

Addressing the double burden of malnutrition in Egypt:

Report on a stakeholder workshop on key challenges, policy solutions, and research opportunities

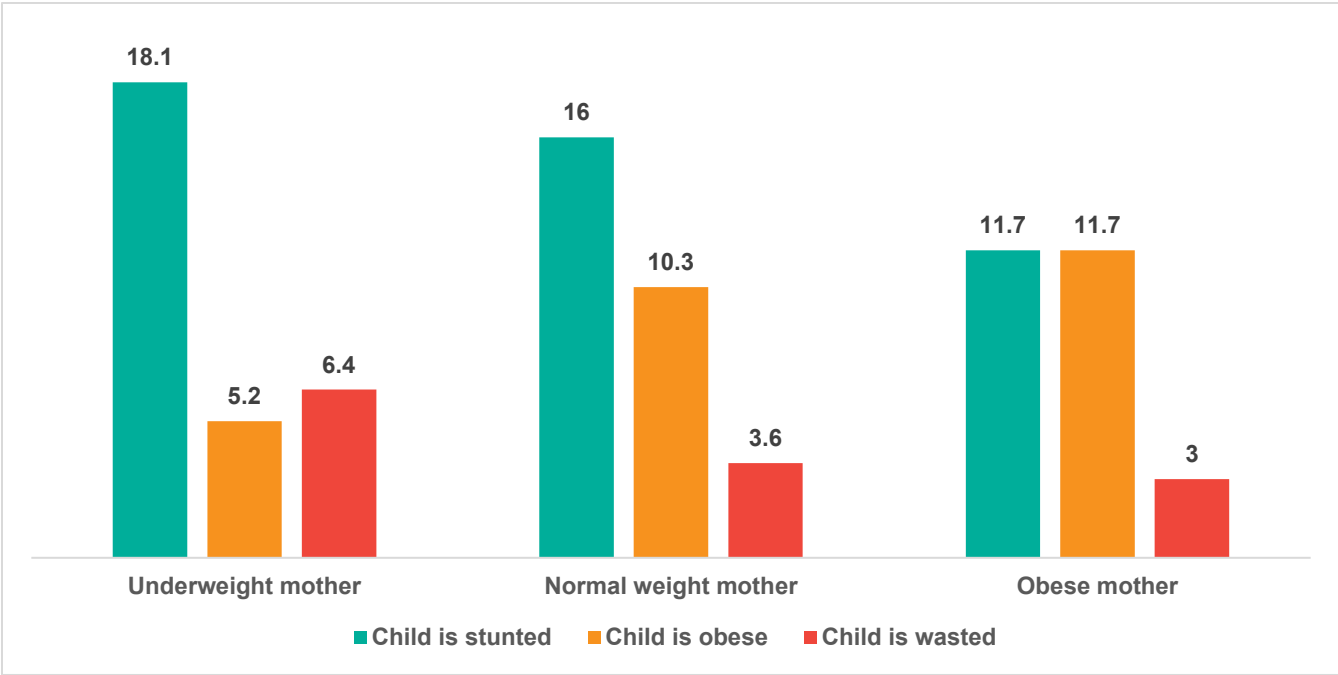
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Key messages

- ▶ Parliamentarians, researchers, and development practitioners shared perspectives on the double burden of malnutrition in Egypt in roundtable discussions.
- ▶ Infrastructure gaps and policy and research strategy fragmentation are highlighted as challenges to accessibility of healthy food.
- ▶ Aggressive ads/media environment and inefficient nutrition education programs are regarded as negatively impacting consumer behavior.
- ▶ Economic factors are widely identified as a major driver of malnutrition.
- ▶ Recommended solutions include raising nutrition literacy, transitioning from food subsidies to vouchers, improving nutrition services infrastructure, taxing unhealthy foods, and fortifying staple foods.
- ▶ Participants called for continued dialogue between researchers and policymakers.

The double burden of malnutrition refers to the co-existence of under-nutrition (wasting and stunting) and overnutrition (obesity and overweight). In Egypt, according to the 2021 Family Health Survey, 11.5% of children under the age of five are overweight or obese and 12.8% are stunted. Over and undernutrition can also co-occur at the household level: within households characterized by maternal obesity, 12% of children are stunted (figure 1). In addition, rates of micronutrient deficiencies such as anemia have historically been high, though screening of school children shows a remarkable decline from 2019 to 2024 (Egypt National Health Strategy 2024). Malnutrition in all its forms has significant long-term economic consequences through reduced productivity and perpetuation of poverty across generations.

Figure 1: Prevalence of malnutrition among children under five by maternal nutritional status (%)



Source: 2021 Egypt Family Health Survey (CAPMAS 2022).

In earlier IFPRI work, Ecker et al. (2016) identified four key drivers of malnutrition in Egypt: the post-2011 economic instability, the food subsidy system, insufficient nutrition-sensitive investment, and changes in dietary patterns. This policy note serves as the first step in a renewed research agenda aimed at informing policy to address the double burden of malnutrition in Egypt.

The sections below summarize stakeholder views shared during the workshop held in Cairo on December 18, 2024, that brought together researchers, development practitioners, and members of Parliament. The dialogue was guided by a matrix of questions to understand stakeholder views on the current status, constraints to improvement, potential policy solutions, and role of research in informing policies for all aspects of the food environment: physical, socio-cultural, and economic and political (Barling and Fanzo, 2018).

The workshop was held as part of the “Bridging Evidence and Policy” (BEP) seminar series, a collaborative initiative by the Egyptian Food Bank (EFB), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and the Sawiris Foundation for Social Development (SFSD).

Stakeholder Perspectives

The workshop participants were carefully selected to gather opinions from a broad range of experts and stakeholders including members of Parliament, representatives of philanthropic organizations, development practitioners from multilateral organizations and local NGOs, researchers, and academics. Roundtable discussions were held among pre-assigned groups with mixed stakeholder profiles in two 45-minute sessions. The first session focused on status quo and constraints and the second session focused on potential policies and areas where more research is needed. Moderators and notetakers were

assigned to each group to initiate the discussion by asking the questions outlined in figure 2 and record comments.

The report below summarizes common themes that emerged in review of the notes compiled across all discussion groups.

Figure 2: Issue-theme matrix of the discussion on the food environment in Egypt

	Questions	Physical Aspect	Social and Cultural Aspects	Economic and Political Aspects
Status quo	How and to what extent do the [box 1; box 2; box 3] contribute to the malnutrition situation in Egypt? How do these compare to global and regional contexts?	[box 1] Availability of and accessibility to food and existing/lack of infrastructure (including supply chain issues)	[box 2] Dietary preferences, dietary habits, and nutrition education, etc.	[box 3] Poverty, food prices (including food subsidies), food diversity within social protection programs, etc.
Constraints	What are the constraints to moving towards a more nutritious diets in Egypt in terms of [box 4; box 5; box 6]?	[box 4] Availability of and accessibility to food and facilities for households (including supply chain issues)	[box 5] Social and cultural factors	[box 6] Household income, food prices, government budget allocations
Policies	What policies could realistically be proposed within the Egyptian policymaking context to address [box 7; box 8; box 9]? What institutions are responsible in Egypt to monitor and improve [box 7; box 8; box 9]?	[box 7] Availability of and accessibility to nutritious food in homes, education facilities, CBOs, etc. (including supply chain issues)	[box 8] Health and nutrition education, food labels, retail environment, the role of media	[box 9] Production of nutritious foods, food prices (including food subsidies), food diversity within social protection programs, etc.
Research role	How and at what stages of policy-making can the research community contribute evidence to support the government and assistance programs in terms of [box 10; box 11; box 12]? Would strong cost-benefit evidence on this issue mitigate existing constraints?	[box 10] Availability of and accessibility to nutritious food (including supply chain issues)	[box 11] Dietary preferences, dietary habits, health and nutrition education, food labels, retail environment, the role of media, etc.	[box 12] Production of nutritious foods, food prices (including food subsidies), food diversity within social protection programs, etc.

Availability of healthy diets

This theme included the physical aspect of the food environment: agricultural production in Egypt as well as supply chain infrastructure and logistics systems that influence availability of high-quality nutritious foods, such as transportation networks, storage facilities, market connectivity, and the proximity of food sources to consumers. The participants described the lack of policy coherence around issues of food production and infrastructure as a major challenge.

In terms of agricultural production, soil degradation and low uptake of modern irrigation practices negatively affect yields while the quality of fruits and vegetables is negatively affected by overuse of pesticides. Moreover, farm systems tend towards monocultures of cash crops rather than supplying a variety of nutritious foods.

Discussants agreed that there are challenges to food availability particularly in remote and underserved areas. A lack of integrated supply chains combined with long distances, incomplete coverage by road networks, and under-investment in refrigerated transportation increases costs and leads to spoilage and

food waste. A particular example is the milk surplus in New Valley governorate which cannot be profitably exported to other governorates to meet nutritional needs.

Parliamentarians mentioned the following actions that should be explored as policy responses focused on food availability:

- Removing current legal barriers to food donations.
- Improving road infrastructure.
- Supporting establishment of local milk processing facilities.
- Establishing civil society-led consumer cooperatives for affordable food distribution.

Demand for healthy diets

This theme included the social aspect of the food environment, such as norms and cultural factors that influence eating habits within families, schools, and communities.

Participants noted that consumers in Egypt are well into a nutrition transition away from traditional diets towards more highly processed and less nutritious foods. Researchers and policymakers pointed out that there is a significant gap in nutrition literacy. They indicated that schools are not effectively promoting healthy eating habits. Moreover, development practitioners noted that school canteens prioritize profits from selling junk food rather than providing nutritious food.

The consensus among participants was that social media and television advertising play a major role in shaping food preferences in Egypt. Participants agreed that unhealthy food, such as fast food, junk food, candy bars and sweets, is often portrayed as aspirational in advertising campaigns.

Parliamentarians proposed providing mothers with nutrition education and involving them in school meal programs to prepare nutritious meals for schoolchildren.

Development practitioners and researchers also suggested as potential policies to consider:

- Improving nutrition at schools through projects for children to grow food, “taste education” for children to introduce diverse and nutritious foods, nutrition education for teachers, and regulations of the intra-mural sale of unhealthy foods and beverages.
- Imposing taxes on unhealthy products such as sweets and sweetened products.
- Subsidizing nutritious foods.
- Strengthening food labeling regulations.
- Encouraging supermarkets to also offer culturally acceptable, nutritious, and affordable foods.
- Banning advertisements for unhealthy products targeting children.
- Promoting affordable and nutritious diets through nutrition literacy programmes and social media

Accessibility of healthy diets

This theme covered the economic and political aspects of food environment and encompasses food pricing, poverty levels, household income, economic factors that influence the affordability of nutritious foods as well as government regulations and policies.

The discussions revealed a shared consensus among participants that economic constraints are a primary driver of malnutrition in Egypt. Rising food prices pose a significant barrier to food access. According to researchers in the workshop, poor households in Egypt prioritize food quantity over nutritional value.

Participants acknowledged role of Egypt's food subsidy system which subsidizes calorie-dense foods. However, parliamentarians emphasized that switching to cash transfers may undermine access to food for vulnerable populations during times of inflation.

Researchers also brought up the issue of agricultural and trade policies that emphasize export of high-value food items, while supporting imports of wheat. Researchers recommended better policy coherence and coordination, namely:

- A high-level food and nutrition security coordination authority to align food, health, and agricultural policies¹.
- Regular reviews and updates of policies as needed.

There were mixed opinions on how to move beyond the food subsidy system, with Parliamentarians more focused on political constraints and the importance of maintaining popular support and researchers more focused on the nutritional impacts.

- Voucher system that would allow beneficiaries to purchase specific nutritious foods (e.g., chicken and fish).
- Cash based systems with continuous updating for inflation.
- Permanent funding of the fortification of subsidized bread with iron and folic acid through the state budget

Integrating Research and Policy

Across all the themes, participants' feedback on questions about the future research agenda focused less on the specifics of topics where evidence is needed and more on the general status of communication between researchers and policymakers. Participants broadly called for more collaboration between research institutions and policymakers and for shifting from theoretical studies to actionable research outcomes including piloting and evaluating the effects of specific policies such as those suggested in the workshop.

In terms of structural changes to support this, participants recommended that a centralized database of agriculture and nutrition data and a nation-wide nutrition survey is needed. Parliamentarians proposed research liaison offices in government agencies to connect evidence with policy needs, researchers called for more collaboration through Memorandums of Understanding, while development practitioners pointed out that the private sector should be involved and financially support research.

Discussion

THE WORKSHOP SHOWED STRONG INTEREST ACROSS STAKEHOLDER GROUPS ON INCREASED RESEARCH TO SUPPORT POLICYMAKING AROUND NUTRITION IN EGYPT. MANY OF THE PROPOSED POLICIES THAT EMERGED IN ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS HAVE SHOWN EFFECTIVENESS IN OTHER CONTEXTS (I.E., VOUCHER SYSTEMS, MICRONUTRIENT FORTIFICATION, CASH TRANSFERS). HOWEVER, THE SUCCESS OF SUCH POLICIES IS HIGHLY CONTEXTUAL, AND POLICYMAKERS MUST PAY ATTENTION TO TRADE-OFFS INCLUDING DIRECT AND INDIRECT COSTS INTRODUCED

¹ PM Decree 2765/2023 established a High Level Committee for Food and Nutrition Systems Committee with policy setting and coordination functions, reporting to the Prime Minister's office and supported by an appointed Technical Committee. To date, the Committee is not fully operational

THROUGH OTHER MARKET DISTORTIONS. GREATER TRANSPARENCY OF EXISTING DATA ON NUTRITION STATUS AND CONSUMPTION PATTERNS, THAT HAS ALREADY BEEN COLLECTED BY THE GOVERNMENT, WOULD ALLOW FOR IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF THE PROJECTED IMPACTS OF SUCH POLICIES. SOME POLICY APPROACHES COULD ALSO BE PILOTED IN A SMALL NUMBER OF SETTINGS (I.E., SCHOOL FEEDING) TO MEASURE THE EFFECTIVENESS AT CHANGING NUTRITION OUTCOMES USING A COMBINATION OF TOOLS INCLUDING RIGOROUS IMPACT EVALUATIONS AND COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS.

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