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# Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) Benin

## Executive Summary



### Background

In Benin, the nutritional situation of children under five remains worrying, with 32 percent stunted, 17 percent underweight, 5 percent wasted and 2 percent overweight (DHS 2017-2018). Nevertheless, according to a recent report (Cadre Harmonisé 2023), food availability is in general satisfactory because of improved agricultural production. In accordance with the Zero Hunger objective (SDG 2), Benin reaffirmed to eliminate hunger, ensure food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture at the Tokyo 2021 Nutrition For Growth (N4G) Summit. The implementation of the

FNG in Benin took place while the national food and nutrition policy was being finalized, and when the bill on school feeding was being drafted. The FNG analysis provides evidence to inform strategic and programmatic choices for improving the nutritional status of vulnerable groups in Benin by assessing the main barriers to accessing nutritious foods and identifying entry points for nutrition-related actions across multiple sectors. The findings and recommendation of the FNG analysis intend to guide and align the strategic implementation of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive activities by relevant stakeholders.

## Process and methods

The FNG analysis estimated costs of energy-only and nutrient-adequate (nutritious) diets, as well as the percentages of households that, given current food expenditure, are unable to afford each diet. The costs of energy-only and nutritious diets were estimated using the linear optimization software, Cost of the Diet (CotD) developed by Save the Children UK. Diet costs and non-affordability were estimated in 10 livelihood zones of the country for a five-person household comprising a child between 1 and 2 years of age, a school-age child (6–7 years), an adolescent girl (14–15 years), a breastfeeding woman, and an adult man.

Primary data collection of local food prices was carried out across the 10 livelihood zones in January and February 2023, and the food expenditure data in Global Analysis of Vulnerability and Food, Nutritional and Food Systems Security Benin (AVGSAN-SA, 2022) were used to calculate the affordability of each diet by matching departments to their corresponding livelihood zones. The results of the analysis were validated in May 2023. Revisions with intervention modelling were made and presented in July 2023 at a multi-sector workshop, during which stakeholders drew up recommendations based on the FNG's main findings. The Permanent Secretariat of the Food and Nutrition Council (SP/CAN), with technical support from the WFP, led the FNG process and convened stakeholders to inform, validate and draw recommendations from the FNG analysis.

## Main findings

1. A high proportion of households in Benin cannot afford the minimum cost to purchase a nutrient-adequate diet. A household must spend at least CFA (African Financial Community francs) 1,415

per day to cover its nutritional needs, whereas meeting energy-only requirements costs CFA 568 per day. The cost of a healthy diet per household per day is CFA 2177.

2. More than a half of households (60 percent) cannot afford a nutritious diet and one in five (21 percent) cannot afford an energy-only diet. The costs and non-affordability of both energy-only and nutritious diets vary across livelihood zones.
3. Given food consumption habits, maize and local flours provide good opportunities for fortification that can improve households' access to affordable nutritious diets. In Benin, fortification of wheat flour, oil and iodized salt has been mandatory, and there is a good opportunity to fortify maize and rice given their high level of consumption and industrial processing. Maize fortified with vitamin A, vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, iron and zinc reduces the cost of a household's nutritious diet by 4-7 percent if offered at the same price or 20 percent higher than the normal maize. Fortified infant flour is commercially available in Benin; however, the standard of fortification could be improved with more essential micronutrients.
4. With over 40 percent of Benin's population below 15 years of age, programmes that focus on human capital development of children and youth can benefit households and the economy in the long term. The current school meal programme in Benin reduces the economic burden on households with school-going children by covering part of the cost of their nutritious diet. It also covers 30 percent of daily macronutrient requirements and more than 50 percent of daily requirements for certain micronutrients for children, yet it lacks in providing other key micronutrients.





5. Opportunities exist to improve school meals. Replacement of the current staples with fortified or wholegrain equivalents and additions of locally available foods can improve the nutritional quality of meals. Animal source foods have the greatest impact on closing nutrient gaps of school-age children and adolescents. However, inclusion of these foods in school meals is constrained by weak or non-existent value chains.
6. In Benin, young women who marry before the age of 18 start their reproductive lives early and face challenges realizing their full potential. The combined efforts of different sectors keep girls in school by covering part of their food and education costs. International evidence shows that providing school meals has the greatest impact on improving gender equity in education, while cash transfer programmes are also effective. School meals with a basic ration of fortified maize as well as Cash+Care (targeted cash transfer programme supported by UNICEF) can reduce the affordability gap of the nutritious diet of an adolescent girl by 27 percent.
7. Recent violence and displacement in the northern regions of Benin have disrupted livelihoods and therefore food and nutrition security. Comprehensive response plans need to include nutrition-sensitive interventions to prevent a deterioration of the nutrition situation of displaced persons and host communities.
8. Social protection programmes, interventions improving agricultural practices, and provision of supplementation to targeted individuals can help cover households' nutritional needs. However, a single intervention is not enough to close the affordability gap of a nutritious diet substantially, hence it also needs a nutrition-sensitive value chain approach. Various interventions help cover the cost of a nutritious diet in different ways and multisectoral coordination is necessary to ensure comprehensive assistance to the most vulnerable households.

## Recommendations

1. Improve nutritional quality of school meals by increasing the diversity of food groups.
2. Develop systems, capacities, and infrastructures for the fortification of staple and processed foods.
3. Improve nutritional quality of school meals by replacing maize and white rice with fortified maize, unpolished brown rice or parboiled rice.
4. Improve the nutritional status of adolescents by using schools as a platform for health interventions.
5. Develop national systems to provide cash transfers to households facing shocks and households living in extreme poverty.
6. Develop nutrition-sensitive resilience programmes in shock prone areas and communities with high poverty rates.





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This Fill the Nutrient Gap is financed by: Rockefeller Foundation, the Government of the Netherlands, and the Government of Denmark.

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