

Nutrition in City Ecosystems (NICE) – Micronutrient Forum 6th Global Conference

NICE advocating to close the micronutrient gap in secondary cities at the Micronutrient Forum 2023

NICE project coordinator:

Helen Prytherch, Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH). Contact:

helen.prytherch@swisstph.ch

With the following authors of this contribution:

Mathilda Freymond, Nutrition Associate, *Sight and Life* Foundation. Contact:

mathilda_freymond@sightandlife.org

Rachel Natali, Communications Manager, *Sight and Life* Foundation. Contact:

rachel.natali@sightandlife.org

Projections indicate that by 2050, approximately sixty-eight percent of the world's **population will live in urban areas**, with around 90% of this increase occurring in secondary cities and/or small towns of Africa and Asia.¹ While studies on **hidden hunger** have traditionally focused on rural contexts, its prevalence is increasingly acknowledged in urban areas. This shift is driven by **lifestyle changes** and external factors prompting a significant dietary transition globally. This transition involves a notable shift from traditional nutrient- and fibre-rich staples such as millet, legumes, and pulses towards more convenient yet often highly processed foods, such as refined bread, pasta, and foods with added sugars.²

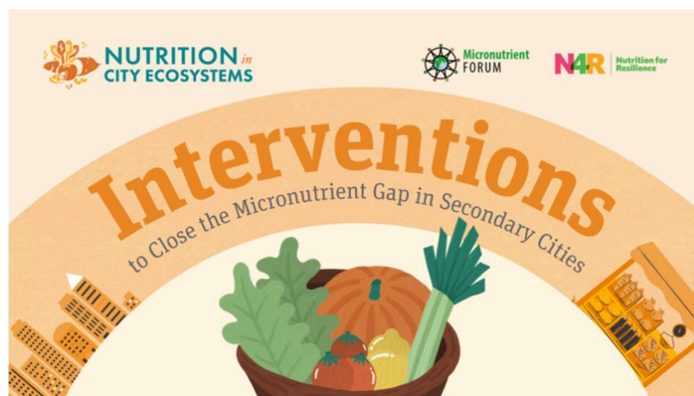
In agricultural development work, the emphasis on rural areas and increasing calorie yield have often been the primary goals of agricultural research. However, with more and more people living in cities, urban food systems become increasingly important, and urban contexts and modern lifestyles also present opportunities to better reach consumers through **behavior change and fortification initiatives**.

Secondary cities, in contrast to primate cities, tend to be better linked with their surrounding foodshed and act as important platforms to trade agricultural produce within their rural surrounding.³ However, the pace of rapid and unplanned urbanization still frequently results in resource degradation, pollution, and inadequate infrastructure adaptation.

Addressing these challenges requires **effective governance of urban food systems**, facilitated through **multisectoral collaboration**. Such collaboration represents an initial step toward transforming food systems and tackling various forms of malnutrition.⁴ Nevertheless, the lack of emphasis on nutrition outcomes within relevant urban **policies and strategies**, weak coordination among stakeholders acting in food systems, insufficient institutional leadership, and the absence of monitoring systems are issues that urgently need to be addressed. A joint effort, making use of best practices across several contexts, is imperative to address these pressing issues.

The Micronutrient Forum

The Micronutrient Forum's 6th Global Conference took place online and at The Hague, Netherlands, October 16-20th 2023, with a thematic focus on "Nutrition for Resilience". The conference shaped a compelling agenda on the interdependence of nutrition and resilience. It provided opportunities to advance integrated research, set new policy and investment priorities and to accelerate progress towards global nutrition and development goals. The Nutrition in City Ecosystems (NICE) project hosted a session on October 19th entitled "Interventions to Close the Micronutrient Gap in Secondary Cities".

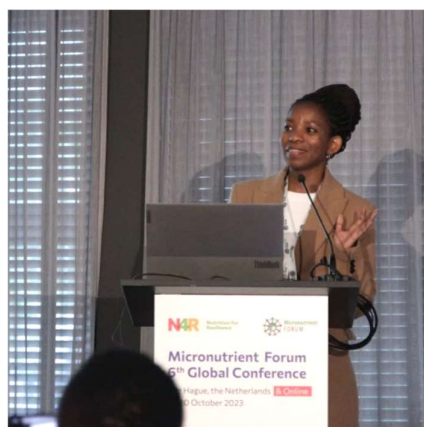


The Session

The session started with opening remarks from **Dr Emorn Udomkesmalee**, Senior Advisor and Former Director of the Institute of Nutrition at Mahidol University, Thailand and currently an Adjunct Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins University. She highlighted the pivotal role of nutrition, underscoring its centrality to 12 out of the 17 SDGs, while emphasizing the particular significance of Goal #17 – Partnership. Furthermore, she drew attention to the evolving nature of life in low- and middle-income countries, marked by increasing urbanization and shifts in dietary and lifestyle patterns. Dr Udomkesmalee underlined that "there is a need to generate demand in secondary cities to influence the supply chain and the consumer's decision for a healthy diet. Targeting peri-urban areas to influence both big cities on one end and the farming communities on the other, is the promising way forward".



*Dr Emorn Udomkesmalee,
Mahidol University*



*Ms Balance Phala, ICLEI World
Secretariat*

Balance Phala, Food Systems Officer at the ICLEI World Secretariat, delved into the unique perspective of secondary cities in reshaping our urban food system. She showcased a compelling case study on AfriFOODLinks, an EU funded project coordinated by ICLEI Africa. Ms Phala highlighted the importance of first understanding the challenges faced by the cities or communities in question before coming up with interventions. Her conclusion emphasised that "we need to translate abstract concepts into real world solutions, which are implementable. And lastly, we need to move beyond only talking about interventions to actually doing them."

Dr Cornelia Speich, Food Scientist and Nutritionist at Swiss TPH, presented on the multifaceted nature of micronutrient deficiencies and the consequent complex interventions needed to address them. She pointed out that starting with dietary diversity could be a significant step forward. Further, Dr Speich stressed that “multi-sectoral collaboration is one of the key components to close the micronutrient gap and to transform food systems. Individual silos or sectors working alone cannot solve these problems.”



Dr Cornelia Speich, Swiss TPH

Finally, **Dr Anicet Kibiriga**, the Mayor of Rusizi, Rwanda, talked to the importance of implementing a nutrition action plan to address micronutrient deficiencies in Rwandan districts. He underscored the pivotal role of the NICE project “as a catalyst for transformative change, for addressing this issue of micronutrient deficiencies through supply of nutrition.” Furthermore, he highlighted the project’s objective “to inspire behavior change within the community members through social marketing.”

After these insightful presentations, Kesso Gabrielle van Zutphen-Küffer, Director of Science at Sight and Life, moderated a panel discussion featuring **Elizabeth Imbo**, Country Project Manager of NICE in Kenya, **Straton Habumugisha**, Country Project Manager of NICE in Rwanda and Dr Cornelia Speich. The panel discussion revolved around three key themes: Firstly, the selection of the nutrition-sensitive value chains; secondly, enhancing knowledge and demand for healthy diets; and thirdly, strategies to reach urban consumers. Each panellist contributed their contextual expertise to the discussion. Elizabeth Imbo guided us through the process of value chain mapping and the iterative steps involved in the final selection value chains in Kenya. Straton Habumugisha expanded on the demand side and underlined, “The knowledge in the communities on nutritious diets is there, but it is not used. That’s why we need social marketing - to allow local communities to take ownership of their nutrition. Ms Elizabeth Imbo reiterated that “people have knowledge, but they either cannot access nutrition (lack of infrastructure) or nutrition is beyond their reach (due to costs).” Additionally, Dr Cornelia Speich added that prioritizing functional capacity is pivotal when bridging the gap between understanding nutritious diets and making informed decisions. Lastly, Ms Imbo talked about schools, as a good entry point to target the most vulnerable children. In Kenya, NICE is engaged in initiatives centered around public procurement, establishing “a model which enables local farmers and suppliers to be able to provide food to schools, parents to be part of the decision making.”



From left to right: Kesso Gabrielle van Zutphen-Küffer; Elizabeth Imbo (Country project manager, NICE Kenya); Straton Habumugisha (Country project manager, NICE Rwanda); Dr Cornelia Speich (Swiss TPH)

To conclude the session, Kesso Gabrielle van Zutphen-Küffer underscored **three key messages** from the discussion:

1. The importance of adopting varied viewpoints for a holistic understanding of food systems.
2. The power of cross-sector collaboration and embracing diverse diets as vital steps towards bridging the micronutrient gap.
3. The significance of generating demand among communities and engaging consumers effectively.

Big thanks again to all panellists, speakers and guests who contributed to the discussion!

Outlook and next steps

Following this engaging session at the Micronutrient Forum 6th Global Conference, we are continuing the exchange with both the ICLEI World Secretariat and ICLEI Africa. These conversations aim to consolidate connections and draw links between the NICE project and the AfriFOODlinks initiative.

For more information on the NICE project see our website: <https://nice-nutrition.ch> and recently published paper: <https://nice.ethz.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Barth-Jaeggi-et-al.-2023-NICE-Baseline.pdf>

References

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