WFP
World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Mind the Gap
Country Case Study
PHILIPPINES

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About the Mind the Gap Report

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) by 2030 is increasingly at risk due to the combined impacts of climate change, conflict, COVID-19, and rising living costs, which have reversed progress in reducing global hunger. Social protection systems, while essential for supporting vulnerable populations, often fail to account for nutritional needs—a key element in breaking the cycle of poverty, vulnerability, and malnutrition. This oversight represents a missed opportunity to advance the objectives of SDG 2, especially in a context where hunger has been rising since 2015.

Amid these challenges, the Mind the Gap report explores the role of social protection systems in addressing affordability gaps of nutritious diets. It is structured around the **Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG)** analytical approach, which aims to understand the drivers affecting the availability, cost, and affordability of nutritious diets in specific contexts. The policy objective is to identify and implement interventions to improve diets, especially of nutritionally vulnerable people, including through the integration of nutrition into social protection systems. Through case studies from 12 diverse national contexts, the report presents actionable social protection pathways for reducing the affordability gap of nutritious diets and improving food security and nutrition outcomes.

Further information and evidence on the FNG can be accessed at: wfp.org/fillthenutrientgap

FNG
FILL THE NUTRIENT GAP
SYSTEMS ANALYSIS FOR NUTRITION

Contents

I. Overview of the malnutrition burden and poverty situation

Poverty in the Philippines had been declining since the early 2000s, from 25.7 percent in 2003 to 16.5 percent in 2018. However, the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic set back some of the gains, as the poverty rate (lower middle income poverty line of USD 3.65 a day) increased to 18.1 percent in 2021, with an additional 2.3 million additional people entering poverty (1).

Malnutrition is a large burden on the Philippine economy – childhood malnutrition alone cost the country USD 4.4 billion, or 1.5 percent of its GDP in 2015 (2). The country faces a triple burden of malnutrition with a high prevalence of stunting among children, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity. These burdens have severe implications for human capital development, translating to economic losses, due to lost productive potential and increased healthcare costs (3).

In the most recent nutrition survey conducted in 2021, 27 percent of children under 5 years were stunted and 5.5 percent were wasted (4). Despite the rapid economic growth of 6.4 percent annual average between 2010 and 2019, the rates of stunting and wasting among children have remained mostly stagnant over the last two decades (2). There are several factors that explain these high rates of malnutrition, including repeated shocks, such as natural disasters; low consumer demand for nutritious foods; agriculture policies that focus predominantly on rice self-sufficiency; and persistent poverty. There are large disparities in nutrition outcomes across wealth groups, with evidence that children in families among the poorest 20 percent nationally are more than twice as likely to be stunted as those from the richest 20 percent (5).

Simultaneously, around 13 percent of adolescents and 36 percent of adult women (aged 15–49 years) were overweight or obese at the time of the most recent national nutrition survey (4) (6). This is cause for concern, as overweight/obesity can lead to diet-related non-communicable diseases (7). This follows changes in the food environment, with a concurrent shift of consumer preferences towards energy-dense but micronutrient-poor, ultra-processed foods, as well as the increasingly sedentary lifestyles that are associated with rapid urbanization.

The average Filipino diet is not diverse, with three fourths of calories coming from starchy staples (8). Among children aged 6–23 months, fewer than 14 percent were meeting minimum dietary diversity requirements in 2021 (6). There are large differences in diets of the wealthiest and the poorest. Individuals in the wealthiest quintile consume five to six times more meat and poultry than those in the poorest quintile. However, consumption of fruits and vegetables has been decreasing across wealth groups, with per capita consumption declining by 67 percent and 12 percent respectively in the last four decades (8).

II. Country priorities on nutrition and social protection

NUTRITION POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Philippines Plan of Action for Nutrition (PPAN) 2011–2016 set targets related to the reduction of stunting, wasting, underweight and overweight. These targets were not met due to poor programme design, lack of adequate financing and governance structures, and inability to fully utilise the 'power of nutrition-sensitive programmes' (9). The PPAN for 2017–2022 aimed to reduce levels of child stunting to 21 percent (adjusted to 28.8 percent in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and wasting to less than 5 percent (adjusted to 9 percent). It also set targets for the reduction of micronutrient deficiencies (e.g. reducing anaemia among women of reproductive age to 6 percent), and to lower the prevalence of overweight among adolescents to less than 5 percent and among adults to 28 percent (10). This was attempted through a complementary set of multisectoral nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive programmes, including a social protection programme. The Department of Social Welfare and Development, the lead ministry responsible for social protection in the Philippines, is named in the PPAN as one of the key members of the Governing Board of the National Nutrition Council.

The most recent plan, PPAN 2023–2028, was launched in September of 2023 with a focus on improving food security and nutrition. The plan defines four desired outcome result areas: food security, nutrition practices and behaviours, multisectoral interventions and enabling environments (9).

SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

The Philippines flagship social assistance programme, the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4P), is a conditional cash transfer. The objectives of the programme are to alleviate poverty by supplementing household income to address immediate consumption needs, while improving human capital by keeping children in school and healthy, enabling them to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty (11). A cash transfer is provided every two months, conditional on the household fulfilling health and education conditions, including children's health check-ups and the attendance of a guardian at Family Development Sessions which are designed to provide behaviour change communication, including on food and nutrition (12). Households eligible for the transfer are those with children under 18 years and/or pregnant women and those identified as the poorest through a proxy means test (12). As of June 2020, the programme covered 4.3 million households with 7.8 million children (13). This wide coverage allows potential for large-scale impact.

Evaluations of the programme report mixed results on nutrition outcomes (13). The first comprehensive impact evaluation of the 4P, carried out in 2012, found a reduction of 10 percentage points in severe stunting among children aged 6–36 months and an improvement in height-for-age Z-scores. Later evaluations did not find any improvements in child undernutrition but did find that, compared to control groups, 4P beneficiaries had better intermediary outcomes such as access to and use of health services and better

dietary diversity. These differences in results across evaluations could be explained by their particular study design, the declining value of the transfer in real terms over the course of the programme, the exclusion of new pregnancies and the reduced number of children under 5 years of age monitored over time due to the static beneficiary list.

Since the programme's roll out in 2008, it has undergone several design modifications, including an increase in the education grant for high school children from 300 Philippine Pesos (PHP) to PHP 500 in 2014 and PHP 600 added for the rice subsidy in 2017 (14). However, multiple analyses indicate that the benefit amount is too low to have a significant impact on defined outcomes, despite the increased grant for high school children (12). The programme also fails to reach all poor and vulnerable households as the registry used for targeting, the Listahanan, has not been updated since 2009. This means that newly poor and vulnerable households are not included. Only households with children born before 2010 are covered, and even among beneficiary households, only children born before the household was enrolled are included. This excludes new pregnancies and newborns (13; 15).

III. WFP's approach

In 2018, the World Food Programme (WFP) collaborated with the Philippines Department of Science and Technology Food and Nutrition Research Institute to carry out a Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) analysis (16). A multisectoral approach was used to identify bottlenecks across the food system that drive malnutrition, with an emphasis on availability, cost and affordability of nutritious diets.[1]

Cost of the diet analysis in FNG Philippines

The cost of the diet analysis was conducted using prices from the 2015 National Nutrition Survey and expenditure data from the 2015 Philippines Family Income and Expenditure Survey. The lowest costs of a diet that meets energy requirements and a diet that meets requirements for macro and micronutrients were estimated using the FNG methodology (19) for a modelled household consisting of five individuals: a breastfed child (12–23 months), a school-age child (6–7 years), an adolescent girl (14–15 years), a breastfeeding woman and an adult man.

The cost of the diets was then compared to household food expenditure to determine the proportion of households unable to afford them (called 'non-affordability'). The gap between the lowest cost nutritious diet and the food expenditure of a household is referred to as the affordability gap.

Interventions were modelled in seven regions identified by stakeholders: NCR, Bicol, MIMAROPA, Eastern Visayas, Westerns Visayas, ARMM and Soccsksargen.

In multisectoral workshops and bilateral consultations, stakeholders identified interventions across different sectors from the PPAN with the potential to improve nutrient intake for key target groups. These interventions are implemented by government agencies, including local government units, departments of health, agriculture, education and social welfare and development; and development partners such as WFP, Nutrition International and Helen Keller International.

The FNG analysis examined the contribution of social assistance programmes in the Philippines to improve access to nutritious foods. This generated evidence to inform national dialogues on maximizing the impact of existing social assistance programmes on nutrition and human capital development.

1 This was done through a comprehensive review of secondary data and literature on food systems and nutrition and by estimating the cost and affordability of the nutritious diet using food price data from the FNRI 2015 National Nutrition Survey and food expenditure data from the 2015 Family Income and Expenditure Survey.

IV. Findings of the FNG

COST AND AFFORDABILITY OF THE NUTRITIOUS DIET

Nationally, in 2015 the average cost of a diet that meets energy requirements only (energy-only diet) for the modelled five-person household was PHP 108 (USD 2.4) per day. Nearly all households (97 percent) would be able to afford this diet. However, in areas such as ARMM (now referred to as BARMM), nearly a quarter of households (23 percent) would not be able to afford the cost of an energy-only diet.

The cost of the nutritious diet, or a diet that meets individual nutrient needs, was PHP 206 (USD 4.5) per day on average, ranging from PHP 148 (USD 3.2) in Bicol to PHP 316 (USD 6.9) in Metro Manilla (Figure 1). At the national level, 32 percent of households would not be able to afford this diet. In areas such as ARMM, Northern Mindanao and CARAGA more than half of households would not be able to afford a nutritious diet (Figure 2). The FNG analysis found a correlation between non-affordability of a nutritious diet and stunting prevalence with areas of higher non-affordability experiencing higher stunting rates.

Figure 1: Daily cost of the (a) nutritious and (b) energy-only diet in PHP weighted average across rural and urban areas (FNG 2018, using data from 2015)

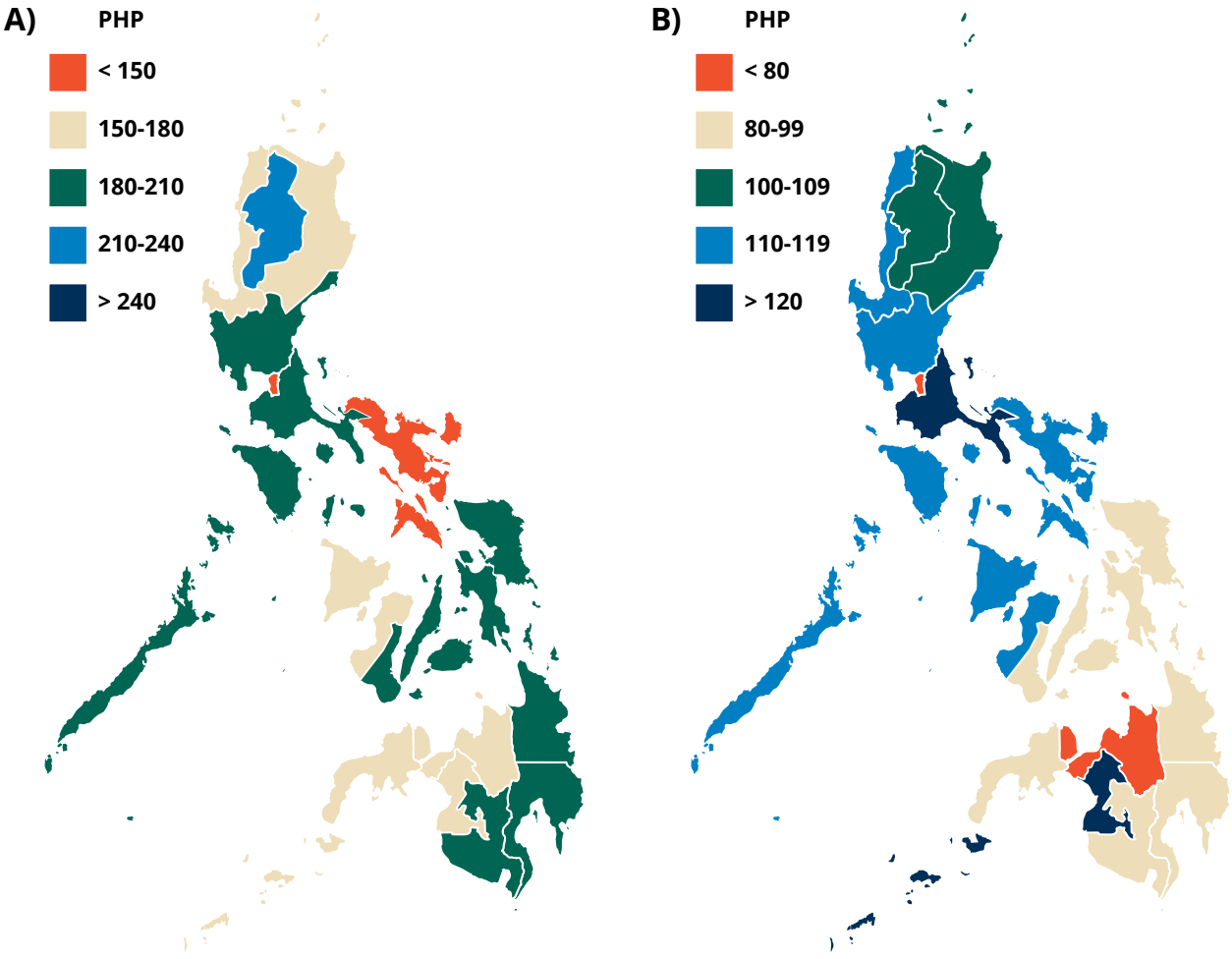
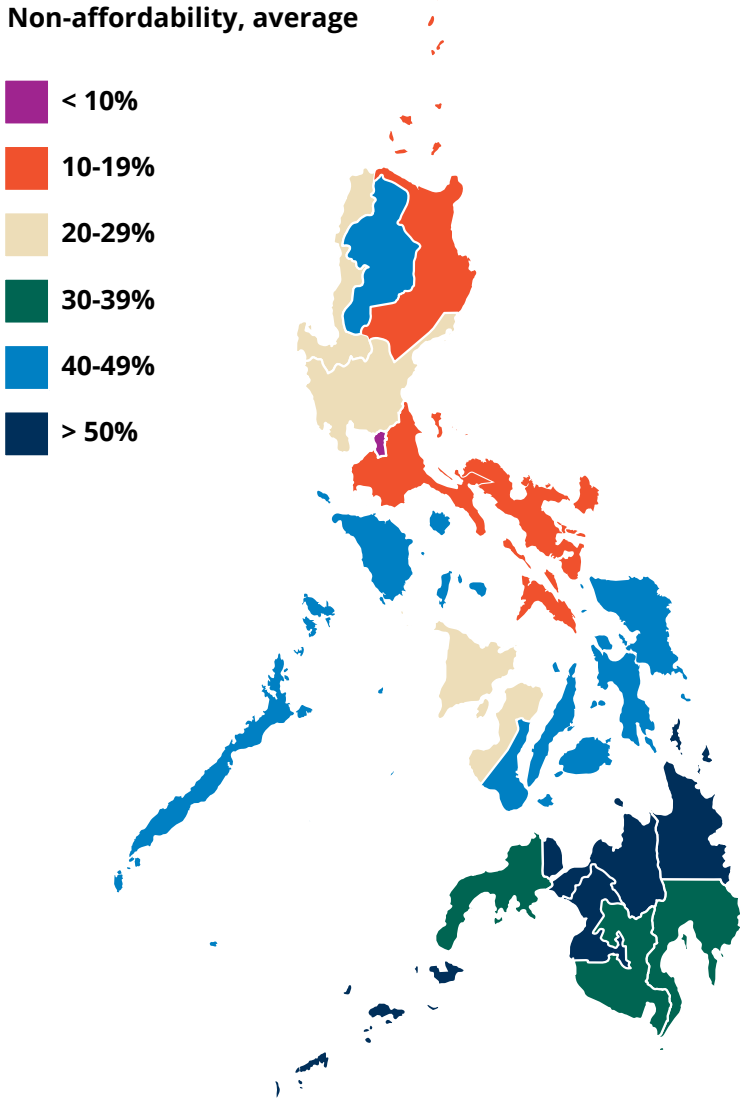


Figure 2: Non-affordability of a nutritious diet by region (FNG 2018, using data from 2015)

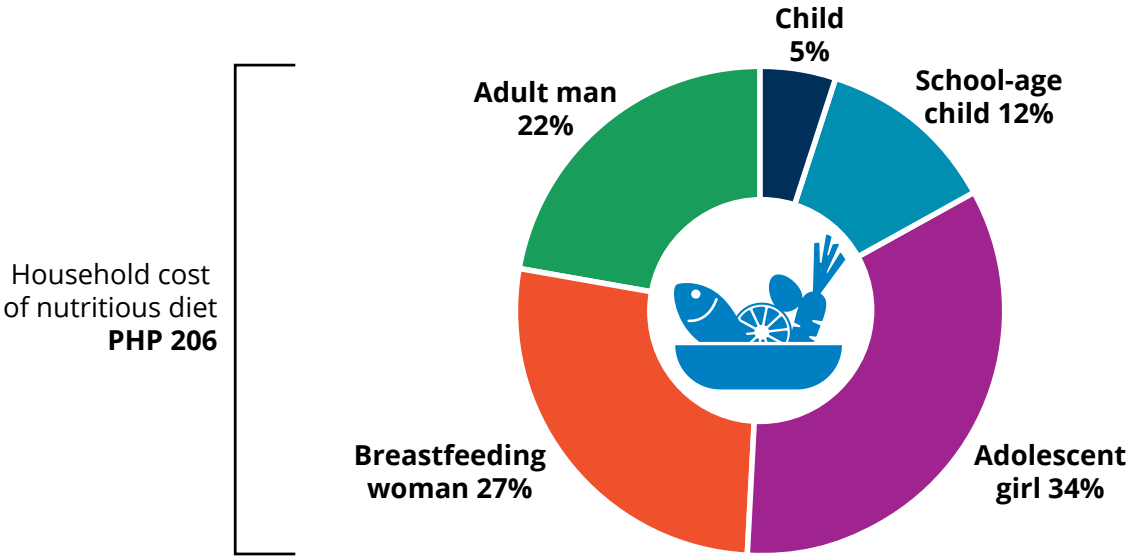


VULNERABLE GROUPS

Adolescent girls and pregnant and breastfeeding women have relatively higher requirements of specific nutrients such as iron, folic acid and vitamin B12. In the modelled household, this is reflected by the adolescent girl and breastfeeding woman together having the highest cost of nutritious diets within the household, representing over 60 percent of the household's total cost (Figure 3). Actual intra-household food allocation may not consider these differential nutrient needs and the corresponding greater need for diversity and nutrient-dense foods in the diet, and therefore targeted interventions such as supplementation are often needed to help cover the nutrient requirements of nutritionally vulnerable individuals.

Children aged 12–23 months have a lower cost of nutritious diet compared to other members of the household as they consume less food, and the modelled diet assumes optimal breastfeeding which covers a large proportion of their nutrient needs. This age group, however, is nutritionally vulnerable as their smaller stomachs mean that meals must be provided at higher frequency and need to include nutrient dense foods to cover nutrient requirements. A failure to meet nutrient intake during this life stage has lifelong consequences (17).

Figure 3: Distribution of the daily cost of a nutritious diet for the modelled household across individual household members (FNG 2018, using data from 2015)

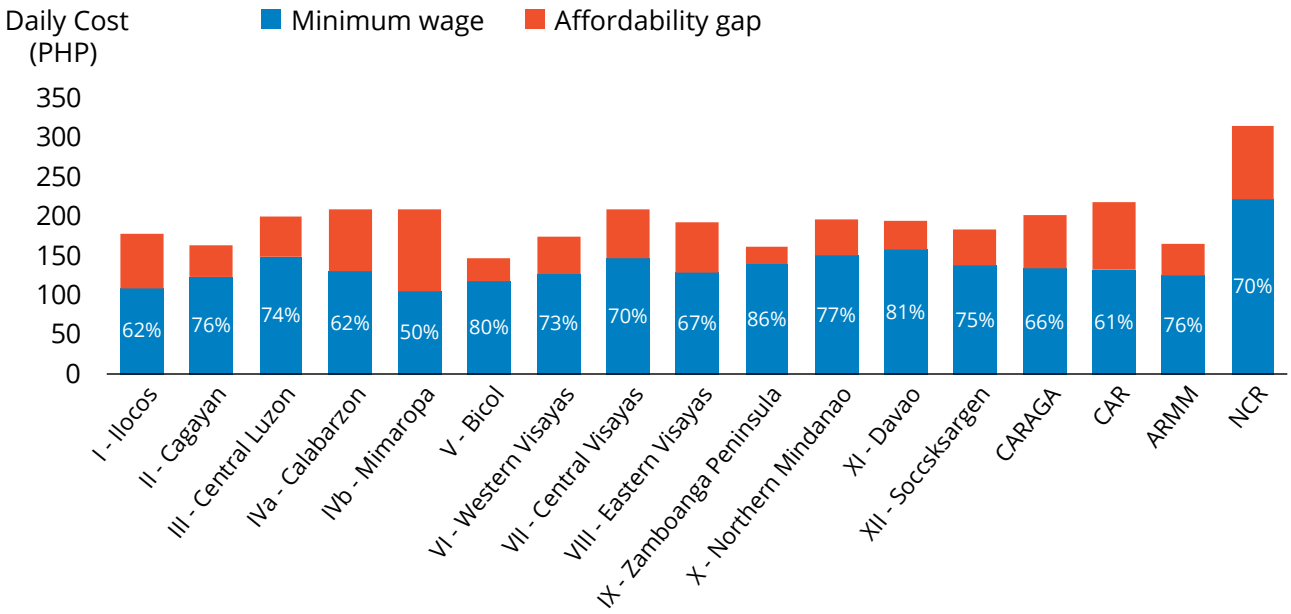


V. Using the FNG to inform social protection programmes

CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL PROTECTION TO REDUCING THE AFFORDABILITY GAP

The FNG analysis compared the minimum wage and the cash transfer provided by the 4P programme to assess their adequacy regarding affordability of the nutritious diet. The non-agriculture minimum wage in the Philippines in 2015 varied by region and location (urban/rural), ranging from PHP 210 (USD 4.6) per day in MIMAROPA to PHP 444 (USD 9.7) per day in NCR (18). Assuming a five-person household with one wage earner who gets paid the minimum wage five days a week, and that the household uses as much as 70 percent of its income on food, the minimum wage is not sufficient to afford nutritious diets, resulting in an affordability gap. The adequacy of a minimum wage ranges from 50 percent in MIMAROPA to 86 percent in Zamboanga Peninsula (Figure 4). In regions such as Ilocos and MIMAROPA, this income would fall slightly below the lowest cost energy-only diet.

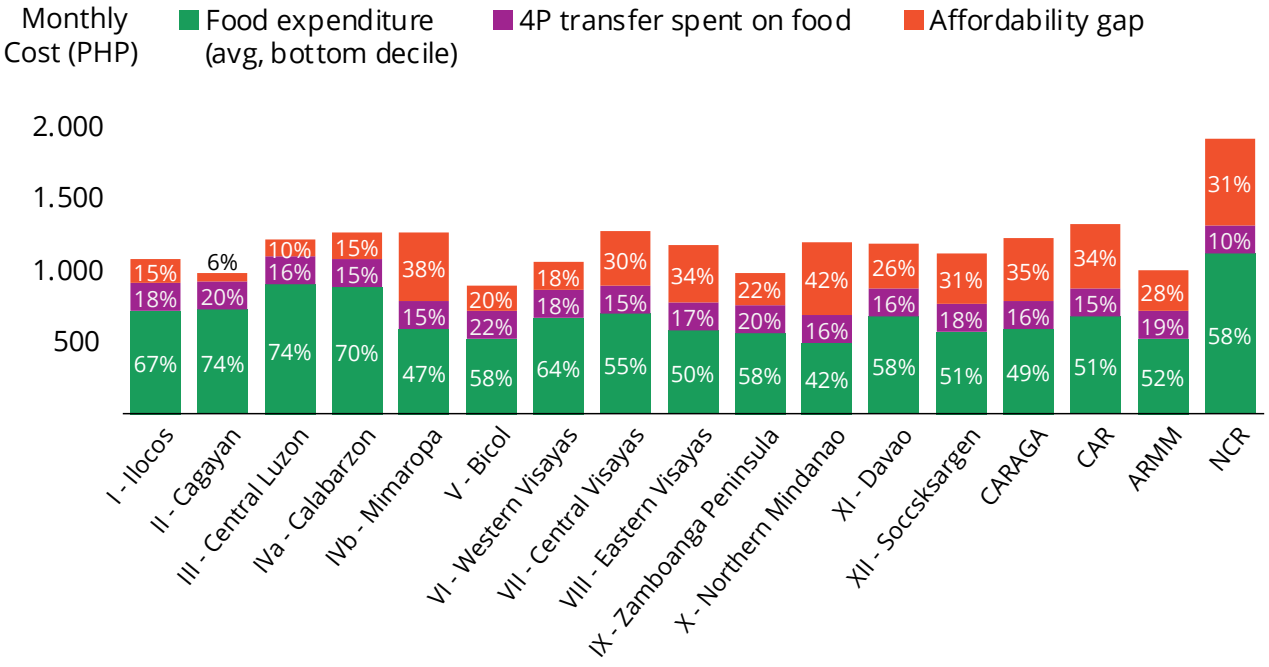
Figure 4: Adequacy of the daily minimum wage by region (adapted from FNG 2018, data from 2015)



Under the 4P programme, if a household met the education and health conditions it could have received a maximum of PHP 1,400 (USD 30.6) per month, or PHP 46 (USD 1) per day. Assuming households use 70 percent of this cash towards food expenditure, the transfer would cover between 10 to 22 percent of the cost of a nutritious diet for the modelled household, depending on the region. This suggests the 4P alone would not be enough to ensure economic access to a nutritious diet for vulnerable households. If household food expenditure is considered, the baseline affordability gap (before the 4P transfer) for poorest households

in the bottom decile of food expenditure ranges from 26 to 58 percent. After the 4P transfer, the affordability gap would reduce to 6-42 percent of the nutritious diet cost (Figure 5). The food expenditure used in these estimations may include households that are already receiving the 4P; therefore, the baseline and remaining affordability gap is likely to be higher for these households.

Figure 5: Contribution of 4P cash transfer on reducing the affordability gap of a nutritious diet (adapted from FNG 2018, data from 2015)

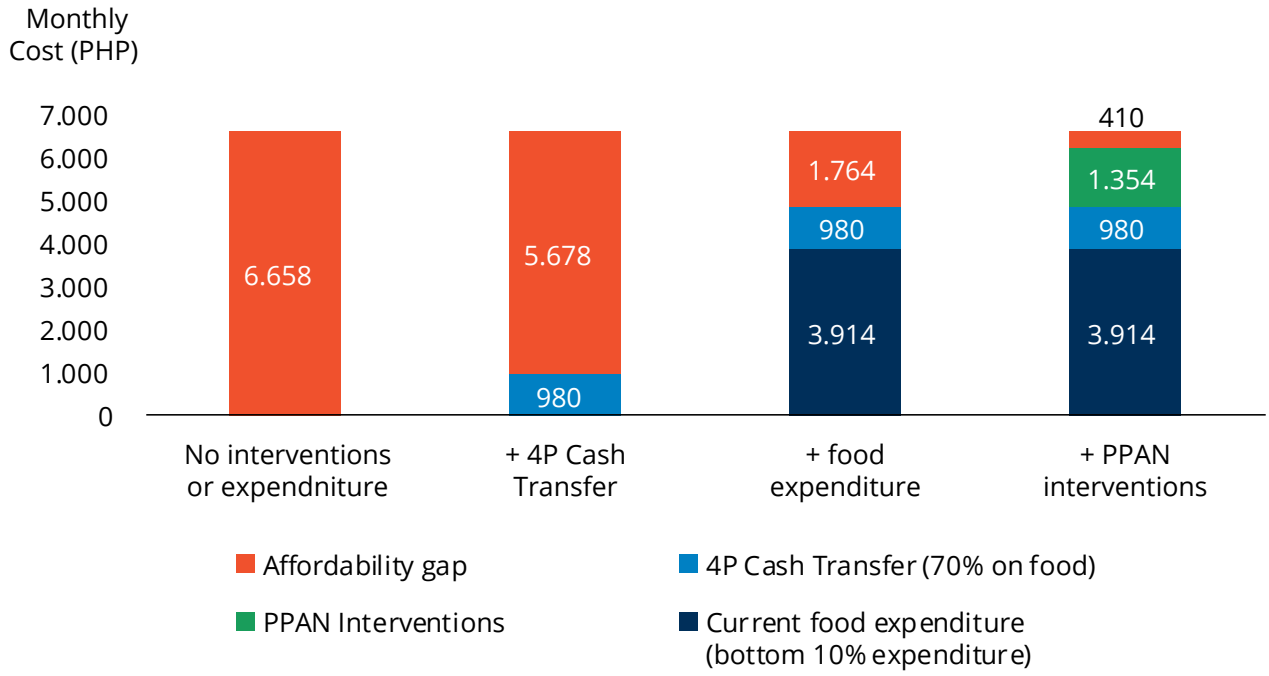


The FNG modelled the impact on the cost of the nutritious diet for households receiving the 4P transfer in addition to a package of targeted nutrition interventions from the PPAN. This includes Rimo Blend (a local specialized nutritious food with a blend of rice and mongo bean fortified with iron and zinc) provided in-kind to children aged 6–23 months, school meals for the school-age child and iron and folic acid supplements for adolescent girls and pregnant and breastfeeding women. Figure 6 shows the results of the package in modelled regions for households in the bottom tenth percentile in terms of food expenditure who are likely to be targeted by the 4P programme.[2]

The average cost of the nutritious diet per month for a household is PHP 6,658 (USD 145.3). Considering food expenditure, a five-person household receiving a 4P transfer would still have a gap of over PHP 1,700 (USD 37.1) a month, equivalent to just about a fourth of the nutritious diet cost for the modelled household. If receiving the package of PPAN nutrition interventions alongside the cash transfer, the household would be left with a gap of only PHP 410 (USD 8.9) per month, or 6 percent of the nutritious diet cost.

2 The modelled regions were suggested by FNRI and include NCR, Bicol, MIMAROPA, Eastern Visayas, Western Visayas, ARMM and Soccsksargen

Figure 6: Modelled impact of the cash transfer and nutrition interventions on the affordability gap of nutritious diets, weighted average of modelling areas (adapted from FNG 2018, data from 2015)



VI. Bridging research with policy and action

Cash transfers can effectively improve access to nutritious food, but certain conditions must be met. Individuals within households who are responsible for making decisions about food consumption should understand what foods are nutritious and have a desire to purchase and consume these foods. On the supply side, the food environment should be conducive to nutritious diets and have sufficient availability of nutritious food in local markets at affordable prices for both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Studies on the 4P programme revealed that prices for food increased in areas with 4P beneficiaries, with unintended negative effects for non-beneficiary households (13). These impacts were mostly seen in more disadvantaged areas.

Social behaviour change strategies and effective implementation of the multisectoral intervention package are also needed. In the Philippines, evaluations of the 4P programme suggested that weak service delivery is a bottleneck to ensuring that the programme positively impacts nutrition outcomes (13). Consistent delivery of high quality supplements and specialized nutritious foods is important to ensuring programme success. Nutrition education sessions should promote compliance and address concerns of acceptability.

Stakeholders participating in the FNG validation workshop highlighted opportunities for making social assistance programmes nutrition sensitive. Stakeholders recommended the inclusion of nutrition indicators in monitoring and evaluation frameworks in the revised social protection strategy. However, the 4P programme does not yet include nutrition indicators (15).

Following completion of the FNG, WFP and government partners used the findings in advocacy efforts and to inform planning and policy development. WFP used the FNG to provide technical inputs to the formulation of 2020 National Food Policy (15). The policy outlines national priorities on achieving zero hunger, specifically in the following policy areas: (i) review of existing policies, (ii) ensuring food availability and affordability, (iii) securing nutrition adequacy of transfers, (iv) securing food accessibility and safety, (v) ensuring sustainable food systems, resilience and stability during emergencies, and (vi) ensuring information, education, awareness and people participation.

WFP used the FNG findings to initiate a discussion to address the inadequacy of the minimum wage considering the cost of a nutritious diet. WFP also supported the government in the design and finalization of the PPAN 2023–2028 which emphasized nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programmes related to the FNG findings to improve delivery and implementation. The 2023–2028 PPAN focuses on four outcomes: (i) food security; (ii) age-appropriate feeding, dietary practices and hygiene and health-seeking behaviours; (iii) services on nutrition, health, education, sanitation and social protection; and (iv) enabling environment. The Super Typhoon Rai (Odette) Humanitarian Needs and Priorities was also informed by the findings of the FNG utilizing cost of the diet data and acknowledging diet affordability gaps.

The FNG findings were used by the Department of Education as the basis for enhancing the National School-Based Feeding Programme. Costs of nutritious and healthy diets were

used by implementers as the basis for costing school meals when drafting proposals to obtain additional budget. Findings from the FNG informed the Government's recently launched Food Stamp Programme (Walang Gutom 2027), particularly the design of the food basket and the express recognition of the need to support households' dietary diversity and having a food basket that complements existing social protection programmes.

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World Food Programme
Via Cesare Giulio Viola 68/70,
00148 Rome, Italy - T +39 06 65131
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