

Evolving Agri-food Systems in Asia

Achieving Food and Nutrition Security by 2030

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In recent years many Asian countries have seen rapid transformation in people's diets and the underlying agri-food system that supplies food. But malnutrition remains a serious challenge for many countries in the region. Only a few Asian countries are on course to meet some of the globally adopted nutrition targets set for 2030 embodied in the SDGs, while most are likely to fall short. According to a recent report published by FAO, about 514 million people in Asia are undernourished, a figure that has remained stagnant for the last three few years after precipitous declines in the decade prior. At the same time, changing lifestyles have led to increased consumption of over-processed food and convenience products that are often less nutritious, raising rates of overweight and obesity.

To accelerate progress in reducing hunger and improve access to healthy diets, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Myanmar Institute for Integrated Development (MIID) organized a regional conference with the financial support of USAID in Yangon to share lessons on what agrifood policies have worked in Asia to reduce hunger and malnutrition and how countries can support more nutritious diets.

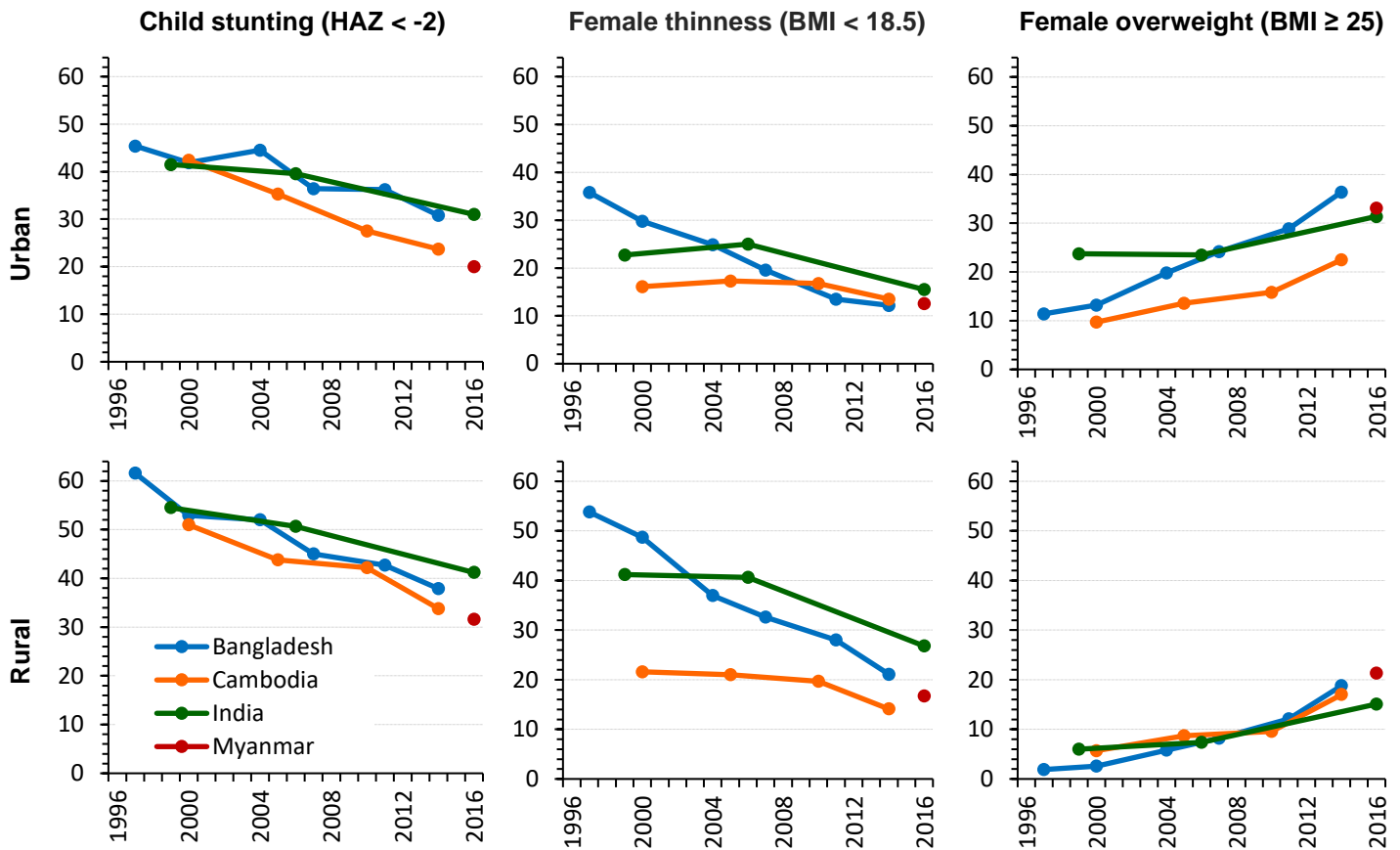
Leveraging AgriFood Systems for Better Diets and Nutrition

The nutrition transition is accelerating rapidly in much of Asia due to income growth and the evolution of agri-food systems. While the poor generally derive a large share of their energy from staple foods (such as rice), as incomes rise, diets diversify into more nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables, and animal products but also more prepared and processed foods that can be unhealthy. However, people's lifestyles also change with income growth. Less healthy diets combined with increasingly sedentary lifestyles are driving rising rates of overweight and obesity and a surge in non-communicable diseases. Overnutrition is increasing in among all income groups and in both urban and rural areas. As food systems continue to evolve the prevalence of obesity will continue to increase at current or higher rates, having critical implications for healthcare budgets and economic development. Meeting food needs is therefore not just about quantity—quality is also important. The simultaneous rise of overnutrition with the lingering prevalence of undernutrition within the same countries, and sometimes even in the same households, has been dubbed the double-burden of malnutrition.

Myanmar presents a case in point. Recent figures from the USAID-supported, 2015 Demographic and Health Survey for Myanmar show that 29% of children under 5 are stunted, with higher rates in rural areas (32%) than urban (20%). Almost 1 in 5 children are underweight and 58% of children are anemic. At the same time, 25.5%

of women are overweight or obese. Malnutrition is therefore a complex, multi-sectoral problem that presents across a continuum, from under-nutrition due to deficiencies in energy, protein, and micronutrients to problems of overweight, obesity, and noncommunicable diseases resulting from poor quality, energy-dense, and micro-nutrient-poor diets.

Figure 1: Changing patterns of malnutrition in South and Southeast Asia



Source: Ecker, based on DHS data (ICF Intl. 2018).

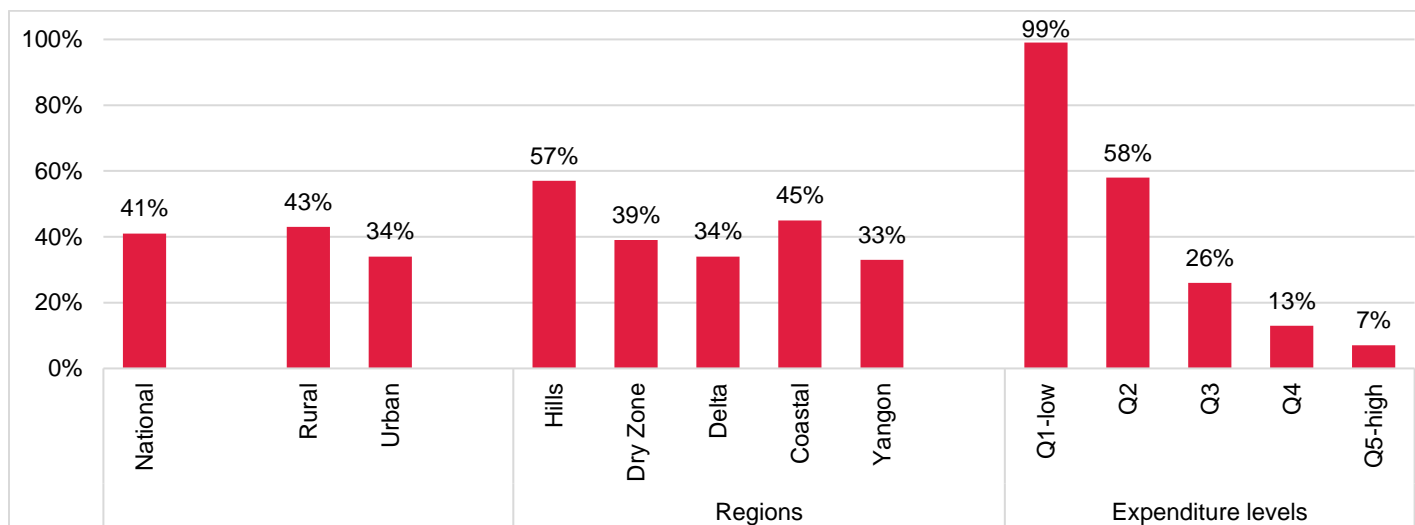
One of the contributing causes of poor diets is the cost of a nutritious diet. In Myanmar a nutritious diet costs more than twice as much as an energy only diet and approximately 40 percent of households nationally cannot afford nutritious meals regularly (Figure 2). The percentage is higher in more remote areas such as the hilly / mountainous regions where production diversity is low, and the availability and consumption of protein rich foods is infrequent. Many fresh and nutrient dense foods are perishable, which limits long distance trade and makes prices largely determined by local supply and productivity. Continued investment in agriculture and diversification of production on farms, in addition to improved value chains for perishable foods, can drive food prices down while improving nutrition and economic opportunities for the poor.

Efficient and Inclusive Agrifood Value chains for Nutrition

Government and the private sector must work together to create an enabling environment for improved diets. Asia’s transforming urban landscape may offer new economic opportunities for farmers and food processors, traders, and vendors. Most rural people today live close to cities where agricultural transformation often takes place. Farmers in peri-urban areas are expected to have greater potential to benefit from agricultural commercialization and specialization and cater to the growing urban demand. The development potentials in peri-urban

and urban areas therefore deserve greater attention from agricultural policy and food security research. Additionally, much of the agri-food system lies beyond the farm, even in lower-middle-income countries. The off-farm component's contribution to the national economies is substantial. For example, in Vietnam and Bangladesh, with each dollar generated in agriculture, another dollar is generated in the related upstream (inputs) and downstream (processing, trade) sectors. The off-farm components of the agri-food system, in terms of both value and employment, continue to expand and dominate agricultural GDP as economies grow. A comprehensive approach to agricultural policy that targets productivity improvements, but also supports upstream and downstream markets and agrifood processing will be critical to support agricultural transformation.

Figure 2: Myanmar population share unable to afford recommended diet (%)



Source: Mahrt et al 2019

Agri-food System Governance and Innovations

Progress on addressing malnutrition is possible when countries' actions reflect commitment at the highest levels. Country-level action that is context specific and well-coordinated across sectors have produced rapid reductions in hunger and malnutrition in the region. The establishment of sound nutrition policy benefits from inter-ministerial coordination that minimizes programmatic overlap and harmonizes activities across a range of sectors given the multi-dimensionality of nutrition. The establishment of milestones and strong monitoring systems that provide feedback on progress can help inform the value of programming. Lastly, there is a need for a single coordinating body at sufficiently high levels of government that can improve accountability and ensure adequate funding. Without high-level government accountability, coordination can lag, friction between ministries can arise, or there can be a lack of buy-in.

Frequently, agrifood system transformation in addition to rapid urbanization leads to new actors entering the food system. Existent governance and market institutions may not meet the concerns of these emerging private sector actors, nor the demands of a growing cadre of middle-class citizens. Consumer demands for safety and quality, and increasingly traceability, requires greater support from national governments and policy, particularly to improve the standards of laboratories that implement testing. In addition, as food systems evolve and become more complex, new technologies are introduced that may challenge existing policies. Addressing these concerns may call for the adoption of new policies and the application of modern technologies to monitor and regulate the food system and hence increased collaboration between the public and private sector.

In addition to addressing the challenge of producing enough food, biotechnology innovations may have the potential to improve resilience and lessen the risk associated with climate change. Many countries in the region have weak policy and enabling environments for biotechnology or do not have adequate strategies for their application. Others have stronger policy frameworks, but an abundance of caution has thus far limited the application of biotechnologies to food though other areas such as biopharmaceuticals have grown tremendously. In other cases, strong government support for biotechnology along with financial support for the establishment of key infrastructure (laboratories, technical skills improvements) has rapidly increased the usage and private sector participation in the agri-biotech sector. Many of the smaller countries in the region will not have the resources to pursue biotechnology development on their own, and existing regional mechanisms for collaboration and technology transfer will be needed.

Food fortification is a sound public health strategy because it can reach large segments of at-risk populations through existing food delivery systems, without requiring major changes in existing consumption patterns. The effectiveness of fortification programs is not only determined by the biological efficacy of the fortified food but also by its effective implementation, which includes, among others, monitoring, quality assurance and control, as well as compliance by industry with fortification standards. In countries where food processing is still at a nascent stage and localized in small cottage industries, implementation of food fortification policy can be hastened through transparent dialogue with the private sector, the development of clear standards and manuals, and the elimination of duties and taxes on fortificants and the equipment needed to incorporate them into food vehicles.

Facilitating knowledge exchange

The conference made clear the importance of sharing lessons from across Asia that have effectively reduced malnutrition. Convening researchers, policymakers, and development partners to share successful experiences can accelerate implementation and catalyze the next era of rapid reduction of malnutrition in Asia. In many cases the policy challenges in one country may have been experienced in other countries. Understanding and re-interpreting these lessons are important channels to influence policy. Networks of policy experts who can quickly supply knowledge and experiences in these situations makes them an asset to policy discussions. The ReSAKSS-Asia Program supported by USAID is conducting cross-country policy research to accelerate growth and transformation of agriculture and food systems and creating a network of researchers and policy experts to share lessons across countries to improve policies for agriculture, nutrition, and food security.

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