

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO IMPROVING CHILDREN'S DIETS

Learning from lived experience



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KEY MESSAGES

Learning from our children

Children's experiences provide powerful insights into how to build effective policy for transforming their food environments and diets with a view to addressing the different faces of child malnutrition.

Children's health and development are profoundly affected by the foods they eat. Yet evidence shows that society is not giving infants, children, adolescents and young people the support they need to eat the diets that will allow them to thrive. This is leading to unacceptably high levels of undernutrition (stunting and wasting), micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity – a triple burden.

This document explores the daily lives of three children from different contexts. In their own words, these children show us how the foods they

eat are powerfully influenced by the environments and systems in which they live.

Food, education, social protection and built infrastructure systems make a difference to these children. Some of these forces are obvious, while others are invisible. By understanding the realities of children's lives, we can identify the role these different systems play in shaping children's diets and the combination of actions needed to realize children's right to healthy, available, affordable and nutritious food. We can determine why existing efforts may not be working as expected and provide concrete pointers to help policymakers and practitioners take action.

Translating children's lived experiences into smarter actions to improve food and nutrition

Listening to children from different contexts and communities reveals some important, universal recommendations for solving the collective problem of child malnutrition:

1. Recognize and leverage children's agency in making change.

Children have the right to express their views and participate in building healthier food environments that meet their needs and desires. We need to learn more from children about what solutions work for them in the realities of their lives. This requires platforms that inform, learn from and empower children to articulate their views, demand better food environments and co-create solutions.

2. Implement a set of universally applicable, effective, and equitable policies.

Children everywhere deserve to benefit from (a) social protection programmes to increase the affordability of healthy diets; (b) diverse, healthy meals in early childhood centres and schools; (c) controls on the marketing of unhealthy, ultra-processed ("junk") food and beverages across all channels; and (d) gender norms that give greater agency to their female caregivers.

3. Take place-based action tailored to local contexts.

In addition to universal policies, we need policies tailored to local contexts to ensure that all children have an enabling environment to grow and thrive. Place-based action sparks multi-sectoral action across different levels of government to collaborate on improving children's diets. It stimulates engagement with stakeholders beyond governments for a whole-of-society approach.

INTRODUCTION

Our systems are failing children, everywhere

The long-term health and development of children is profoundly affected by the foods they eat. Yet the evidence is clear that infants, children, adolescents and young people are not getting the support they need to eat the diets that will allow them to thrive. This is a problem for children everywhere.

A staggering two in three young children worldwide are not fed the diverse diets they need to grow well. One in three young children is fed at least one unhealthy food or drink daily and fewer than a third of school-aged children consume fruits or vegetables daily.

The consequences of poor diets are grave: nearly 200 million children under the age of 5 around the world experience stunting, wasting or both. More than 340 million children suffer from deficiencies in vitamins and other essential micronutrients. Meanwhile, the rise in overweight and obesity has been swift and pervasive. Around 40 million children under the age of 5 are overweight, which rises to more than 340 million children and adolescents aged 5 to 19. The vast majority of children affected by all forms of malnutrition, including overweight and obesity, live in low- and middle-income countries.

The right to nutrition is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which calls on States Parties to provide children with “adequate nutritious foods”. Upholding children’s right to adequate nutrition means upholding their related rights to food, social protection, education, basic infrastructure (such as water and housing), and freedom from economic exploitation. Sadly, the systems that enable these rights are failing children. This includes, but is not exclusive to, the food systems that shape their access to nutritious, safe and affordable diets; the education systems that shape the

quality of the knowledge and skills they receive; the built infrastructure systems so vital to safe drinking water, housing and transport; and the social protection systems that influence the income, assets, housing and livelihoods of their parents and caregivers.

Ensuring that these systems better uphold children’s right to adequate nutrition and deliver nutritious food, healthier food environments, and better dietary practices requires a new way of thinking – one that re-works existing policies and programmes so they better achieve their objectives and introduces fresh ideas to address new challenges. This is a complex task, but listening to children’s voices can provide important insights into how to rise to the challenge.

Children can show us the way

Understanding the realities of children’s lives can help pinpoint specific constraints and challenges that must be addressed for policies and programmes to work more effectively for children and families. By listening to children’s stories, we can identify previously unexamined opportunities and solutions to those problems. And we can enable children to voice their own solutions as agents of change within their own communities.

A growing number of organizations, including UNICEF, are using what is known as “lived experience” research to strategize around how to better tackle the burdens of malnutrition in innovative ways. This can also help policymakers understand why a policy may not be working as expected and provide concrete recommendations on how to improve it.

Through the stories shared in this document, we learn about the daily lives of three children of different ages, in three varying contexts, from different regions of the world. Their stories represent the collective voices of

MEET OUR CHILDREN

the many children we heard from in three different studies from around the world (see '**How we did the research**'). The studies were carried out at different times, with different goals in mind, by different groups of researchers. Despite the differences in these stories, we can draw some universal lessons.

Nosipho (age 5) is from an informal settlement outside Cape Town, South Africa; Meriem (age 11) is from a middle-class neighbourhood in Greater Tunis, Tunisia; and Jon (age 17) is from a rural municipality in Zamboanga del Norte province in the Philippines.

These three distinct stories demonstrate each child's unique experience in his or her specific part of the world, within a given setting, eating different foods. Their stories were gathered during different times in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic: Nosipho's profile was developed during the pandemic but not during lockdown; Meriem's story draws on her experience pre-pandemic; Jon's story was told during the pandemic lockdown. Nevertheless, their stories have a lot in common, which provides some important signposts for how to solve the collective and universal problems of child malnutrition.

What can we learn from their experiences?

My name is
Nosipho. I'm 5
years old.



My name is
Meriem. I'm 11
years old.

My name is
Jon. I'm 17
years old.



NOSIPHO

from Masiphumelele township
outside Cape Town, South Africa

Nosipho is a 5-year-old girl who lives with her mother and older brother in a one-room shack in Masiphumelele township on the southern peninsula of Cape Town. In addition to reading about her story below, you can watch a video about Nosipho's daily life [here](#).

A struggle for basic infrastructure

Masiphumelele township has grown rapidly, from just a few hundred people in the 1980s, to more than 45,000 people today. Residents live in both formal areas with brick houses, in shacks with roads and amenities, and in informal areas located on wetlands where there are fewer amenities and little space for vehicle access. These informal settlements are also subject to frequent fires and flooding.

Nosipho's informally built home is in the wetlands. Her mother is currently employed two days a week as a domestic worker, and the family's other source of income is the government's Child Support Grant, part of South Africa's social protection system. Nosipho's mother does not pay rent. The family gets water from a standpipe in the settlement and uses a shared toilet provided by the City. Access to electricity is a challenge for the family. Due to shortages supplying the national electricity grid, "load shedding" (often every day for weeks at a time), means that the electricity will go off for 2.5 hours at a time across the whole of Masiphumelele. In addition, the household does not have its own formal connection to the grid and is thus connected via a wire from a neighbour who charges them a set amount for electricity per month. Sometimes when the power comes back on after load shedding, the surge trips the system. More often, the neighbour cuts them off because she says they've used their allocation. In addition, Nosipho's family has gas and a paraffin heater for cooking.

Local food environments influence buying decisions

The food environment of young children in Masiphumelele consists of the food prepared at home and eaten at creches, food available at the many small informal shops in the neighbourhood – known locally

as *spaza* shops – within walking distance, and a weekly shop at supermarkets in the wealthier surrounding suburbs. Mothers of children like Nosipho prioritize supermarkets at malls in these suburbs to buy a big monthly shop. These retail outlets are safe and clean, a change of pace and scenery from the usual local shopping, and close to the cash withdrawal machines where they draw their monthly Child Support Grant money. They prefer not to take their children to avoid being pestered to buy the tempting foods available in the supermarkets and fast-food outlets. But when they do take the children, and if they have the money, they might treat their children to a snack at a fast-food chain.

When in their community, children enjoy buying cheap but unhealthy snacks from the *spaza* shops, of which there are plenty. *Spaza* shops sell long-lasting packaged foods, and a smaller amount of fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy and frozen meat. There are also some informal fruit and vegetable vendors and some butchers. *Spaza* shops are set up to attract little children like Nosipho. Mothers also know their children are more likely to help them with the *spaza* shopping needed between the monthly shopping outings if they give them extra cash to buy a packet of chips or a sugary drink. Children sometimes also get cheap, local fast-food (*amagwinya* – fried dough – consumed plain or filled with chips, burgers, sausages etc.), weekend barbeque, or liver/chicken feet from the street vendors nearby.

A key role for creches

Most young children go to creches, and those over the age of 5 go to the local overcrowded school, or schools outside the township. In most cases, parents must pay fees to the creches, but their children often receive subsidized meals there. The quality of the meals varies, but many do include vegetables.

My name is Nosipho and I am 5-years-old. I live in Masi with my mom and brother. We don't have water or a proper electricity connection and share two rooms. My mom makes us food on a stove. Most days I go to a creche with other children.

NOSIPHO

At creche



7:00 am

I wake up and my mom feeds me banana-flavoured Instant Pap. She likes it because it's quick and easy – and the packet tells her about all the added vitamins. I like it because it's sweet and tasty.



8:00 am

As soon as mom drops me at creche, I get some porridge with sugar with all the other children before we start learning and colouring.



10:30 am

I eat my snack. My mom always packs me sweet yoghurt because it's the same as everyone else. I don't want to feel different. Sometimes when Mom can afford it, I even get an apple too.



12:30 pm

For lunch the school gives us pap and vegetables, like spinach. I don't like spinach. But my teacher makes me eat it. I know it will make me big and strong!



At home



6-7:00 pm

Even though my mom is so tired after getting home from work, she prepares a meal. It takes over an hour to cook pap and some sausage in our small shack. But Mom says they are cheap and will fill my tummy which will make me healthy. I get to have veggies on Sunday. Mom says she can't afford vegetables every day.



**Vegetables may be available at home on the weekends*

At Auntie's house



3:30 pm

After school my auntie picks me up because my mom is still working. She makes me the 2-minute noodles at her house. They are easy to store and prepare and use hardly any electricity. Mom and Auntie get these noodles on special in the big pack at the supermarket when we do our big shop at the end of the month after mom gets the money from the government. I watch TV as I wait.



At the store with friends



4:30 pm

Before going home, my friends call me to play. My friend, Sizwe, often needs to go to the *spaza* shop for his mom. She gives him a Rand or two to buy a treat when he's there, and he always shares with us! The shopkeeper expects us most days and puts a box for kids to be able to reach him to pay for the sweets and chips right by the till.





Policy solutions reflected in a systems approach

Touchpoints where Nosipho's day is affected by her environment



Built infrastructure system

Finance energy systems and housing that enable the preparation of healthy meals.

- With a reliable energy supply – either through gridded electrical supply or by ensuring access and fair pricing of gas – Nosipho's mom could cook more frequently and not have to rely on instant foods due to unreliable, expensive electricity.
- Better water and sanitation, electricity, solid waste management and roads in the urban environment would make it easier for the *spaza* shops and fresh food vendors to have hygienic stores with more fresh produce.



Education system

Invest in Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDCs) as spaces to provide healthy meals and build healthy social norms among children and caregivers.

- (ECDCs) play an important role in Nosipho's life as they can model healthy eating and shape her tastes and preferences for healthy food.
- These spaces, some even with gardens, provide opportunities to educate children and caregivers about avoiding unhealthy foods and setting healthy norms.
- ECDCs encourage caregivers to send healthy snacks with their children rather than sugary treats. This helps establish healthy eating norms that favour nutritious foods rather than just a full tummy.



Food system

Adopt policies that make healthier options more affordable, accessible, and appealing, while disincentivizing options high in sugars, salts, and fats.

- Restrictions on the amount of sugar and salt in food products, like the instant pap that Nosipho eats, could reduce sugar intake and the preference for very sweet foods.
- Regulations on nutrient claims (e.g., added vitamins in sugary foods, like yogurt) could prevent Nosipho's mom from being misled to believe that the products are healthy.
- *Spaza* owners make money when children buy cheap and unhealthy snacks; they need support to promote and sell healthier snacks that kids want to eat.
- Restricting discounts on foods with high sugar/high salt content and increasing discounts on fresh produce can disincentivize unhealthy food purchases.



Social protection system

Dedicate more resources for higher levels of social protection.

- South Africa's Child Support Grant, along with meals at ECDCs, keep Nosipho out of hunger, but they don't keep all children well-nourished. Even for Nosipho, the Grant is not sufficient to buy enough basic nutritious foods, including more expensive healthy options such as animal-source foods and fruit. This means that her meals typically don't contain enough different types of food to provide sufficient micronutrients.

MERIEM

from a middle-class neighbourhood in Greater Tunis, Tunisia

Meriem is an 11-year-old girl living with her parents and two brothers in a two-bedroom apartment on the first floor of a rented villa in El Mhamdia, Greater Tunis. Tunisia is a lower middle-income country in North Africa bordering the Mediterranean Sea, with a population of 11 million people, of which almost 70 per cent live in urban areas. Greater Tunis spans four urban and peri-urban governorates, including the capital Tunis. This region is the most developed part of the country and has seen a rapid nutrition transition, including a shift from nutrient-dense traditional foods to more processed foods high in sugar, salt and fat.

Temptation abounds: the journey to and from school

El Mhamdia is a popular district of the city of Tunis where the neighbourhood is made up of densely packed low-rise concrete houses and where the road infrastructure experiences some flooding in the heavy rains. There are a couple of popular cafés on Meriem's street and the big neighbourhood supermarket is a 15-minute walk away.

Children in urban Tunis often live close to school and walk there; alternatively, they are driven to school by their parents or take a school bus. Pre-teen Meriem's walk to and from school exposes her to an environment that is filled with unhealthy food temptations. The journey is a key source of exposure to food cues, such as restaurants, food stores and mobile food vendors mainly selling popcorn, sandwiches, *mleoui* (i.e., a type of bread), pancakes, and/or sodas, as well as foods displayed outside shops.

Food retailers selling affordable yet unhealthy ultra-processed ("junk") food tend to be more common near schools than other places, compared with retailers selling healthy, fresh food. This results in children buying unhealthy snacks from these stores and either eating them before reaching school or later during recess. Others eat breakfast on the bus or in the car. Children are allowed to leave school during recess, further increasing the temptation to grab an unhealthy snack nearby.

Advertising and peer pressure as a multiplier

In addition to unhealthy food outlets, Meriem is exposed to food advertisements on her journey to school that promote unhealthy, ultra-processed ("junk") food in school neighbourhoods. Children are aware of the multitude of food exposures surrounding them. They know that many food advertisements focus on sugary and calorie-dense foods and that food cues, including ads and peers, make them want to eat certain foods, even when they are not hungry. Seeing their peers eating branded snacks really influences children like Meriem; they want to try what their friends are eating. At home, Meriem tends to eat healthier dishes, but unhealthy food cues influence her preferences for unhealthier options from fast-food outlets around her home.

MERIEM

My name is Meriem and I am 11-years-old. I live in Greater Tunis with my parents and older brother. We aren't far from my school, so every day I walk to and from school like most kids in my neighborhood.

Walking to school



7:30 am I usually walk to school with my mother and my older brother. Sometimes, I buy breakfast while walking to school and I eat it on the road. While walking I see lots of ads for tasty food like sweets and pizza.

7:00 am On school days, I wake up and get ready quickly. I don't usually have time to have breakfast at home. But when I do, I mainly drink milk and eat honey, cereals, a chocolate croissant, fruits, cakes, eggs, or sandwiches.



At home

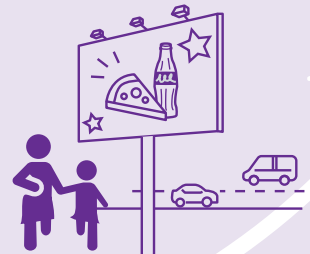


5:00 pm In the evening, I arrive home to do my homework. While studying, my mother brings me snacks to eat.

8:00 pm When I'm done, I have a home-cooked dinner with my family while watching TV. We usually have a big dish of chicken and vegetable stew with a side salad. The TV is my favorite because lots of fun food ads play while we eat.



Walking home with Grandmother



3:30 pm After school I walk home with my grandmother. Sometimes I feel hungry on the way back, so I ask her for sweets, and she stops in a store to buy me croissants, chocolates or other treats. I prefer eating outside our home; the food is tastier and there are so many options with cool pictures to choose from.



At school



10:00 am During recess, we are allowed to go out of school; I buy food from kiosks, street vendors, or fast-food stores that are close to my school, as that is what I can afford with my pocket money.



12:30 pm Around noon, I go to the refectory to have lunch. I usually eat food from home such as sandwiches, cookies, cakes, mleoui, fruits, vegetables, or chocolates. I also like to drink strawberry-banana juice with my meal.



Once during snack time, I saw my friend eat a popular brand of chips I had never tried before! So, I then asked my parents to get some as I really wanted to bring them with me next time.



Policy solutions reflected in a systems approach

Touchpoints where Meriem’s day is affected by her environment



Built infrastructure system

Regulate the urban zoning area around schools to protect the physical environment from unhealthy food vendors.

- Local governments can zone the area around schools so street cart food vendors cannot sell unhealthy products within a certain distance from school gates. This zoning regulation can be accompanied by programmes that support street cart food vendors to shift to more nutritious options on the streets around schools.



Education system

Implement holistic nutrition education programmes in schools.

- A comprehensive curriculum could be introduced, including formal nutrition education associated with school garden and cooking programmes and supported by a nutrition promotion programme with parent associations.



Food system

Restrict the deluge of unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children, across all settings.

- Food system regulations can reduce the temptation and aspiration created by the advertising Meriem and her friends see on the way to school, on branded packaging, in food outlets, and on television.



Social protection system

Expand Tunisia’s nutritious meal programme in schools to peri-urban areas.

- Tunisia already has a nutritious meal programme in place in rural areas which could be expanded to target increasingly vulnerable peri-urban schools.
- Embedding nutritious meal programmes in peri-urban schools designed to appeal to children could help encourage children like Meriem to eat a daily balanced diet *inside* school rather than consuming unhealthy foods from kiosks and fast-food outlets *outside* school.

JON

from a rural community in the Philippines

Jon is a 17-year-old living on a small farm with his parents in Godod – a rural, hard-to-access mountainous municipality in the province of Zamboanga del Norte, in the Philippines, with an estimated population of 17,510 people.¹ They live close to extended family and their home is made of wood and light materials, with galvanized iron for roofing. The family uses wood to cook their food, and while they have access to electricity, they experience frequent interruptions in supply, sometimes lasting 4 to 8 hours a day.

Social protection systems to boost food resiliency

More than half (59 per cent) of the population of Godod lives below the poverty line.² Families living below a specified provincial poverty threshold are eligible for the *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps), a conditional cash transfer system. Eligible families are those with children below the age of 18 years, or with a pregnant woman. Programme recipients receive a monthly health grant of PhP750 (US\$14) and an education grant for children in school (per month, per child, for a maximum of 10 months per year of PhP500–PhP700 (US\$9-13)), which is conditional on maternal and child health care visits and school enrolment. The government subsidizes schools, which makes them free to attend. Along with the health and education grants, the beneficiaries also receive a rice subsidy amounting to PhP600 (US\$11) per month.³

Many of the residents of Godod rely on farming. Some of them have their own land for farming, but it is also common practice for those without land to be hired as farm labourers with a daily wage, which is usually lower for agricultural workers compared to other workers. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, day labourers have found it difficult to find work. Local government units have responded by providing one-time additional cash assistance of PhP5,000 (US\$95) to vulnerable

4P and non-4P households, as well as once-off food packages of rice, canned fish and noodles.⁴ Children usually go to school until the age of 18, but during COVID-19 lockdowns, when this study was conducted, they were studying at home.

Food availability and affordability shape Jon's diet

Since Jon's family lives far from grocery stores, their food options depend on local farm produce (from their own farms or those of their neighbours) and informal mobile vendors who walk or bike around selling their products. Godod also has some small convenience stores, known locally as *sari-sari* stores, but no large public markets. The nearest open food markets, supermarkets and grocery stores are in the municipality of Salug, which is about 1.5 hours away by bus. Families travel to Salug about twice a month by bus to buy canned food and dried goods such as rice and fish that can be stored in a mini cabinet at home.

Families have some access to vegetables as they are grown in backyards and family farms, but sometimes they must be bought locally. Chicken, pork and beef are very rarely purchased because they are expensive. Mobile vendors sell fresh fish, vegetables and home-cooked foods like banana cue (fried plantains cooked with brown sugar). The *sari-sari* stores stock a range

1 Philippines Statistics Authority (2021). 2020 Population and Annual Growth Rates by Province, City, and Municipality – By Region. <https://psa.gov.ph/content/highlights-philippine-population-2020-census-population-and-housing-2020-cph>

2 Philippines Statistics Authority (2021). 2018 Municipal and City Level Poverty Estimates. <https://psa.gov.ph/content/psa-releases-2018-municipal-and-city-level-poverty-estimates>. Retrieved last 18 Feb 2022.

3 DSWD related the results of the third impact evaluation report on 4Ps. <https://mb.com.ph/2021/04/14/dswd-related-with-results-of-third-impact-evaluation-report-on-4ps/> Accessed on: 13 August 2021.

4 Zamboanga Peninsula COVID-19 Regional Recovery Program 2020-2022. https://nro9.neda.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ZamPen_RRP_Final.pdf Accessed on 13 August 2021.

of foods, from sacks of rice to grocery items, including canned goods, instant noodles, *pancit* (traditional noodles) and other items. However, in *sari-sari* stores, the cost of these items is nearly twice as much as in the markets because of the difficulty of transporting them to Godod. A variety of snacks are also sold such as soft drinks, candies, bread, or *halo-halo* (a dessert made with crushed ice, evaporated milk or creamer, and various sweetened ingredients). Within the municipality, people travel by motorbike or walk.

Parents in families like Jon's decide what to eat at home, which is usually fish, rice and vegetables. Dried fish, corn rice and noodles are cheaper and consumed when there is not enough money for fresh fish and milled rice. Meat and fruit are expensive and consumed only as a treat. Jon and his peers enjoy eating meals with their families and are grateful for the food they can eat – but they also wish they could try different foods, especially meat (chicken barbecue is a favourite food). In particular, Jon and his friends aspire to eat the chocolate and biscuits advertised to them through TV and their mobile phones.

The social role of food

Jon's day is shaped by his school studies (at home, given the COVID-19 lockdown) and domestic chores. In this context, food-related rituals in his social circle are important to him, even though they may centre around less healthy food and beverages. When Jon goes out – typical for a teenager – he eats unhealthy, ultra-processed ("junk") food high in refined carbohydrates, including sugars, and/or fats. They may be prepared by street vendors, prepared in relatives' homes or bought as cheap packaged snacks and sugary drinks from *sari-sari* stores which are prevalent. This is an important part of his social life and presents a break from a life full of household chores and studying. Children know that vegetables and fruits are healthy and that unhealthy, ultra-processed ("junk") foods are not, but they eat them as affordable, accessible pleasures with their friends and families.

JON

My name is Jon and I am 17-years-old. I live on a small farm with my parents in Godod. Luckily, even though we're in a mountainous area, my aunties, cousins, and grandparents don't live too far away.

I start my day at...

6:00 am I usually wake up early to help my mother clean the house. I haven't been sleeping well during COVID-19 because I'm stressed about school. I miss it very much.

7:00 am For breakfast we have fried fish from the fish vendor, with vegetables and corn rice from the night before. If we have money, we have milled rice instead. I would prefer fast foods or meat, but my mother told me it's healthier to eat vegetables from our garden.



At home



6-7:00 pm In the evening, I help my mother make dried fish, vegetables, and corn rice with instant noodles for dinner. If we are lucky, there may be chicken adobo with the chickens from our farm. I would prefer to have more meat and nice fruit like papaya, but it's too expensive and hard to find.



8:00 pm After dinner my mother lets me play games on her cellphone and watch TV until late. I see adverts for the same biscuits, chocolates, and chocolate milk that I see on signs in the grocery store. I wish I had money to buy more of these things.



On the road to Grandma's



8:00 am Each day I head to my Grandma's house to help clean her home with my cousins. On the way I stop in a *sari-sari* store to buy chips and soda. I know they're unhealthy, but they are tasty, affordable, and on my way.

10:30 am After cleaning the house, my cousins and I watch some YouTube on our phones and eat our snacks. I then head to my auntie's house to have lunch.



At Auntie's house



11:30 am My auntie prepares fried fish bought from the mobile vendor, with some vegetables from her farm for lunch. If auntie isn't home, I just eat some canned sardines and instant noodles because they're cheap and easy to prepare.



12:00 pm After lunch I try to do some studying. It's hard to learn new things when COVID-19 keeps shutting our local school. I try my best, but it's hard and I usually end up wanting to nap.



In town with friends



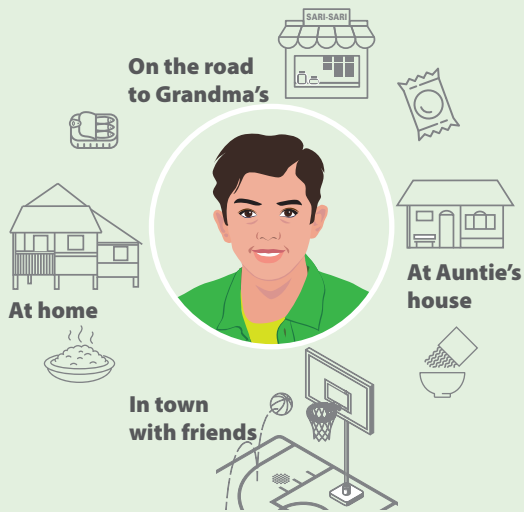
1:30 pm In the afternoons, my friends and I like to go to the local plaza and play basketball. We don't have good courts in our village.

3:00 pm My favourite part about town is we can get a juice drink from the *sari-sari* stores after our game. The sugary taste is nice after playing, and before I go home to help prepare dinner.



Policy solutions reflected in a systems approach

Touchpoints where Jon's day is affected by his environment



Built infrastructure system

Finance improvements to rural built environments so local vendors can stock fresh produce safely.

- Improved roads and better irrigation lead to an increase in local produce.
- Cheaper transport costs mean that local foods are more accessible.
- Together, these actions improve access to food in rural areas and make it easier for the sari-sari stores to stock more fresh, local produce.



Education system

Promote education programmes for caregivers, who have huge influence on child eating practices.

- Families play an important role in modelling and influencing eating practices in the Philippines.
- Mealtimes with family can provide positive emotional support for young people and encourage them to eat healthily.
- Education and communication programmes for parents and other caregivers can help capitalize on the existing assets provided by family structures.



Food system

Invest in supply chains to make healthy options affordable, while regulating the exploitative marketing of unhealthy food and beverages.

- Restricting local vendors from selling unhealthy foods would undermine the livelihoods of many local people, requiring innovative solutions to support healthy diets and livelihoods.
- Fruits that young people love to eat are expensive in such a rural context. Investing in supply chains to make fruit more affordable while also supporting livelihoods and environmental sustainability is a food systems intervention that supports both healthier diets and local livelihoods.
- While not all young people can afford heavily advertised, branded foods, comprehensive government regulation across all marketing platforms could limit the exploitative creation of aspiration for these foods and create space for social marketing to build demand for nutritious foods.



Social protection system

Make the existing Conditional Cash Transfer programme more nutrition-sensitive.

- The Philippines has a Conditional Cash Transfer programme where eligible families are given cash grants and prioritized for scholarship/ livelihood programmes in return for specific conditions including attendance at school, child immunization, and attending Family Development Sessions.
- Exploring how this programme could become more nutrition-sensitive could help families like Jon's, with limited income and resources, to eat healthier.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Translating lived experiences into smarter action to improve food and nutrition for children

The profiles explored in this document bring to light the multiple systems that influence what children eat. For example, Jon's diet in Godod, the Philippines, is shaped by what food is available in his neighbourhood (the food system); his access to resources (the social protection system); his knowledge (the education system); and the aspirations that he and his friends have for products like chocolate and biscuits, which are widely advertised on cell phones and TV (the food system). This highlights the need for a set of complementary actions across multiple systems to drive sustainable improvements in children's diets. Some of these actions are universally applicable, while others are context specific. Recognizing and leveraging children's agency will be vital to ensure action is effective and equitable.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Recognize and leverage children's agency in making change

While the three children featured are of varying ages and living in vastly different food environments, the temptation of unhealthy but tasty food is universal. In particular, the availability of affordable, appealing and aspirational but unhealthy snacks is an issue everywhere. From rural to urban settings, snacks high in unhealthy fats, sugars and/or salt, whether packaged or served by street vendors, are central to children's daily lives. The availability and affordability of these products in the stores and outlets around children, as well as the marketing that children see, make these unhealthy snacks easily accessible and desirable.

Learning from children's stories, we see that the problem is not just the presence of these snacks, but that they interact with children's desires to express

agency and be part of a social world. Snacks emerge as the means through which children empower themselves to make choices in environments where options are constrained; they emerge as central to the way that children socialize with other children or adults. They are a way for children to exercise agency, within constraints that are not of their own making. Children already know these foods are not good for them, but in the absence of an alternative healthier way to express themselves or benefit from social interaction, they have little choice.

Policies and programmatic interventions need to acknowledge that self-expression is important for children. Children deserve to be in environments where they can use their right to express themselves and enjoy time with their friends and families in ways that help them be healthier; they have a right to shape shared culture and identity in ways that support their well-being. When policymakers and practitioners ask the question, "how do we remove the temptation for children to snack by limiting the availability, affordability and appeal of these foods," they should also ask, "how can we do so while appealing to children's right to express their voices and be part of a social world". This means not just removing the temptation, but replacing it with other opportunities for children to socialize and express themselves through activities and in settings that don't promote unhealthy eating.

The implication is that policy and practice need to learn from children about what works for them. This requires platforms that inform, learn from and empower children to articulate their views, demand better food environments and co-create solutions. In this way, we can better recognize and leverage children's agency in making change and advance their right to nutrition and health.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Adopt a set of universally applicable, effective and equitable policies

The stories of Jon, Meriem and Nosipho show that certain actions are universally applicable across settings, spaces and age groups, and can shape the systems around children to support their rights. Governments everywhere need to leverage various ministries to coherently develop and implement the following policies, designing them for maximum impact in their local context. While aiming to reshape the systems in which children live, these policies have the potential to benefit people of all ages:

1. Expand the coverage of social protection programmes to increase the affordability of diverse diets, with special provisions targeted at healthy foods for children.

Families on low, variable and unpredictable incomes need more basic support to afford diverse diets. The Child Support Grant is clearly vital for families in South Africa, just like the 4Ps Programme in the Philippines. In all contexts, marketing and availability make unhealthy foods tempting for children. Well-designed nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes, including vouchers and other incentives, can expand family access to healthy foods and help shift eating practices. They can also be linked with retailers to reshape the foods they sell. During emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to ensure that any emergency food provision – such as the food packages distributed in the Philippines – is nutritious.

2. Ensure that early childhood centres and schools provide diverse, healthy meals in an environment that appeals to children, while limiting unhealthy foods.

Even when meals containing nutritious foods are eaten daily (as is the case for Jon, Meriem and Nosipho), it can be challenging for families to provide sufficient nutritious foods at home. Early childhood centres and schools can provide a safety net to address these gaps and ensure that children receive the nutrients they need. Indeed, the availability of healthy meals in these settings is fundamental given how many children attend them each day. While most countries have school meal programmes, this is not always the case; for example, when Jon attends school, he does not have access to a meal. Moreover, such programmes often do not start until primary school.⁵ The experiences of Jon, Meriem and Nosipho also indicate

the importance of providing a supportive and desirable social environment. While Nosipho had access to a healthy meal, social norms influenced her mother's decision to give her sugary yogurt as a snack. In Greater Tunis, Meriem wanted to eat what her peers were eating. Early childhood centres and schools must therefore provide healthy, tasty options in spaces where children feel accepted and want to be. Well-designed school food programmes can also bring wider benefits to the community, such as providing support to the local economy through procurement of nutritious and sustainable fresh produce.

3. Control advertising and promotional marketing through all channels, including TV, cell phones, schools and other settings where children gather.

The three stories show how children are targeted in different ways: directly in *spaza* stores and through packaging for Nosipho; on TV and en route to school for Meriem; and on TV and via mobile phones for Jon. While not all young people can afford the marketed foods, such as Jon in the Philippines, this promotion creates an aspiration for unhealthy foods and encourages lifelong preferences for these foods. Restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods could create the space for social marketing to stimulate greater demand for nutritious foods. Such restrictions must be comprehensive, covering all marketing for unhealthy foods that children see, as well as including the specific techniques used to directly target children in different settings.

4. Improve gender equity and change gender norms to give greater agency to women.

A closer look at the daily lives of children confirms that feeding children is typically the responsibility of women – such as mothers, grandmothers and aunts. As with care work, there is an absence of institutional and social support to manage this burden, and women's agency may be reduced through social pressure from other family members and the fathers of their children. Women cope with poverty, juggle multiple demands in addition to childcare (e.g., low-paid work), face harmful gender norms related to body image and food choices, and experience barriers in terms of affordability and access to nutritious foods for the family and themselves. Policy responses must accommodate the differential needs of mothers and other caregivers to ensure they are economically and socially empowered to make decisions favouring the healthy diets they seek for themselves and their children.

⁵ The School Based Feeding Program of the Philippines Department of Education did not operate during the COVID-19 pandemic, but does not affect Jon's age group. The programme benefits younger students (i.e., from kindergarten to grade 6) who are considered wasted and severely wasted (based on the current year baseline school nutritional status report) for 100 to 120 feeding days. Only 1 in 10 primary school students were provided with supplemental feeding this school year, a 50 per cent reduction compared with the previous year (<http://enutrition.fnri.dost.gov.ph/site/uploads/RNAS%20Virtual%20Dissemination%20to%20Partners.pdf>).

RECOMMENDATION 3: Prioritize place-based action tailored to local contexts

If we hope to create an enabling environment for children to grow and thrive to their full potential, we need policies and actions that are tailored to local contexts and that complement universal policies. The policy solutions presented for Nosiphi, Meriem and Jon show why this is important.

Nosipho would benefit from the universally applicable policies of investment in healthy food in early childhood centres, enhanced social protection, and regulations on unhealthy food promotion. But in Nosipho's case, addressing local challenges in built infrastructure – energy, housing, water and sanitation – are also vital to enabling her mother to prepare healthy food at home. Restricting discounts on unhealthy, ultra-processed ("junk") food and supporting *spaza* stores to help kids be healthier also emerge as important actions to realize children's right to healthy food.

In Meriem's case, a key aspect of local context is the high density of unhealthy food outlets on her walk to school. Zoning the areas around school could incentivize these outlets to shift to healthier foods. For Jon, community-led initiatives that provide resources to women and caregivers could help sustain existing family structures favouring family mealtimes. Supply chains, too, could be strengthened to support access to more affordable fruit and other healthier foods.

As these children's stories illustrate, child nutrition is shaped by the interaction of several systems. However, this connection may not be immediately evident to local policymakers. Place-based action can enable different sectors and levels of government to work together to develop actions that address local challenges in ways that improve children's diets and address other societal objectives. Policy interventions at different levels of government and vertical integration of policy – across national, subnational and local levels – enables the various levels of government to work in harmony for the people and places that they are intended to benefit.

Place-based actions require different parts of the government at multiple levels (local, national, regional) and stakeholders beyond government (a whole-of-society approach) to understand what they can do, their role, and how to coordinate with others to do it. Highlighting these responsibilities across multiple actors can motivate collective action and accountability for children's diets.



Nosipho



Meriem



Jon

THE RESEARCH

How we did the “lived experience” research

Case Study #1: Masiphumelele, Cape Town, South Africa

Researchers. *Jane Battersby and Jo Hunter-Adams, University of Cape Town*

Study purpose. Nosipho’s profile was developed based on information collected by the Nourished Child Project (2020–2022) and the Nourishing Spaces Project (2017–2020) by the University of Cape Town, a collaboration of universities and the provincial government of the Western Cape. The purpose of these projects was to identify what policies and actions would effectively and coherently address the different faces of child malnutrition in poor urban settings.

Study method. The projects explored the lives of mothers with young children in different urban sites, including the township of Masiphumelele. The *Nourished Child Project* used two methods to engage with mothers, namely: in-depth interviews with mothers focusing on how they navigated buying and cooking food for themselves and their children; and a WhatsApp group with mothers in which participants were asked to reflect on the impact of elements of the food system, urban system, and social services system on their ability to feed their children and keep them healthy. The Nourishing Spaces Project conducted interviews with food retailers and performed field observations on the food environment. The studies also built on previous ethnographic research in Masiphumelele. The study was conducted between the different COVID-19 waves under relatively light lockdown conditions.

Malnutrition context. The Western Cape Province in South Africa has a protracted and complex burden of malnutrition. More than 1 in 10 children under 5 are underweight, the second highest proportion of the South African provinces (despite the Western Cape being the wealthiest); more than one in five children under 5 are stunted (over three times the average rate for upper-middle-income countries). Meanwhile, among children

aged 2 to 14 years, 26 per cent of girls and 22 per cent of boys have overweight or obesity. The percentage of adults affected by overweight and obesity in the Western Cape is the highest of all provinces at 44 per cent for men and 73 per cent for women. The obesity rate for women is particularly severe at 48 per cent.

Case Study #2: Greater Tunis, Tunisia

Researchers. *Hala Ghattas, Christelle Akl, Nehmat El-Helou, Gloria Safadi, Jalila El Ati and the SCALE study team, American University of Beirut, Lebanon and the National Institute of Nutrition and Food Technology, Tunisia.*

Study purpose. Meriem’s profile was drawn from the work of researchers at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon and the National Institute of Nutrition and Food Technology, Tunisia, which focused on tackling school and community drivers of unhealthy diets among children in Arab cities. The purpose was to identify the kinds of foods and food cues that children are exposed to in their daily lives, and to see how these factors influence their eating behaviours. A random sample of children from all socioeconomic groups was included in the study. Meriem’s profile is compiled from a school with middle-class children.

Study method. To capture the influence of children’s food exposures, the study used two methods to gain insights from children’s own perspectives about a typical school day. First, user-centered design workshops with school-children aged 10 to 12 used storyboarding and mind-mapping techniques to help children describe a typical school day from when they woke up until they went to sleep. Second, children wore wearable cameras as an automated image-capture tool (in a method co-designed with children during the workshops). In addition, children’s school neighbourhood food environments were mapped using geospatial techniques. This combination of methods enabled children to pinpoint the contexts in which they encounter

food in a typical school day and provided images of these exposures from their own perspectives. This work is also being complemented by survey research with the children and their parents.

Malnutrition context. Recent malnutrition estimates in Tunisia show that 2.1 per cent of children under 5 are wasted, 8.4 per cent are stunted and 17.2 per cent have overweight, with overweight reaching 24 per cent in school-aged boys and almost 26 per cent in school-aged girls. On the other hand, anaemia is still a major public health problem among Tunisian children. One-third of children under 5 years of age in the Greater Tunis area are estimated to be anaemic.

Case Study #3: Godod, Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines

Researchers. *Nikka Oliver, Cherry Maramag and Mary Christine Castro, Nutrition Center of the Philippines, Alice Nkoroi, Maria Evelyn Carpio, Fiona Watson, UNICEF and Corinna Hawkes, City, University of London.*

Study purpose. Jon's case study is one of a series of six compiled by the Nutrition Center of the Philippines with the support of UNICEF and the Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London. The purpose of the study was to understand children's lived experiences of the food environment to provide qualitative evidence for policy options to prevent overweight and obesity among children. It complements a comprehensive

landscape analysis that reviewed the extent and risk factors for overweight and obesity in children, identified the gaps in governance, policies and programmes, and recommended actions for policymakers. Evidence from the landscape analysis, a related marketing study, and this lived experiences study, provide a robust rationale for strengthening policies and legislation. Communication materials featuring the case studies will be developed to support advocacy efforts.

Study method. Jon's profile drew from the work in Godod, a rural, mountainous municipality in a coastal province. It involved two focus group discussions with local teenagers, most of whom came from low-income households, typical for the area. In each session, at least six to eight participants were asked questions in the local dialect about what they ate and how they spent their days. One session was with 11 to 15 year-olds and the other was with 16 to 18 year-olds. Researchers conducted one individual interview with an adolescent aged 16 to 18 years old. The study was conducted during a COVID-19 lockdown when children were not able to attend in-person schooling as normal.

Malnutrition context. The latest (2018) national nutrition survey data from Zamboanga del Norte showed that among children aged 10 to 19 years old, 33.0 per cent are stunted, 9.9 per cent are wasted and 4.3 per cent have overweight or obesity.