

# Making urban food environments fit for children

All children have the right to adequate nutrition and good health to reach their full potential within their cities and communities. Urban food environments need to provide children, their families and communities with permanent access to nutritious food that is healthy, affordable and sustainably produced.

For the past four decades, significant global trends including globalization, urbanization, economic development, and technological progress have led to a predominance of food systems that greatly increase the availability of 'food energy', or calories, but not necessarily access to healthy food. Citizens in urban food environments eat more processed foods laden with salt, sugar and saturated fat than those in rural settings, and often have a greater demand for animal-source foods. At the same time, current food systems are contributing to climate change, food waste and loss, environmental degradation and economic inequality.<sup>1</sup>

UNICEF's *State of the World's Children Report 2019*,<sup>2</sup> highlights the challenges faced by children in urban

settings, where fast food and packaged snacks are readily available and outdoor spaces to gather and play are limited. The need to transform the food environment in cities is clear and urgent. While every city is unique, all cities can generate and inspire the changes needed to make healthy and sustainable eating a reality for all children.

Together, EAT and UNICEF are seeking to improve urban food environments for healthy and sustainable diets among children and adolescents, to the benefit of entire communities. The content in this brochure highlights the vital elements of a child rights approach<sup>3</sup> to creating healthy food environments that are so important to securing healthy diets for all, now and in the future.

## Key facts

**Of the 4 billion people living in urban areas today, nearly one third are children. By 2050, an estimated 70% of the world's children will live in urban areas.**

Undernutrition continues to exert a heavy toll globally. In 2018, almost 200 million children under 5 suffered from stunting or wasting while at least 340 million suffered from hidden hunger. At the same time, 40 million children under 5 are affected by overweight. Among older children (5 to 19 years old), the world has seen a dramatic increase from 10%

to 18% from 2000-2016, such that 337 million children of this age are now overweight. The triple burden of malnutrition – undernutrition, hidden hunger, and overweight – threatens the survival, growth and development of children, young people, economies and nations. It is driven by the poor quality of children's diets. To illustrate, only 2 in 5 infants under

six months of age are exclusively breastfed, as recommended, while 2 in 3 children are not fed the minimum recommended diverse diet for healthy growth and development. Many school-going adolescents follow unhealthy diets that include frequent consumption of highly processed foods such as carbonated soft drinks and unhealthy fast foods.

Source: UNICEF (2019). *The State of the World's Children 2019. Children, Food and Nutrition: Growing well in a changing world.* UNICEF, New York.



## Children's right to nutrition is often at risk in cities

More than half of the Sustainable Development Goals have indicators that are crucially related to nutrition and cities. Goal 2 aims to achieve zero hunger through food security, improved nutrition and the promotion of sustainable agriculture.<sup>4</sup>

The widespread presence of unhealthy food and its pervasive marketing to children underscore the need for integrated planning and active design in the development of healthy food environments for children in cities. Taking account of the transition from traditional to modern food systems, links must be made across local urban-rural production and supply chains to ensure sustainable access to nutritious food.

Goal 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. In urban

food environments, the variety of available healthy foods disproportionately benefits the wealthy, while the poorest are left with inadequate access. In both high-income countries and low- and middle-income countries, food deserts (settings devoid of healthy food options) and food swamps (settings inundated with unhealthy food options) are commonplace in the poorest areas.<sup>5</sup> The urban poor, particularly those living in informal settlements, face the greatest barriers to food security and nutrition. For example, cooking is difficult or impossible without infrastructure for electricity and clean drinking water, leaving many people to rely on cheap processed fast foods and street foods. These issues are intensified in low- and middle-income countries where informal settlements in cities are common.<sup>6</sup>



## What do children think?

Under article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are guaranteed the right to meaningful participation and consideration of their views in all matters that affect them<sup>7</sup> – and this includes policy decisions on health, nutrition and the urban development. To change the urban 'foodscape', it is important to understand how children perceive the food environments they live in.

A research team in New Zealand partnered with a Ministry of Health initiative to study why so many children are not eating well. Small but intensive workshops were held in a low-income, ethnically diverse city neighbourhood, with participants including students, parents and community leaders. Participants identified the main barriers to nutritious diets as a saturation of fast food outlets, ubiquitous junk food marketing, the high cost of fresh produce, and parents having little time or cooking skills for preparing food at home.<sup>8</sup>

### Here is what they said

During the course of research for the *State of the World's Children Report 2019*, workshops were conducted in 18 countries with adolescents and mothers. Participants indicated that a wider variety of healthy and affordable food options were central to creating healthy urban food environments.

Young people living in urban areas were more likely than their rural counterparts to mention taste and individual preferences as a barrier to healthy eating:

**"We are not able to eat healthy food because we have already tasted junk food and [are] now attracted to that only." (India, age 14, male)**

**"[I don't eat healthy food] because I have developed the taste for other foods that are delicious." (Ghana, age 17, male)**

Access to healthier food was also an issue for some adolescents:

**"There are [healthy foods], but they are far from where you are." (Mexico, age 13, male)**

**"Unhealthy food is easier to come by." (United States, age 17, male)**

London's Child Obesity Taskforce, a group brought together by the Mayor of London, places children at the centre in efforts to transform the city to help children eat healthily, drink plenty of water and be physically active. In a recent study, the Taskforce spoke with children and families in the city's poorest neighbourhoods to better understand how they perceived their food environments.<sup>9</sup> Parents facing limited resources in terms of both time and money often served their families takeaway or fast food meals, while children who had only experienced unhealthy foods, due to their affordability and accessibility, had entrenched food habits and were reluctant to eat healthy foods even when they were available.

Among mothers living in urban areas, the primary barrier to feeding their children healthy and nutritious foods was financial. Other challenges mentioned included availability, accessibility and time:

**"[I am] unable to buy meat (because of high prices) [or] fruit due to financial state." (Egypt, age 24, female)**

**"In Australia, many things are expensive, like fish, and vegetables and meat. It should be cheap so that anyone can buy." (Australia, age 29, female)**



# What can cities do?

Children face specific challenges in urban environments, and each city will face conditions that are specific to its context. There is, however, a universal need to take action – and progress is already underway in many municipalities. All cities should involve their relevant departments and representatives from local stakeholder groups in developing a food strategy and corresponding policies to give children and their communities permanent access to nutritious food that is healthy, affordable and sustainably produced. Support and commitments from city mayors have been crucial to advancing this goal. Three areas for action are outlined below.

## 1. Build a sustainable and resilient food supply system at the local scale

*Local governments are key in developing policies and investing in land and infrastructure to shorten food supply chains, ensure space for farms that are close to markets, and protect ecosystems. To achieve this, we can:*

- Integrate sustainable food systems with other supporting systems such as health, water and sanitation throughout the entire city development planning cycle, from planning, to financing, to the monitoring and evaluation of results for children.
- Establish land use and building regulations that promote urban agriculture and ensure equally distributed food entry points for children in schoolyards, community gardens, fresh markets or on green rooftops.

- Plan schools as healthy food infrastructure, where children can grow, harvest and cook healthy food in greenhouses, schoolyards and rooftops.
- Enable better access to retail outlets including supermarkets and independent vendors who offer healthy and sustainable food options, such as fresh food markets, farmers' markets and street vendors. Limit access to outlets selling predominantly unhealthy foods.
- Foster interaction with healthy and sustainable food environments in public spaces for children to help children and their caregivers gain knowledge and exposure to healthy food production, physical activity and other healthy behaviours.
- Ensure affordable access to clean, fresh and tasty drinking water in public drinking fountains in restaurants and public buildings, especially schools.
- Develop a food waste plan with all stakeholders – including farmers, retailers, supermarkets and communities – to ensure all food waste is reused for food and nutrition purposes when possible or recycled as an organic resource (soil fertilization, water purification).

## 2. Foster a healthy food environment for all children in their cities and communities

*Food producers, suppliers and vendors are central to creating a healthy food environment close to children's daily lives. To achieve this, we can:*

- Foster community-supported agriculture, and support local farmers and producers by providing incentives for sustainable production and distribution of healthy foods in urban and peri-urban spaces.
- Ensure healthy food programmes at schools that offer affordable meals for all children and are made from healthy food produced in a sustainable way. All schools and other institutions where public meals are served should use contracts and procurement policies to supply healthy diets from sustainable food systems.
- Support effective implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes through local monitoring and enforcement.
- Regulate and limit marketing for food and beverages high in calories, saturated fats, refined sugar and salt, and animal-based products, especially in public spaces and close to schools, to promote daily consumption of healthy and sustainable foods.
- Reduce influences that encourage obesity in and around settings designed for children (schools, playgrounds, sports fields) through planning regulations and licensing.
- Support the adoption of taxes on unhealthy products, such as sugar-sweetened beverages, to limit the consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages by children and adolescents.
- Support the implementation of targeted food subsidies to increase the affordability and consumption of healthy foods by vulnerable children and women.

## 3. Nurture the empowerment of children, young people and caregivers in demanding healthy and sustainable food

*Parents and caregivers make better food choices for children when healthy options are available, affordable, convenient and desirable. To achieve this, we can:*

- Develop public education campaigns to reach schools and households about the benefits of healthy and sustainable diets and ways they can achieve this, including through supporting change in their communities.
- Support the development of consumer-friendly front-of-pack labelling that helps caregivers and children identify and choose products with less sugar, salt and fat; and less environmental impacts; while establishing incentives for companies to reformulate unhealthy products.
- Invest in maternity and community services that offer support to breastfeeding mothers. Empower women to breastfeed anytime and anywhere, including through the creation of breastfeeding-friendly spaces.
- Promote nutrition education in the school curricula to provide children with the knowledge and skills they need on healthy and sustainable diets.



# Promising practices

## Cities transforming the food environment

**Belo Horizonte, Brazil:** Since the early 1990s, the city has maintained an integrated food policy to ensure that low-income families have access to healthy foods. The policy includes streams such as low-cost grocery stores that sell healthy staples at a fixed price, food assistance through food banks and school programmes, and food and nutrition education. Dedicated to the core principle of food as a human right, this programme has survived for more than 20 years due to continued federal support and funding, cross-sector collaboration (public, private,

civil society), and the positive response of international organizations and academics.

**Amsterdam, The Netherlands:** The *Amsterdam Healthy Weight Programme* (AAGG) was launched in 2012 in response to nearly 21% of children under 18 being overweight or obese, with children of immigrants and those of low socio-economic status the most affected. The programme aims to address the structural causes of obesity and to change the urban food environment to make healthy

choices the 'easy choice'. Community participation and consultation in programme design is an integral part of the AAGG, which is composed of the departments of public health, health care, education, sports, youth, poverty, community work, economic affairs, public spaces and physical planning, and organizations from outside local government.

Source: Hawkes, Corinna, and Jess Halliday, *What Makes Food Policy Happen? Insights from five case studies*, International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, Brussels, Belgium, June 2017, pp. 21–31, 40–50, 12, 15.



## City schools providing healthy meals

**Montpellier, France:** With *Ma cantine autrement* (My different canteen), the City of Montpellier has been optimizing its school catering for the past three years, aiming to promote sustainable nutrition in the food supply for children. The project takes into account the entire food chain by: gradually integrating products from short supply chains and/or from organic farms; developing its purchasing policy; producing alternative 'eco-citizen' meals without animal proteins; training staff in mealtime and nutritional balance; and reducing food waste by using biowaste recycling.

**Kazan, Russia:** In 2006, Kazan approved the municipal programme *Healthy Nutrition for Children in Schools*. The department provides food in 160 educational institutions for about 150,000 children. For preparing school lunches, the programme introduced the 'Cook & Chill' technology, approved by European Union sanitary legislation. This makes it possible to quickly prepare the largest number of hot meals for all children while maintaining freshness, shelf-life and quality.

Source: Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2019, <[www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org](http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org)>.

## Acknowledgments

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## Endnotes

- 1 Hawkes, Corinna, and Jess Halliday, *What Makes Food Policy Happen? Insights from five case studies*, International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, Brussels, Belgium, June 2017, p. 6.
- 2 United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the World's Children 2019: Children, food and nutrition – Growing well in a changing world*, UNICEF, New York.
- 3 All children have the right to adequate nutrition and a high standard of health, as guaranteed in article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the right to non-discrimination), article 6 (the right to life, survival and development to their fullest potential) and article 24, (enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, including the provision of nutritious food and clean drinking water). See, also: Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No. 15 on the Right of the Child to the Enjoyment of the Highest Attainable Standard of Health', CRC/C/GC/15, United Nations, 17 April 2013.
- 4 The United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025) further mobilizes this global ambition to end hunger and prevent all forms of malnutrition.
- 5 High-Level Panel of Experts on Food and Security and Nutrition, Nutrition and Food Systems, HLPE, Rome, September 2017, p. 81.
- 6 United Nations Children's Fund, *Shaping Urbanization for Children: A handbook on child-responsive urban planning*, UNICEF, New York, May 2018, p. 138, <[www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF\\_Shaping\\_urbanization\\_for\\_children\\_handbook\\_2018.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_Shaping_urbanization_for_children_handbook_2018.pdf)>.
- 7 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No. 12: The right of the child to be heard', CRC/C/GC/12, United Nations, 20 July 2009.
- 8 Gerritsen, Sarah, et al., 'Improving Low Fruit and Vegetable Intake in Children: Findings from a system dynamics, community group model building study', *PLoS One*, vol. 14, no. 8, 15 August 2019, p. e0221107.
- 9 London's Child Obesity Taskforce, 'Every Child A Healthy Weight: Ten ambitions for London', Greater London Authority, London, 2019, p. 10.

# Further reading, networks and platforms

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UNICEF (2019). *The State of the World's Children 2019. Children, Food and Nutrition: Growing well in a changing world*. UNICEF, New York.

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Child Friendly Cities Initiative, UNICEF, 2019, <<https://childfriendlycities.org>>.

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United Nations Children's Fund, *Shaping Urbanization for Children: A handbook on child-responsive urban planning*, UNICEF, New York, May 2018, p. 138, Principle 7 'Urban food systems', '<[www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF\\_Shaping\\_urbanization\\_for\\_children\\_handbook\\_2018.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_Shaping_urbanization_for_children_handbook_2018.pdf)>.

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International frameworks, in particular the New Urban Agenda (para. 123), the Paris Agreement (safeguarding food security and ending hunger) and the seven PANTHER principles (right to food);

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City networks, in particular the EAT C40 Food Systems Network, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, FAO networks and the ICLEI-RUAF CITYFOOD Network