



Synopsis: Accelerating progress in improving diets and nutrition in Ethiopia*

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Abstract

Ethiopia has witnessed significant reductions in child mortality, undernutrition and communicable diseases, but more substantial and faster progress is still needed. The rise in overweight and obesity and in non-communicable diseases, particularly in urban areas, is alarming and requires urgent policy and programmatic attention. Unhealthy diets are the drivers of both forms of malnutrition and are the underlying cause of significant proportion of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Maintaining the relatively high breastfeeding practices and increasing the diversity of diets will be critical. Implementation of effective nutrition messaging that shapes consumer behavior to adopt healthy dietary patterns, while bridging gaps in reach and quality of nutrition messaging is warranted. The health extension program that is the cornerstone of the health sector transformation may need to be redesigned in a way that improves reach, quality, and minimize the risk of burnout of frontline health workers. Interventions focusing on making healthy diets affordable, accessible and available are urgently needed.

Summary

Ethiopia has made laudable progress in reducing child mortality, undernutrition, and communicable diseases over the past two decades. This progress needs to continue but also to accelerate if national and international nutrition and health targets are to be met. Moreover, the recent rapid rise in overweight and obesity and non-communicable diseases, particularly in urban areas, is alarming and requires urgent policy and programmatic attention. Unhealthy, monotonous diets are key drivers of undernutrition, overnutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies and are the underlying cause of a significant proportion of communicable and non-communicable diseases in the country. This suggests that improving diet quality should be made a top priority in the fight against all forms of malnutrition in Ethiopia. To achieve this, maintaining the relatively high breastfeeding practices and increasing the diversity of diets will be critical. Implementation of effective messaging that shapes

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consumer behavior to adopt healthy dietary patterns, while bridging gaps in the reach and quality of nutrition messaging is also warranted. The health extension program that is the cornerstone of the health sector transformation may need to be redesigned in a way that improves its reach and quality and minimize the risk of burnout of the frontline health workers. Finally, interventions focusing on making healthy diets affordable, accessible, and available are urgently needed.

Challenges

We identify four major challenges facing Ethiopia in the near future that must inform the design of diet and nutrition-focused policies and programs:

1) Demographic changes

Ethiopia's population is expected to continue to grow both in urban and rural areas. The population growth in the urban areas is faster, but given the size of the rural population, it will take decades before the urban population eclipses the rural population. Rapid population growth will stretch the country's ability to provide decent education, health care, and other basic services. This also increases the demand for food, putting more pressure on land, water, and natural resources.

2) Nutrition transition

With urbanization and income growth, dietary patterns will shift towards higher consumption of animal products and processed foods. This, combined with sedentary lifestyles, is likely to increase the risk of overweight and obesity, as already witnessed in urban areas. Overweight and obesity, undernutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies will thus constitute a triple-burden that challenges our ability to eradicate all forms of malnutrition.

3) Pervasive inequalities

Inequalities in income, between rural and urban communities, and across genders are impeding poverty reduction, economic growth, and the eradication of all forms of malnutrition. Women's status is a key determinant of maternal and child nutrition, thus the returns to investing in efforts to empower women are high.

4) Climate change and degradation of natural resources

Climate change, extreme weather events, and the frequency and intensity of droughts are increasing. These impacts will vary across Ethiopia's agro-ecological zones, but increasing weather anomalies, whether droughts or floods, are likely to cause localized food shortages, especially in more remote areas that are poorly connected to the major food value chains and food markets.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence synthesis, the following recommendations are made:

- **Increase production and consumption of nutrient-dense foods using nutrition-sensitive fiscal policies**

Revoking sugar subsidies, addressing the constraints to expanding production of nutrient-rich foods, and removing value-added taxes from nutrient-rich foods, such as fruit and vegetables, all are viable policy or programmatic options that should be implemented urgently.

- **Maintain the relatively high rates of breastfeeding**

More stringent laws and regulations on the marketing of breastmilk substitutes are needed to sustain the benefits of prolonged breastfeeding of infants and young children.

- **Address risk of food safety**

The increasing reliance of Ethiopian households on markets for food provisioning and efforts to increase consumption of nutrient-dense foods that frequently are perishable is likely to increase food safety concerns. Strengthening monitoring along the value chain, increasing the capacity of value chain actors, and improving water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) conditions will be critical.

- **Bridge inequalities through social protection/school feeding**

Wealth inequalities and rural/urban disparities should be addressed to prevent further widening of dietary and nutritional inequalities. Given the long-term consequences of poor diets and malnutrition, such inequalities should be addressed through nutrition-sensitive social protection, e.g., the Productive Safety Net Programme, and school feeding programs.

- **Increase the scope of social behavioral change communication topics and targets while ensuring adequate support to Health Extension Workers**

Expanding nutrition education targets to reach not only women and children, but also men, adolescents, and urban households is needed given the widespread consumption of unhealthy diets and the high prevalence of malnutrition and associated diet-related diseases. However, such measures would require an increase in the number of Health Extension Workers and further strengthening of their capacity, as well as stronger partnership with community leaders.

- **Strengthen implementation capacity**

The complexity of the problem of malnutrition requires multi-sectoral interventions. Given the tradition of sector-specific policymaking and implementation, the capacity of national and local government agencies should be built so that they can better design, lead, coordinate, and effectively implement complex interventions. Moreover, government's capacity to respond in a timely and effective manner to increasing shocks, whether economic, weather, conflict, or health, should continue to be strengthened. The pace at which this capacity is developed will determine how quickly impact can be seen on the ground.

References

Refer to ESSP Working Paper 144 (<https://ebrary.ifpri.org/digital/collection/p15738coll2/id/133759>) for a full list of references used in this study.

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