



UNSCN Statement

NUTRITION SECURITY OF URBAN POPULATIONS

Important global initiatives to improve nutrition have developed over the past years and many stakeholders have expressed their commitment and interest in supporting the scale-up of nutrition actions. Most recently, the Rio+20 Conference recognized the right to food and the importance of food and nutrition security for all. The United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has also launched the Zero Hunger Challenge, encouraging working with governments, civil society, business and development partners. Urban and peri-urban environments have their own unique specificities and present many challenges for the achievement of food and nutrition security.

This 2012 United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) statement builds on the 2006 statement (*The double burden of malnutrition: a challenge for cities worldwide*) but adds new perspectives.

Now more than half of the global population lives in cities which are therefore hosting more poor. Urban households essentially depend on food purchases and the volatility of food prices makes it difficult for poor urban households and particularly those headed by women to adjust. Climate change undermines current efforts to reduce hunger and the frequency of natural disasters escalates. Growing urban populations increase vulnerability and the risk of humanitarian crises. All countries, high as well as low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), are experiencing the double burden of malnutrition which is rooted in poverty and inequality: a dietary transition from local diets to increased consumption of processed foods high in fat, sugar and salt and low in fiber combined with more sedentary lifestyles and little space for physical activity creates the “perfect storm” for noncommunicable diseases like heart disease, diabetes and certain forms of cancer. Vulnerable households require social protection, adult education including nutrition education and legal protection to realize and protect optimal nutrition. As cities expand, so does the length of the rural-urban food supply chain which increases food losses and negatively affects safety and quality of the food products.

A wide variety of local innovative initiatives is taking place, both in LMIC as in wealthy nations. But cities need to be empowered to do more, better and now.

The UNSCN calls for increased attention, awareness and research on urban nutrition as well as for an effective engagement and intersectoral and multi stakeholder collaboration leading to an efficient use of urban resources. Rural- urban linkages need to be enhanced. Successful urban nutrition initiatives need to be better documented and more widely shared.

The UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition (www.unscn.org) is the interagency platform, furthering, coordinating and supporting joint efforts on nutrition across the UN System. The UNSCN is unequivocally committed to supporting global efforts to improve nutrition and to address all forms of malnutrition. It recognizes that this requires the collective efforts of many stakeholders across sectors and that nations must lead in defining priorities and action plans.

Nutrition security of urban populations: A call for attention and joint action

Urban areas hold great appeal for populations seeking a better life, livelihood and education opportunities. However, **urban malnutrition and food insecurity**, both rooted in **poverty and inequality**, are becoming priority issues in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) as well as high-income countries. In 2008 more than half of the world's population was living in cities for the first time in history, and it is expected that 60% of the world's population, almost 5 billion people, will be living in cities by 2030^{1,2,3}. By 2020 the LMIC of Africa, Asia and Latin America will be home to approximately 75% of urban dwellers¹. Not only are the numbers growing; cities are increasingly becoming home to the world's poor⁴. In 2002, approximately one third of people living in urban areas in LMIC fell below the poverty line of living on less than \$2/day, and 13% were living below the poverty line of \$1/day⁵. By 2020 it is expected that 85% of the poor in Latin America and about 40-45% of the poor in Africa and Asia will be concentrated in towns and cities¹. Additionally, one third of city dwellers live in slums, where there is limited access to income, employment and sanitation, all of which can result in food insecurity, poor nutritional status and high levels of disease morbidity^{1,6}.

Unlike rural residents, city dwellers have limited opportunities to grow their own food and are thus more likely to purchase their food. Disadvantaged urban households allocate an extremely high proportion of their disposable income to food, between 54% and 76% in Sub-Saharan capital cities¹. Between 2005 and 2008, the world's staple food prices soared to their highest levels in 30 years⁷. This affects the **urban poor's purchasing power**, subsequently working longer hours to increase income, and reducing dietary quality and diversity. In response to this, in Brazil, where 30% of the population faces daily food insecurity, the government implemented the Zero Hunger Project ("Fome Zero"), which includes the world's largest conditional cash transfer program, a school meal program and a pillar to strengthen family agriculture⁸. Food assistance can be used as a short term solution to food insecurity, but governments and stakeholders must include sustainable social protection strategies that target the poorest and most vulnerable households.

Women in cities represent an important vulnerable group. Women are more likely to work outside the home than rural women, which makes caring for children and optimal feeding practices difficult. Urban women tend to breastfeed two to three months less than rural women, leaving children poorly nourished and more vulnerable to disease⁹. Additionally, violence against women, stress and subsequent mental health issues are not uncommon in urban areas, and studies show that stressed mothers can cease to lactate, potentially resulting in sub-optimal feeding and thus causing stunting in their children¹⁰. Indeed, one quarter to one-third of urban children in low-income nations are stunted¹¹. In order to promote breastfeeding among urban women, the Philippines created the Expanded Breastfeeding Promotion Act of 2009¹². The aim is to increase awareness of the advantages of breastmilk by installing lactation stations at work, managing breastmilk donations, and providing breastfeeding education. Moreover, illiteracy among women is also linked with poorer nutrition among children¹³. Social protection policies, adult education, nutrition programs and legal protection measures can contribute to realizing optimal nutrition for their children.

While they continue to face undernutrition, cities in both LMIC and high-income countries are now experiencing a **double burden of malnutrition** with the additional presence of overweight and obesity, which is associated with noncommunicable diseases like heart disease, diabetes and cancer. People who move to cities may have less time for preparing food, and therefore rely on energy-dense, processed and convenience foods, which are more widely available, less expensive and highly publicized in urban environments¹⁴. While calories may remain the same, the decline in dietary diversity and the substitution effect decreases nutrient density, less fiber, minerals, vitamins, other health-promoting components, and more sugar, salt and fat¹⁵. This dietary transition is more significant as there are changes in the built environment that reduce levels of daily activity, such as little space for physical activity and mechanized transportation¹⁶. In an attempt to reduce the consumption of unhealthy foods, the UK Department of Health made a commitment to reduce salt content of processed food by collaborating with all sectors of the food industry¹⁷. In Aquitaine, France, the Program for Nutrition, Prevention and Health of Children and Adolescents aims to reduce childhood obesity by improving the availability of healthy

food at school, implementing health promotion, and training health and education professionals on obesity prevention¹⁸.

Climate change affects food and nutrition security and further undermines current efforts to reduce hunger and protect and promote nutrition¹⁹. Global warming, including increased frequency of natural disasters, has adverse impacts on crop yields, and the resulting undernutrition lessens capacities to resist and adapt to the consequences of climate change. Growing populations in urban areas in these situations only increase vulnerability and risk of **humanitarian crisis**. Political conflict and disasters that occur elsewhere can also affect cities due to a high dependence on imported food and the influx of refugees and Internally Displaced People²⁰. This further challenges the capacity of the city's infrastructure and economy to feed the fast growing population. Strategies related to climate change and crisis response are important to reduce vulnerability and to build resilience, thus reducing threats to food and nutrition security.

Fresh foods come mostly from rural areas, and as cities expand, so does the length of the **rural-urban food supply chain**, causing food to travel over greater distances²¹. This is challenging since fresh foods must be handled with care and in appropriate conditions to preserve quality and safety. In LMIC, almost 65% of **food losses** happen at the production, post harvest and processing stages, whereas in high-income countries much of the loss occurs at the consumer level¹. The Save Food Initiative, a collaboration between FAO and other partners, attempts to cut down on food losses by advocating for new technologies, better practices, coordination and investments in infrastructure²². Such a campaign is important for local authorities to **enhance rural-urban linkages** to bring increasing quantities of good, healthy and affordable food to consumers. Furthermore, the existence of policies that support smallholder farming and encourage young people to stay in rural areas can help re-value, develop and sustain climate-smart agriculture.

As a result of the expanding urbanization and food supply chain, **accessibility to safe and affordable foods** can become an issue. Street foods play an important role in increasing food accessibility in LMIC urban environments, though the issue of a lack of access to adequate sanitation and clean water persists. In high-income countries urban food deserts are becoming apparent. These are areas within city centres with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, causing people to rely on small grocery or convenience stores that are more expensive and lack all foods needed for a healthy diet²³. In the US, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, a partnership between the Treasury Department, Health and Human Services and the Agriculture Department, is working to bring healthy food sources into food deserts²⁴. Zoning policies can also be used to encourage the development of farmers markets and grocery stores and by creating areas for urban and peri-urban food production.

Growing **cities require sustainable diets**²⁵. Encouraging results come from urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) which is a source of employment and income, has the potential to improve nutrition and food security in disadvantaged urban residents, significantly contributes to the urban fresh food supply chain, re-establishes the often lost link of youth with a green environment, and might contribute to reducing stress, thus improving overall well-being²⁶. Furthermore, UPA allows for saving on energy at various levels of the food chain including packaging, transport, storage and distribution that will affect the final retail price of the food commodities¹. Household food production such as rooftop gardens can also contribute to a sustainable diet. In Bangladesh, Helen Keller International's Homestead Food Production program provides training and resources for women in densely populated peri-urban areas to grow gardens and manage livestock, contributing to the economic stability of their families and improving access to micronutrient-rich foods²⁷. UPA and household food production can be part of a sustainable solution to empower urban residents to foster a sustainable diet based on locally adapted varieties, thus contributing to safeguarding biodiversity. These can be integrated into urban planning and national food security programs, agricultural policy and development strategies.

Cities determine to a great extent national, regional and global food, agriculture and trade policies. But urban consumers can also play a major role in reorienting such policies towards more rational and resilient food systems. Consumer information is essential to the promotion of sustainable diets, diets which are healthy and safe, compatible with culture and social equity as well as with the sustainable management of natural resources.

Malnutrition in all its forms creates a burden on cities and national health systems as well as on the lives and wellbeing of humans. Both undernutrition and overweight and obesity are rooted in poverty, and are increasingly coinciding in the expanding urban environment in LMIC and high-income countries. Therefore, it is essential to ensure adequate sanitation, clean water and healthy food choices that are both physically and economically accessible. To achieve this, **multisectoral collaboration is indispensable**. Stakeholders not only from the health and agriculture sector but also from the education and social sectors, urban planners, municipal authorities, researchers and the media need to work together to identify opportunities to advance urban nutrition and effectively and efficiently use urban resources. Information sharing, capacity building and awareness among these stakeholders can help to promote the right to food, ultimately leading to improved health and nutrition for all.

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