

DOUBLE BURDEN OF MALNUTRITION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Need to close the gap in food & nutrition policy

Issue Brief – Oct 2025

The double burden of malnutrition is a crisis

- Nearly 12% of the population experiences chronic hunger, with stunting among children under 5 years remaining stagnant at 27%
- High prevalence of overweight / obesity among adult women (68%), men (31%), and adolescents (21%), with a concomitant high burden of diabetes and hypertension
- Comprehensive food and public nutrition policies have been developed but are insufficient to address this double burden of malnutrition

Gaps in food and nutrition policy

In 2023/2024 FoodSAMSA conducted an assessment of food and nutrition policy in South Africa, revealing the following gaps in food and nutrition policy:

Restriction of food marketing targeted at children in schools and in print and online media

Regulation of the retail food sector, in particular zoning laws

Access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

Public funding for population nutrition

Platforms for interaction between government, civil society, and the commercial sector

Intersectoral / Health-in-All policies



Priority Actions

Regulate the promotion,

sponsorship and advertisement of unhealthy food and drinks directed at children.

Increase

the sugar-sweetened beverage taxation to 20%.

Develop and implement

policies to regulate relationships with and influence of commercial actors.

12%

of the population experiences chronic hunger

27%

of children under 5 years experience stunting

68%

prevalence of overweight/obesity among adult women

31%

adult men

21%

adolescents

Implications

Healthy starts for children

Clear and enforceable regulations on foods sold and marketed to children in the school environment will promote healthier food choices and reduce exposure to unhealthy food marketing. The school years are a critical period of development for promoting lifelong healthy dietary behaviors. Children are a vulnerable population and spend most of their waking hours in school. Therefore, school needs to be a safe and health-promoting environment.

Increased public revenue and lower healthcare costs

Unhealthy food consumption often displaces consumption of healthier foods and is associated with higher prevalence of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes and hypertension. The economic impact of reducing rates of obesity and NCDs on healthcare costs and loss of productive life years can be significant, especially for lower income populations. Implementing /increasing taxes on unhealthy foods, for instance on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), raises public revenue and can in turn be used to fund health promotion programs, thereby preventing millions of obesity-related healthcare costs.

Systems approach to governance

Mandating a health impact assessment as part of socioeconomic assessments in policy development reduces fragmentation and offers a platform for intersectoral governance. This enables a systems approach that preemptively accounts for potential negative /positive externalities, thereby creating stronger and more coherent policies that reduce policy overlap, promote more efficient use of resources and reduce costs.

Food labelling

Ingredient list and nutrient declaration

Food provision

Nutrition

Healthy policies in schools

FOP labels

Healthy policies in other public settings

Menu labelling

Support systems for the public sector

Support system for private companies

Provisions for breastfeeding

Access to WASH in public spaces

Food marketing

Restrictions in broadcast media

Food in retail

Restrictions in digital media

Zoning laws limit unhealthy restaurants

Restrictions in other media (outdoor etc.)

Zoning laws encourage F&V outlets

Restrictions where children gather

Support systems for food stores

Restrictions on food packaging

Support systems for informal retailers

Support systems for restaurants

Food prices

Minimize taxes on healthy foods

Platforms & interactions

Increase taxes on unhealthy foods

Coordination across government

Subsidies favour healthy foods

Government and commercial sector

Income support progs. for healthy food

Government and civil society

System-based approach

Funding

Population nutrition budget

Health in policies

Government funded research

Coherences

Health promotion agency

Health impact assessments (HIAs)

Extent of implementation:

High

Medium

Low

Results from 2023/2024 policy implementation assessment.

High = 60-80%, Medium = 40-60%, Low = <40%

Source: FoodSAMSA 2024

Key findings

1

Guidelines regarding the foods sold at tuck shops around school are limited and implemented on a voluntary basis.

2

Taxation on sugar-Sweetened beverages (SSB) has been implemented, but far below the level recommended by national and international experts.

3

Health impact assessments are not routinely done during policy development.

This Issue Brief was developed with support from the Center for Evidence based Health Care (CEBHC) at Stellenbosch University.

Credits: Nasreen Jessani

Contacts

Nicole Holliday MSc

LMU Munich / SAMRC

nicole.holliday@ibe.med.uni-muenchen.de

Peter Delobelle MD PhD FRSRH

CDIA / University of Cape Town

peter.delobelle@uct.ac.za

Zandile Mchiza, BSc, PhD

SAMRC/UWC

zandile.mchiza@mrc.ac.za

Jillian Hill, BPysch, MPH, PhD

SAMRC

jillian.hill@mrc.ac.za

Sources:

- FAO, European Union, CIRAD and DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS). 2022. Food Systems Profile-South Africa. Catalysing the sustainable and inclusive transformation of food systems. Rome, Brussels, Montpellier, France and Bellville, South Africa. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0071en>
- Nwosu, E., Fisman, AS., Helleve, A. et al. Trends in prevalence of overweight and obesity among South African and European adolescents: a comparative outlook. BMC Public Health 22, 2287 (2022).
- WHO manual on sugar-sweetened beverage taxation policies to promote healthy diets. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO