and ready-to-eat meals are on constant display and easily accessible to all. Today, almost a third of total calories of people living in Mexico and Chile is consumed from UPFs. In many countries, UPFs even contribute to more than 50% of daily total calories consumed by children! The proportion of UPFs distributed through supermarkets and chains is also increasing globally: the distribution of these products across these spaces in China rose from 20% in 1999 to 60% in 2013.<sup>1</sup> In parallel, healthy diets today are still unaffordable for 57% of the world's population

and out of reach for around 3 billion people.<sup>2</sup> But the impact of food systems goes beyond human health: 21–37% of global greenhouse gas emissions are attributable to food systems, making food systems almost the largest contributor to climate change!<sup>3</sup> The list goes on, but one thing is clear: we need to adopt a shared approach to human and planetary health.

**“Healthy diets cost 60% more than diets that only meet the requirement for essential nutrients.”<sup>4</sup>**

Food systems define a complex set of activities that involve different sectors, fields and stakeholders involved in food and feeding.<sup>5</sup> This includes materials, production, transportation, processing, manufacturing, retailing, and consumption of food,<sup>6</sup> and the way in which food and feeding processes interact with and impact health, society and the environment.<sup>7</sup> Food systems directly affect food security, population health and social welfare.<sup>8</sup>

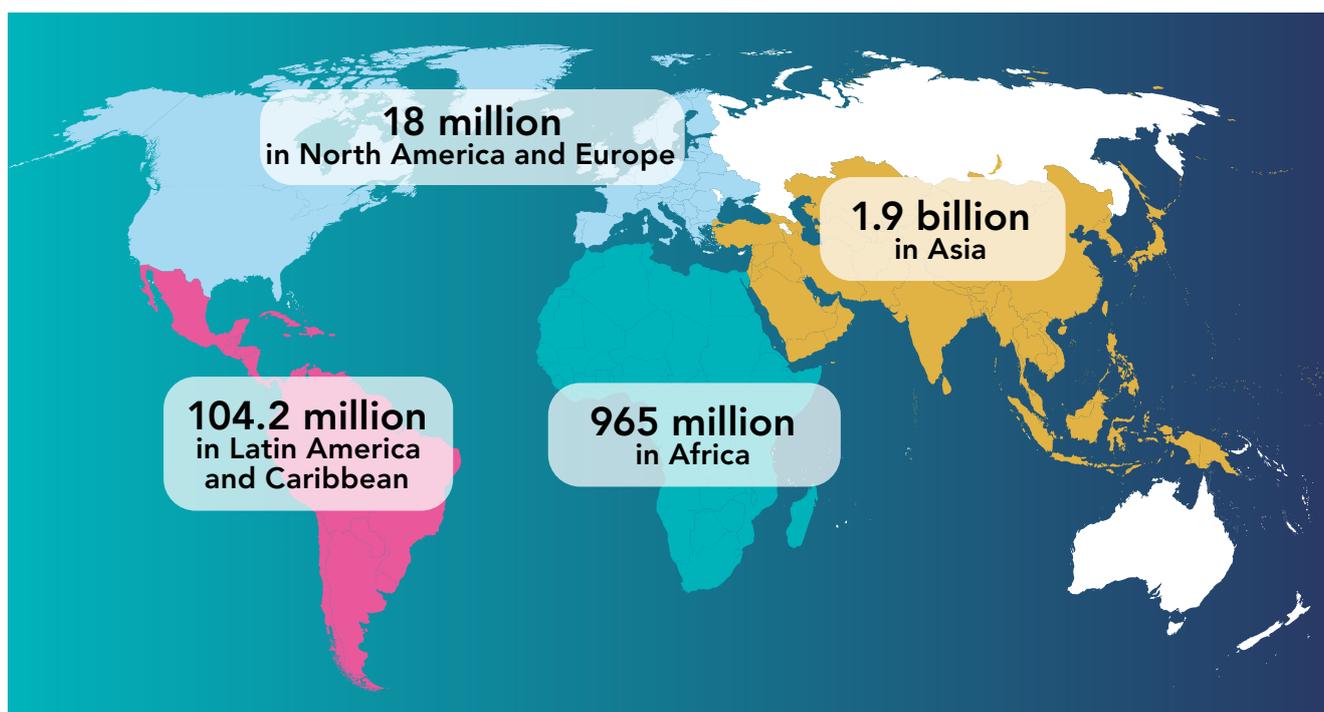


Figure 1. Number of people unable to afford a healthy diet around the world. Source: SOFI report, 2021

## Key terms

### Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs)

“Ultra-processed foods are defined as industrial formulations which, besides salt, sugar, oils and fats, include substances not used in culinary preparations, in particular additives used to imitate sensorial qualities of minimally processed foods and their culinary preparations.”<sup>9</sup>

### Healthy diets

“A healthy diet helps to protect against malnutrition in all its forms, including a range of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and conditions.” It consists of the consumption of foods low in saturate, and industrially produced trans fats. Also, a limited intake of free sugars and salt/sodium. People are encouraged to eat fruits, vegetables, and other dietary fibre such as whole grains.<sup>10</sup>

### Double-duty/Triple-duty actions

Double- and triple-duty actions aim to address the co-existence of undernutrition, overweight/obesity and climate change. As all three share common drivers, we need to adopt multi-sectoral approaches if we are to improve human and planetary health.

### Universal health coverage (UHC)

“UHC means that all individuals and communities receive the health services they need without suffering financial hardship. It includes the full spectrum of essential, quality health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care. UHC enables everyone to access the services that address the most significant causes of disease and death, and ensures that the quality of those services is good enough to improve the health of the people who receive them.”<sup>11</sup>



## UPFs

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# 57%

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# Why do food systems matter for obesity?

Today, it is estimated that NCDs are responsible for the death of 41 million people annually, or 71% of worldwide deaths.<sup>12</sup> While there are many drivers for this increase in people affected by NCDs, unhealthy diets are responsible for more total and premature deaths than any other risk factor.

Food systems are linked to all forms of malnutrition and climate change due to their relationship with food and nutrition, but also their influence on the availability and quality of food. Unfortunately, it is increasingly common to have multiple forms of malnutrition – undernutrition, overweight/obesity, micronutrient deficiencies, stunting or wasting – co-exist within the same country, region, city or even person. Today, we live in a world where foods high in fat, sugar and salt surround us at all times, are easily accessible at a very low price. This is a direct example of the failure of food systems to deliver safe and nutritious diets to everyone.<sup>13</sup>

Announced on April 1st 2016, the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition was established to

accelerate the implementation of the framework developed at the Second International Conference on Nutrition.<sup>14</sup> Focused around six action areas, the Decade provides a set of actions for all stakeholders and governments to be able to implement to end all forms of malnutrition. As shown in the figure below, initiatives across all six action areas are needed to address obesity (Figure 2).

Food systems are also inextricably linked with the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. For instance, Target 11.3 calls to enhance “inclusive and sustainable urbanisation.” However, without access to affordable, healthy food, this will be impossible to sustain in the long term. Target 3.4 calls to “reduce by one third premature mortality from NCDs through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and wellbeing.” This will be unachievable without addressing the co-existence of overweight/obesity and undernutrition, and the underlying drivers of today’s food systems.

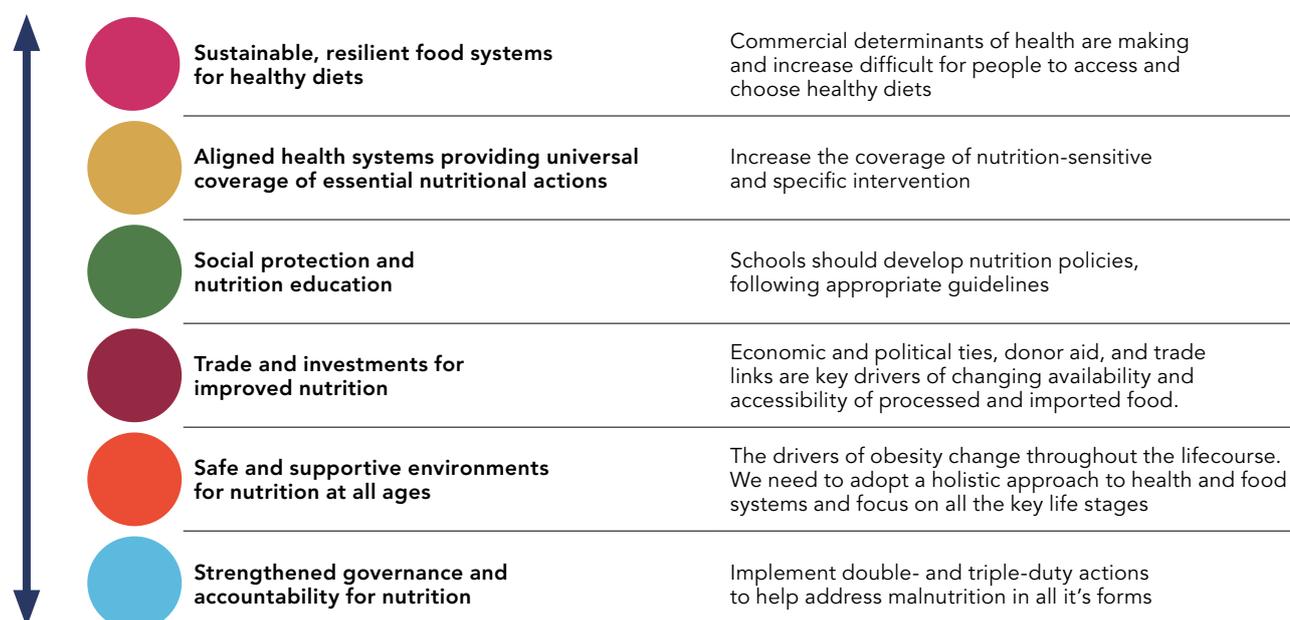


Figure 2. Obesity-related challenges within each of the Decade of Action on Nutrition action areas.

## Double- and triple-duty actions

Many of our global problems are interconnected. Addressing obesity can also have positive impacts on other issues. Obesity, undernutrition and climate change share common drivers, for example, food systems not only drive the obesity and undernutrition pandemics but also generate 25-30% of GHGs, and cattle production accounts for over half of those. Underpinning these issues are weak political governance systems, the unchallenged economic pursuit of GDP growth, and the powerful commercial engineering of overconsumption. Adopting double- and triple-duty actions can help address the common drivers simultaneously through whole-of-government and whole-of-society interventions. Actions need to focus on common causes and solutions, and encourage work across different sectors of society. Figure 4 presents a number of examples of triple duty actions.



Figure 4. Examples of triple-win policies that can help redesign food systems to end all forms of malnutrition.

# How has COVID-19 impacted food systems?

COVID-19 highlighted the importance for everyone to have access to healthy and nutritious food.<sup>15</sup> However, COVID-19 also exposed a number of failures across the food system, resulting in a rise in food and nutrition insecurity globally. COVID-19 response measures and the need to self-isolate has led to:

- Concerns of food shortages leading to an increased reliance on processed, long-life foods and a reduction in the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- A change in eating behaviours due to lockdowns: in Verona, Italy, the first lockdown led showed that 44.5% of people who took part in a survey increased their consumption of sweets, and children almost an additional five hours per day in front of screens.<sup>16</sup>

- Increased levels of food insecurity with people having reduced access to shops or food assistance programmes such as the one normally available in schools.
- A rise in opportunistic marketing from companies. For instance, Krispy Kreme offered healthcare and other frontline workers a 25% off a dozen donuts in their stores. Interested in learning more about the impact of digital marketing? [Read our advocacy briefing here!](#)

COVID-19 has emphasised the need for all individuals to have access to healthy, nutritious food. We must therefore transform our food systems in a way that achieves this.

# How can we transform food systems?

**Redesigning food systems is vital if we are to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, sustainable diets. Transforming food systems has the potential to be a driving force to end all forms of malnutrition, including obesity.**

Transforming food systems to ensure they are fair and provide healthy, nutritious food for all will require governments to implement policies across all sectors of society. The focus will need to shift away from individual responsibility and towards exposing the true cost of unhealthy foods on health and the environment.

**Recommendations for food system transformation:**

- Establish multisectoral policies which support the development of healthy, fair, and nutritious food systems, and steer away from individual responsibility
- Develop double- and triple-duty actions to simultaneously address undernutrition, overweight/obesity and climate change: politicians like 'win win' actions!
- Strengthen accountability systems to create healthy food environments. Good governance and the action of holding governments and

the private sector to account will be a crucial part of improving food systems. As shown by the climate movement, young people have a key role to play here in standing up to leaders and speaking truth to power.

- Develop and update dietary guidelines while acknowledging the role of the environment
- Disincentivise the consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages. Through education, and by using advertising to promote healthy foods and restricting junk food advertising.
- Support farmers with subsidies and tax incentives, in particular women and youth – developing innovative solutions for sustainable, green, and local food production.
- Improve social protection systems by providing families, particularly those with

young children, with the financial support to access healthy, nutritious diets.

- Give young people a seat at the table during decision-making processes.
- Adopt a human rights approach to health and nutrition. ‘The Convention of the Rights of the Child recognises that all children up to the age of 18 years of age are human beings and are entitled to inalienable rights – inherent to human dignity – including the right to healthy food and adequate nutrition.’<sup>17</sup> The best interests of all individuals, including the most vulnerable groups, must be at the front and centre of efforts to create healthy food environments.

## Case Example: Act4Food Act4Change Campaign

The Act4Food Act4Change is a youth-led movement launched in May 2021 to defeat hunger, improve health, and heal the planet. The pledge campaign urges leaders to act and implement positive, sustainable change that transforms our worlds’ food system.<sup>17</sup> ‘Youth leaders’ are at the heart of the campaign and engaging in advocacy activities, both around the UN Food Systems Summit. The campaign invites youth and other allies in the community to join forces and demand urgent large-scale action from decision-makers around the world. To build on the pledge, youth are also invited to specify up to five actions they would like governments and businesses to take. There are ‘17 Actions4Change’ each linked to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Youth leaders presented the final shortlisted ‘Actions4Change’ at the UN FSS, September 2021. Their advocacy efforts will continue in the lead-up to the 26th UN Climate Change Conference and Nutrition for Growth Summit.

The actions were used to gain the support of global decision-makers in the decade of action that lies ahead, ensuring that they implement policies that create a healthy, just, and sustainable food system.<sup>18</sup> The campaign reiterates the desire for young people to get their voices heard. True and lasting effects to positively impact planetary and human health, including overweight and obesity, will not only need to include young people’s input, perspective, and suggestions: the leadership of young people are part of the answer.

# What can you do to advocate?

Through coordinated activities, advocates can promote behaviours and policies to reform food systems and make sure they support positive choices and behaviours both for the health of human and the planet. Stakeholders can advocate for the development of dietary guidelines, for additional support from governments to support youth innovations and the development of measures to restrict marketing. The section below contains tips to plan an advocacy campaign and advocate with governments to support the transformation of food systems.<sup>17</sup>

**1**

**Identify the issue that you want to focus on, e.g., the impact of urbanisation of food systems. It might be useful to conduct research to understand the scope and extent of the issue.<sup>19</sup>**

- a. Suggested guiding research questions:
  - i. Which populations are most effected, how are they effected, and what has changed over the past decades?
  - ii. How has globalisation altered the way food is produced, and how has that impacted the way we consume food? How are the behaviours of young people affected by these changes?
  - iii. What is the social, cultural and economic context? How can it be safeguarded to limit the impact of obesogenic environments?
- b. To get started, consult:
  - i. Existing resources (secondary data), such as the World Obesity Federation's policy dossier on Food Systems and others (see below).
  - ii. Consult with local experts from organizations who have worked on these issues.
  - iii. Collect information from your stakeholders (primary data) for example, through interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and/or focus groups.

**2**

**Work with your team to set goals and objectives, e.g., increase understanding among stakeholder groups about the impact of globalisation on food systems, change behaviour to a healthier diet, and change policies that promote health.**

**3**

**Develop an implementation plan:**

- a. Identify who will do what, by when, and to what purpose
- b. Allocate the budget lines for each activity and other support you need (human and materials resources)
- c. Identify the resistance you might face and develop a strategy to overcome the resistance.

**4** Identify opportunities for advocacy, leverage existing events, key moments and platforms.

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**5** Create a stakeholder map to identify the beneficiaries of your advocacy work and to identify allies who can support your advocacy. This can include parent groups, businesses, news outlets, schools, youth groups and civil society organisations.

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**6** Create a communication plan and develop key messages that are clear, supported by fact and engage your target audience. Consider the following:

- a. Provide a snappy, attention-grabbing opener
  - b. Provide fast facts to frame the problem
  - c. Provide a solution
  - d. Finish with a call to action
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**7** Create a plan to track progress: are activities on time, on budget, reaching their audiences, and affecting stakeholders?

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## What resources can we use to get started?

This resource on **Food Systems** from the World Obesity Federation includes research and studies, statements, and case studies to support advocacy and program planning.

This resource from **Youth Leaders for Nutrition** provides further guidance on advocacy.

Here are some resources from the World Health Organization (WHO) on **Nutrition for adolescent health** and **Guideline: implementing effective actions for improving adolescent nutrition**.

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Healthy Voices provides young people with the knowledge and advocacy tools to promote their positive engagement to address health-related challenges. Owned by World Obesity and born out of the work of two EU-level projects – STOP and CO-CREATE – it is an educational and capacity building platform and provides a space for blogs and discussions. It aims to provide young people with some tools and expertise about how to become actively involved in shaping their environments and become agents of change.

More info on the about this site page at [www.worldobesity.org/healthy-voices/about-this-site](http://www.worldobesity.org/healthy-voices/about-this-site)



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