

## Healthier diets for healthy cities

**Authors:** Sharelle Polack, Programme Lead Urban Governance for Nutrition ([spolack@gainhealth.org](mailto:spolack@gainhealth.org)) and Laura Platenkamp, Associate Urban Governance for Nutrition ([lplatenkamp@gainhealth.org](mailto:lplatenkamp@gainhealth.org)), the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN).

### Urbanisation trends

By 2030, it is expected that 6 out of 10 people will live in cities, with 90% of this growth occurring in Africa and Asia, most of it in small to medium-sized cities. Developing countries also dominate the development of megacities, with Jakarta (Indonesia) due to become the most populous city and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and Luanda (Angola) becoming megacities by 2030.<sup>i</sup> Whilst urbanisation is linked to overweight and obesity, and thus to the increase in non-communicable diseases (NCDs), undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are still prevalent. This is known as the increasingly complex challenge of the “triple burden”. In fact, urbanisation and urban environments are drivers of this type of malnutrition and addressing these problems requires an ‘urban-specific’ approach.

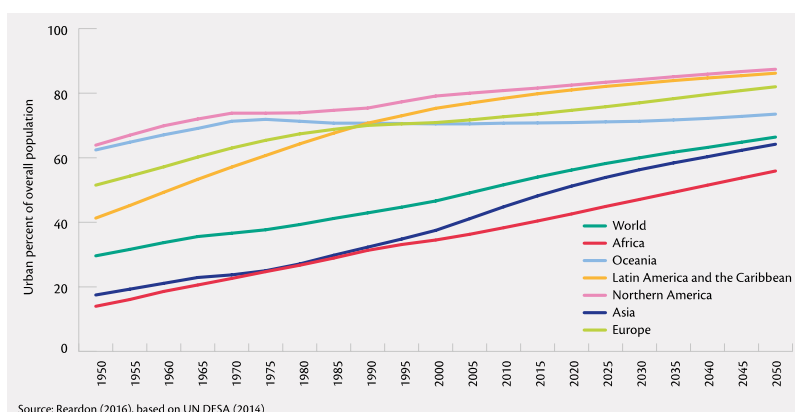


Figure 1 Source: Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition (2016)

### Malnutrition as a characteristic of the urban space

Urbanisation is a driver of the ‘nutrition transition’, the change from diets high in coarse grains, staple cereals, and pulses to increased consumption of animal-sourced foods, sugar, fats and oils, refined grains, and processed foods. It also includes a change to a more sedentary lifestyle that often characterizes living in an urban environment.

The characteristics of urban spaces are at the heart of the drivers of urban malnutrition. Despite an overall decline in underweight and stunting among children between 1985 and 2011 in low and middle-income countries (LMIC), the numbers in urban areas stayed the same, resulting in 31% of stunted and 27% of underweight children living in urban areas.<sup>ii</sup> Obesity prevalence in urban areas for children is 1.08 times higher than in rural areas.<sup>iii</sup> However such averages do not reveal the diversity of malnutrition levels within urban areas and differences between different countries. For example, higher stunting levels have been found for the bottom and top income groups in urban areas for some countries but not others.<sup>iv</sup>

### Living in an urban food environment

The food environment can be understood as the “range of foods *available, affordable, convenient* and *desirable* to people”<sup>v</sup>. The characteristics of food environments in urban areas are distinct from those in rural areas. Living in a city often means:

- ❖ Greater reliance on purchased foods;
- ❖ Higher exposure to marketing and advertising;
- ❖ Higher demand for processed and convenient foods;
- ❖ High demand for street foods;

- ❖ More eating away from the home;
- ❖ Greater variety of food sources (for example supermarkets, markets, street food vendor, small shops)

Additionally, urban environments, and urban slums (where about 1 in 8 people live<sup>vi</sup>), share characteristics that present health challenges, which negatively impact nutrition, including pollution, over-crowding, poor sanitation and open sewage and contamination.<sup>vii</sup>

## Good urban nutrition governance

Urban governance for nutrition can be defined as ‘*all modes of governing, encompassing activities carried out by different actors to guide, steer, control or manage the pursuance of nutrition outcomes in a city*’.<sup>viii</sup> Governance involves government (at all levels), private sector, civil society, community organisations and social structures and may be delivered through laws, policies, norms, power or language of a society.<sup>ix</sup> Nutrition governance should be a process that is transparent, creates accountability, and promotes inclusivity and democracy.

At the city-level there can be a lack of recognition of the importance of, and the role of city governments in, addressing urban nutrition issues. Nutrition and food issues often fall under multiple city Departments therefore inter-departmental alliance building is required. Sometimes there is either no clear mandate for city governments to engage in nutritional issues or where there is a mandate, it is not being actively implemented. There is also still work to be done on how to implement the right mix of actions in different contexts to address urban nutrition issues.<sup>x</sup>

## GAIN's Urban Governance for Nutrition program

The Urban Governance for Nutrition program focuses on supporting city governments to improve nutrition governance. The program assists city governments to develop appropriate policies and initiatives (that fit within national policies), alliance building with governments and key stakeholders (including the private sector), improves understanding of the importance of addressing urban nutrition and provides capacity in applying a range of different interventions.



Figure 2 © GAIN, 2018/ Greg S. Garrett.

<sup>i</sup> Euromonitor International, Megacities: Developing Country Domination, [http://go.euromonitor.com/rs/805-KOK-719/images/MegacitiesExtract.pdf?mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiTURZME9EZ3dNams1WmpZMSIsInQiOiJzOXJ5SkowNldTMFwvaDJla1Q3ZiBjWXhndDRGUW4zOHFxaR6TmF2Zml6V0xTd2g0SnhrdXJaXC9DbWd4aDIJQWVubU5OSWicL3NZWitxWEw5MnFFVWk1d1RDZ3RoMTBDRm9CdldSTWhQcTh1NFJ4bG1cL2U1QnJFcmFkXC94NjE1cFRuIn0%3D](http://go.euromonitor.com/rs/805-KOK-719/images/MegacitiesExtract.pdf?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiTURZME9EZ3dNams1WmpZMSIsInQiOiJzOXJ5SkowNldTMFwvaDJla1Q3ZiBjWXhndDRGUW4zOHFxaR6TmF2Zml6V0xTd2g0SnhrdXJaXC9DbWd4aDIJQWVubU5OSWicL3NZWitxWEw5MnFFVWk1d1RDZ3RoMTBDRm9CdldSTWhQcTh1NFJ4bG1cL2U1QnJFcmFkXC94NjE1cFRuIn0%3D) [last accessed 26 Nov 2018].

<sup>ii</sup> Ruel, M.T. et al. (2017), Urbanization, Food Security and Nutrition, in De Pee, S. et al. (eds.), *Nutrition and Health in a Developing World*, pp. 705-735.

<sup>iii</sup> Id.

<sup>iv</sup> FAO. 2018. *Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2018 – Accelerating progress towards the SDGs*. Bangkok. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO pp 61.

<sup>v</sup> Herforth, A. and Ahmed, S., (2015) The food environment, its effects on dietary consumption and potential for measurement within agriculture-nutrition interventions. *Food Security*, pp.505-520.

<sup>vi</sup> UN Habitat Slum Almanac 2015-2016, <https://unhabitat.org/slum-almanac-2015-2016/>

<sup>vii</sup> Mohiddin, L., Phelps, L., and Walters, T. (2012), Urban malnutrition: a review of food security and nutrition among the urban poor, *Nutrition Works, International Public Nutrition Resource Group*, <http://www.iufn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Nutrition-Works-2012-Urban-malnutrition.pdf> [last accessed 26 Nov 2018].

<sup>viii</sup> Moragues-Faus, A., Sonnino, R. Marsden, T. (2017) Exploring European food system vulnerabilities: Towards integrated food security governance. *Environ. Sci. Policy*. **75**: pp 185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2017.05.015>

<sup>ix</sup> Bevir, M. (2012). *Governance: A very short introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. pp 1.

<sup>x</sup> Gillespie, S., Menon, P., and Kennedy, A. (2015) Scaling up impact on nutrition: what will it take? **6**: pp 440-451.