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Moving nutrition further up the development priority list in Egypt

This policy note is one in a series of four notes that summarize key findings and recommendations from 32 seminars organized by IFPRI between 2016 and 2020 under the Evaluating Impact and Building Capacity Project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and from related research done in collaboration with national and international partners in Egypt. The briefs have been prepared on the basis of a joint symposium and are intended to give policymakers and program designers in the areas of social protection, nutrition, agricultural policy, and the digitalization of agriculture a quick overview of research-based recommendations on key policy issues that will better enable Egypt to achieve several of the goals outlined in the Sustainable Development Strategy 2030.

Addressing all forms of malnutrition – both undernutrition and overnutrition – remains a human and economic development challenge that Egypt must overcome. This brief highlights three areas of action to significantly improve the nutritional status of all Egyptians:

- ▶ Make domestic food policies more nutrition-sensitive and incentivize food producers and marketers to shift to the production, processing, and marketing of healthier foods.
- ▶ Expand ongoing awareness and educational campaigns, such as the 100 Million Healthy Lives initiative, to promote improved nutrition and to disseminate nutrition knowledge. The COVID-19 pandemic is an additional reminder and rationale for investing in healthy diets and sustainable food systems.
- ▶ Promote research to make nutrition policy more effective and efficient, including by increasing collection of nutrition-related data and better sharing of already collected data among ministries, research institutes, and other stakeholders.

Addressing all forms of malnutrition – both undernutrition and overnutrition – is an integral element of the Sustainable Development Goals and a top priority of governments around the globe, including Egypt's. According to the latest Demographic and Health Survey for Egypt, 21.4 percent of Egyptian children under five years of age are stunted in their physical growth and at the same time about 15 percent are overweight. Moreover, about half of Egyptian women are obese, ranking Egypt among countries with the highest rates of obesity in the world.

Economically, malnutrition reduces citizens' productivity and health, which ultimately lowers earnings and income and hampers national economic growth.¹ Additionally, poor nutrition increases the costs of healthcare, both to the overall public and privately to families and individuals. At the individual level, malnutrition can have life-long adverse effects on an individual's physical and cognitive abilities, health, and economic potential. In addition, overnutrition (obesity) is strongly linked with noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), which account for 84 percent of deaths in Egypt.² Obesity is also an important risk factor for respiratory diseases, including H1N1 influenza and COVID-19.³ Several recent studies show that obesity is an important risk factor for COVID-19 complications and mortality. Given Egypt's situation – with significant levels of both undernutrition and overnutrition and a high prevalence of NCDs – eliminating both forms of malnutrition will require focusing the attention of policymakers on these important development challenges so that they can lead efforts to put in place innovative nutrition policies and programs in Egypt.

Addressing child malnutrition will require improving access to healthy food, better care for children and women, and better health services

As shown in Figure 1, there are three principal underlying determinants of good nutrition in young children – a good diet, proper care, and a healthy environment with good access to health services.

- ▶ The diets of young children in Egypt are commonly characterized by low diversity in the foods consumed and sub-optimal meal frequency, both of which are strong predictors of stunting.⁴ Consumption of energy-dense and unhealthy diets, which are usually high in calories but low in micronutrients, has become widespread and, hence, is pushing up overnutrition rates.
- ▶ Despite significant progress in the provision of healthcare to mothers and associated improvements in child malnutrition,⁵ mothers' knowledge about proper infant and child-feeding practices remains inadequate. For example, breastfeeding practices are not optimal, as mothers have little understanding of the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding.⁶
- ▶ Households' access to health services, sanitation services, and clean water have significantly improved across Egypt in the past three decades – an important policy success. However,

¹ For instance, the economic loss associated with malnutrition in Egypt is estimated to be about 2 percent of GDP Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition. 2016. *Food systems and diets: Facing the challenges of the 21st century*. London, UK. <https://www.glopan.org/foresight1/>

² World Health Organization. 2018. *Noncommunicable diseases country profiles 2018*. Geneva. <https://www.who.int/nmh/publications/ncd-profiles-2018/en/>

³ Deitz, W., and C. Santos-Burgoa. 2020. "Obesity and its implications for COVID-19 mortality." *Obesity*. 28: 1005-1005. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/oby.22818>

⁴ Ecker, O.; P. Al-Riffai, C. Breisinger, and R. El-Batrawy. 2016. *Nutrition and economic development: Exploring Egypt's exceptionalism and the role of food subsidies*. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2499/9780896292383>

⁵ Hashad, R., 2019. *Changes in height-for-age of Egyptian children 1995 to 2014*. ERF Working Paper No. 1357. <https://erf.org.eg/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/1357.pdf>

⁶ El-Enbaby, H.; O. Ecker, J.L. Figueroa, J.L. Leroy, and C. Breisinger. 2019. *Characteristics of smallholder farm households in Upper Egypt: Implications for nutrition-sensitive agricultural interventions*. MENA RP Working Paper 20. Washington, DC, and Cairo, Egypt: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). <https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.133262>

continued efforts are needed since the quality of drinking water, sanitation, and health services continues to be underdeveloped.⁷

Figure 1: The underlying determinants of good nutrition – challenges to overcome in Egypt



Source: S. Gillespie, IFPRI.

These three underlying determinants of a child’s nutritional status – food, care, and health – interact with each other in driving children’s nutritional status (Figure 1). Their quality is also affected by the broader enabling environment which includes, but is not limited to, the political and cultural environment, poverty levels, women’s empowerment, and environmental changes.

Reversing current trends in obesity requires sustained and integrated actions

Obesity is rising in Egypt, including in rural areas. Contrary to the conventional view that overweight and obesity rates are urban problems, recent findings by IFPRI researchers show that body weights among the rural population in Egypt have been rising over the past few decades, sometimes at faster rates than in urban areas.⁸

Although many of the causes of Egypt’s recent rise in rural obesity remain unexplored, ongoing structural transformations in rural areas and urbanization of rural livelihoods are certainly contributing factors. In the absence of effective national and regional interventions and efforts to curb this trend, overweight and obesity rates can be expected to continue increasing in coming decades. Yet, to date, efforts targeting obesity in Egypt, as in many other countries, have focused

⁷ Ministry of Health and Population [Egypt], El-Zanaty and Associates [Egypt], and ICF International. 2015. *Egypt Demographic and Health Survey 2014*. Cairo, Egypt and Rockville, Maryland, USA. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/fr302/fr302.pdf>

⁸ Abay, K., 2 February 2020. <https://www.slideshare.net/ifpri/kibrom-abay-ifpri-2020-ifpri-egypt-fao-seminar-food-policies-and-their-implications-on-overweight-and-obesity-trends>

on urban residents. These research findings on the significant rising burden of rural obesity in Egypt reinforce the need for new and integrated initiatives in both urban and rural areas equally. National and international experiences associated with the still unfolding COVID-19 pandemic further justify such integrated approaches and actions to address obesity. Indeed, COVID-19 is triggering changes in food policies in many countries. For instance, in response to the significant impact of excess weight on COVID-19 related complications and deaths, the United Kingdom recently introduced a nationwide strategy to tackle obesity.⁹

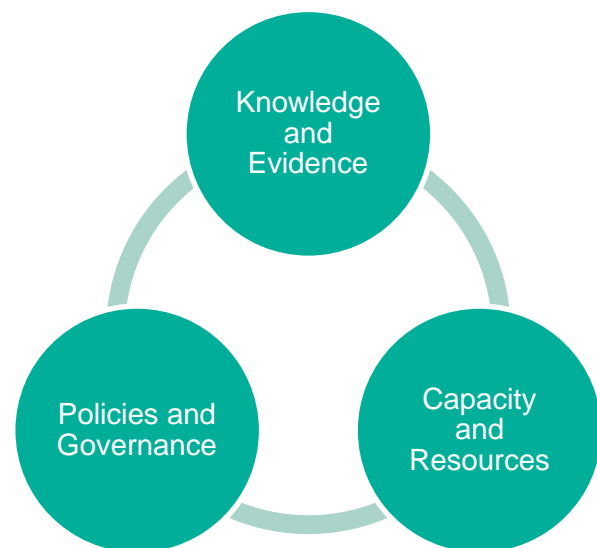
Improving nutrition in Egypt will require decisive actions in policies and governance, capacity and resources, and knowledge and evidence

- 1) **Policies and governance:** Restructure food subsidies either toward a more diversified food basket or toward cash transfers to improve nutrition

Food consumption in Egypt is highly affected by the country's food subsidy (ration-card) system. The food subsidy, according to a 2015/16 evaluation, was found to increase the risk of the double burden of malnutrition (overnutrition and undernutrition) for children.¹⁰ Some agricultural and food security policies in Egypt favor production of energy-rich staple crops, with important implications for the composition of diets in the domestic food environment. Even following the inflationary pressures of the recent economic crises and economic reforms of past decades, energy-dense diets remain relatively cheaper than more nutritious diets, encouraging overconsumption and, hence, overweight and obesity.¹¹

As Egypt satisfies a substantial share of its food demand through imports, trade policies play important roles in shaping domestic food systems. Our recent findings show that an increase in the tariff rate on the components of "unhealthy" diets is associated with a slight reduction in the obesity rate.¹² These pieces of evidence justify the implementation of nutrition-sensitive food policies, which may require reforming food or agricultural subsidies to encourage the production and consumption of healthier foods.

Figure 2: Areas requiring decisive action to improve nutrition in Egypt



Source: Authors.

⁹ UK Department of Health & Social Care, 27 July 2020. Tackling obesity: empowering adults and children to live healthier lives. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-obesity-government-strategy/tackling-obesity-empowering-adults-and-children-to-live-healthier-lives>

¹⁰ Ecker, O.; P. Al-Riffai, C. Breisinger, and R. El-Batrawy. 2016. *Nutrition and economic development: Exploring Egypt's exceptionalism and the role of food subsidies*. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2499/9780896292383>

¹¹ Asfaw, A. 2007. Do government food price policies affect the prevalence of obesity? Empirical evidence from Egypt. *World Development* 35 (4): 687-701.

¹² Headey, D.D.; and H. Alderman. 2019. The relative caloric prices of healthy and unhealthy foods differ systematically across income levels and continents. *Journal of Nutrition*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxz158>

2) **Capacity and resources:** *Build the capacity of local governments to effectively deliver nutrition services*

For local governments to more effectively deliver the health, education, and other nutrition-support services needed to ensure that all Egyptians are well-nourished will require strengthening the human resource and institutional capacity of government offices. This will necessitate mobilizing significant new resources. Adding more nutrition specialists to the workforce of local governments will improve their capacity to implement effective nutrition programs for the benefit of all. Moreover, ensuring that sufficient local government staff are in place with appropriate training in public health nutrition is particularly crucial for scaling up nutrition programs across Egypt.

3) **Knowledge and evidence:** *Establish and extend the evidence base to formulate effective nutrition policies and programs*

Strengthening the evidence base to guide the design of policy and of nutrition programs will require increasing the collection of nutrition-related data, sharing any data collected, widely disseminating the results of data analyses among ministries and other agencies, and promoting additional rigorous research to generate new evidence. Data on nutrition in Egypt are scarce, and those that are available, even from the Egypt Demographic and Health Survey, suffer from measurement issues.¹³ The production of high-quality nationally representative nutrition data will allow for accurate monitoring of malnutrition trends, while high-quality research using such data can inform existing initiatives and guide broader nutrition policies in Egypt.

Nutrition-sensitive agricultural policies can help address malnutrition, especially if coupled with complementary, context-specific interventions

Linkages between agriculture and nutrition operate through several channels in Egypt. For instance, our recent study using survey data from Upper Egypt shows that the majority of farm households purchase most of their food and sell most of their crops.¹⁴ Conventionally, interventions to increase agricultural production are expected to generate income effects as well as home-consumption effects. In contexts like Egypt, however, the effect of increased income on household welfare levels is likely to be significantly more important than the home-consumption effect because smallholder farmers are generally well-connected to domestic markets. Such findings provide the rationale for context-specific and nutrition-specific agricultural interventions to address malnutrition. Furthermore, agricultural interventions that are nutrition-sensitive by design are shown to be more effective when coupled with complementary interventions, including behavior change communication and education.¹⁵

Current initiatives to support nutrition in Egypt should be scaled up

The government of Egypt is cognizant of the malnutrition challenges hampering human and economic development. Evolving efforts are in place to address these challenges. Several ministries have launched initiatives and programs to improve nutrition, such as those that screen school children for

¹³ Figueroa, J.L.; and Kurdi, S., 2019. *Ex post adjustment for measurement error in stunting calculations: An illustration from Egypt*. *Public Health Nutrition*, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980019003100>

¹⁴ El-Enbavy, H.; O. Ecker, J.L. Figueroa, J.L. Leroy, and C. Breisinger. 2019. *Characteristics of smallholder farm households in Upper Egypt: Implications for nutrition-sensitive agricultural interventions*. MENA RP Working Paper 20. Washington, DC, and Cairo, Egypt: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). <https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.133262>

¹⁵ Ruel, M.T.; A.R. Quisumbing, and M. Balagamwala. 2018. "Nutrition-sensitive agriculture: What have we learned so far?" *Global Food Security*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2018.01.002>

anemia, stunting, and obesity. However, these initiatives have mostly been fragmented and not sustainable.

The most important and largest of these initiatives is 100 Million Healthy Lives. This is a national campaign launched by President El-Sisi to screen individuals for hepatitis-C and other NCDs. The campaign aims to treat all those with any NCD and to build people's awareness of the critical need to improve nutritional outcomes, particularly for young children. The political commitment to improving nutrition and preventing and treating NCDs manifested in this initiative offers a great opportunity to make a significant contribution to eradicating the double burden of malnutrition in Egypt. The COVID-19 pandemic further justifies these initiatives and the need to scale up these efforts. However, in addition to awareness, policies should be put in place to guide incentives that consumers face in choosing what foods to include in their diet, both encouraging the consumption of some products while discouraging the consumption of others. Sin taxes are an example of the sort of policies that are likely to influence behavior.

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IFPRI is a CGIAR Research Center

IFPRI Headquarters

1201 Eye St, NW | Washington, DC 20005 USA
T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606
Email: ifpri@cgiar.org | www.ifpri.org | www.ifpri.info

IFPRI-EGYPT

2 Port Said Street, Victoria Square, Maadi, Cairo, Egypt
T. +202-23591144 | F. +202-23591143
Email: ifpri-egypt@cgiar.org | www.egyptssp.ifpri.info