



Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) Cambodia

Executive Summary



Context

Nutrition is a crucial pillar for the development of a healthy, productive nation. While impressive economic gains have been made, Cambodia's vision to become an upper-middle income nation by 2030 and achieve high-income status by 2050 relies on fully developing human capital potential. Current malnutrition rates (stunting, wasting, overweight and obesity) undermine productivity and strain health systems. Poor nutrition impairs people's ability to engage actively as productive members of the workforce and results in significant healthcare costs. Ending all forms of malnutrition is critical for Cambodia to harness this development potential. Coordinated action, leadership and strengthened partnerships can change trajectories for good.

New evidence from the Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis offers timely guidance and a narrative for change. The Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) analysis was conducted in Cambodia in 2022-2023 by WFP and UNICEF in collaboration with the Council for Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD), and line ministries, UN agencies, development partners, NGOs, and private sector actors. Insights showcase persisting gaps and identify barriers from economic vulnerabilities to food systems challenges including supply-side issues, poor food environments, and inadequate consumption and suboptimal infant feeding practices. Climate change risks placing healthy diets out of reach of the most vulnerable and heightens stresses on supply and access to healthy diets.

This new analysis equips decision-makers with integrated solutions across food, health, and social protection systems attuned to realities of Cambodia's

rapid development transition. The analysis serves as a key input in the design of forthcoming Third National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition, 2024-2028 and other national strategies and to operationalize Cambodia's Roadmap for Food Systems for Sustainable Development 2030 with the aim to nourish Cambodia's shared potential, as per the new Pentagonal Strategy.

Methodology

FNG is a multisectoral stakeholder engagement and analytical process which seeks to identify the obstacles that households face in accessing and consuming a nutritious diet, and prioritize actions to overcome them. It consists of two main components: a country-specific review of secondary literature to characterize the food system and nutrition situation, and linear programming using the ENHANCE platform to estimate the cost of meeting nutrient needs across the life cycle as well as the environmental impact of diets.

Based on these cost results and household expenditure data from the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES), the portion of the population that cannot afford to meet nutrient needs was estimated. This was followed by the modelling of stakeholder identified interventions across multiple sectors to assess their contribution to reducing non-affordability. The implications of the findings were discussed with stakeholders working across multiple systems including food, health, social protection and environment, to reach a shared understanding of the main barriers. Using this information, stakeholders prioritized interventions for improving access to nutritious foods.

Main findings

- 1. Progress has been made, but current diets are still inadequate and contribute to all forms of malnutrition and increase the risk of non-communicable diseases.**
 - 1.1 The nature of malnutrition and quality of diets is changing.
 - 1.2 Diets need to improve to build human capital and achieve economic growth.
 - 1.3 All sectors have a critical role to play.
- 2. Although many could afford nutritious diets, some households are still being left behind or are at risk of falling behind.**
 - 2.1 On average, 16 percent of households cannot afford a nutritious diet without loans.
 - 2.2 Social assistance is critical for vulnerable households to afford a nutritious diet.
 - 2.3 Shock responsive social protection could prevent more households from falling behind.
- 3. The supply of nutritious foods is inadequate to meet all nutrient needs.**
 - 3.1 The supply of food is sufficient to cover dietary energy and protein needs, but many micronutrient needs are not being met.
 - 3.2 Nutrient-adequate diets will result in higher greenhouse gas emissions and water use.
 - 3.3 Mitigation measures could deliver win-wins for climate and nutrition.
- 4. The current food environment is not nurturing healthy diets.**
 - 4.1 Ultra-processed foods and snacks high in salt, fat and sugar are available, affordable and consumed.
 - 4.2 Regulation and compliance gaps support the unhealthy food environment.
 - 4.3 The school food environment could provide an opportunity to build lifelong healthier food habits.
- 5. Consumer preferences and behaviour do not result in consumption of healthy diets.**
 - 5.1 Consumer preferences and habits are barriers to ensuring healthy nutritious diets.
 - 5.2 Nutrition knowledge is not the main driver of dietary behaviours, but some knowledge gaps remain.
- 6. Climate change is putting healthy diets at risk.**
 - 6.1 Changes in climate will lead to reduced nutrient content, diversity and availability of foods.
 - 6.2 Climate change will increase food prices, reduce incomes and further compromise access to healthy diets.
 - 6.3 Preparedness for climate shocks needs to be strengthened to build resilience.

Stakeholder recommendations

Food, health and social protection systems must work together to secure positive nutrition outcomes in Cambodia and achieve Cambodia's economic, human capital development, and climate ambitions. In the context of climate change, particular attention will be required to ensure these ambitions do not slip. The following recommendations are divided into five sections: food system, social protection system, health system, climate change and governance.

1. Food systems

Agricultural and food production

- Diversify domestic food production to increase availability and local consumption of fruit, vegetables, pulses, eggs, and other nutrient-dense foods while ensuring sustainable and environmentally friendly practices.
- Scale up climate-smart production practices, and promote the use of solutions such as net houses, greenhouses, cover crops, water management practices and technologies, use of compost as fertilizer, short crop cycle varieties, and other good agricultural practices and technologies to adapt to climate change and prevent environmental degradation.

Post-harvest handling and processing

- Invest in infrastructure to reduce post-harvest losses of perishable nutritious foods, including cold storage and warehouses.
- Strengthen the capacities of millers to locally blend rice with fortified rice kernels.
- De-risk private sector investments to improve safety, handling, and value addition of domestic agricultural products.
- Strengthen public-private producer partnerships to respond to demand for healthy nutritious foods and improve supply chains for these.
- Improve food handling practices across the food chain including at market and vendor level to reduce risk of biological contamination and food-borne illnesses, preventing uptake of nutrients.

Regulatory system and consumer protection

- Develop standards and regulate the marketing and sale of unhealthy and ultra-processed foods and beverages (e.g. tax on sugar-sweetened beverages and ultra-processed foods, front of pack labelling, advertisement restrictions, etc.).
- Strengthen enforcement of legislation related to the marketing and sale of breast-milk substitutes (i.e. SD 133) and develop and enforce standards for commercially produced complementary foods.
- Strengthen enforcement of regulations (Directive 18) around school food environments, particularly of food stalls, to reduce the sale of unhealthy and unsafe foods.

- Strengthen control mechanism to enhance compliance with food fortification standards.
- Explore mechanisms such as results-based financing to strengthen enforcement of regulations and increase necessary budget allocations accordingly.

Demand generation

- Use social behaviour change (SBC) approaches to stimulate demand for vegetables, fruits, pulses, eggs and calcium-rich foods as well as fortified foods, and reduce demand for unhealthy foods, to encourage supply-side changes.
- Strengthen coordination and dialogue platforms between government, civil society and consumer organizations to uphold safeguards

2. Social protection system

Cash-based social assistance

- Incorporate explicit nutrition objectives, metrics and indicators on diets into existing and any new social assistance schemes to monitor the impact on dietary outcomes and health seeking behaviour.
- Tailor transfer values to close the affordability gap based on emerging evidence including the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) and FNG analysis.
- Expand social assistance schemes to cover the 'near poor'.
- Implement SBC strategy to complement cash transfers encouraging optimal use of the cash for nutrition benefits for women and children.

Shock responsive social protection

- Make social assistance shock responsive and anticipatory to disburse cash to households to protect livelihoods and assets and access to healthy nutritious diets before, during and after a disaster.
- Strengthen data systems and vulnerability analysis to inform targeting of interventions to the most at risk.
- Develop nutrition guidelines and standards for food assistance during emergencies, including modalities to secure access to fresh nutrient-dense produce.

Home-grown school feeding

- Revise nutrition standards for school meals to increase the nutrient content of rations and enhance ability to meet children's nutrient needs. Consider the integration of fortified rice into the ration as a cost-efficient solution to provide essential micronutrients.
- Adjust the allowance per meal for home-grown school feeding to enhance the ability to prepare meals that meet nutrition and food safety standards.
- Explore geographical and beneficiary target group expansion of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme to groups most at risk of not affording a nutritious diet, in addition to expansion to secondary facilities.

3. Health system

- Develop sustainable food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) for the general population, followed by FBDGs for specific population groups.
- Update national food fortification strategy and guidelines.
- Develop cohesive SBC package (following FBDGs, MIYCN SBCC Strategy and national nurturing care parenting package) to stimulate demand for more healthy foods, reduce consumption of ultra-processed unhealthy foods, and encourage improved hygiene and sanitation practices across all population groups.
- Tailor SBC package, including content and approaches, for specific population groups and integrate into interventions led by other sectors including cash transfers, education, WASH, extension services, media channels and more.
- Improve SBC approaches to address evidence-informed barriers to sustained behaviour change going beyond communication and awareness raising only.
- Update national guidelines to accommodate transition from iron folic acid supplementation to multiple micronutrient supplementation and expand the target to include all adolescent girls.
- Ensure quality, equitable access of services that prevent and treat child wasting, growth monitoring promotion, infant and young child feeding and micronutrient deficiencies as part of primary health care.
- Remove barriers to optimal breastfeeding practice by increasing maternity leave provisions, increasing skilled breastfeeding support at the community and health centre level, improving the quality of newborn care, and promoting workplace breastfeeding facilities.

4. Climate change

Agriculture, rural development, environment

- Reforest and reduce deforestation for agriculture land use.
- Improve efficiency of existing agricultural land use to improve productivity, reduce water footprint, and reduce deforestation.
- Invest in climate-proofed infrastructure including irrigation, roads, electricity system, storage facilities and markets.
- Invest in climate-smart agricultural technologies and practices, including use of raised beds, greenhouses, net houses.
- Diversify agriculture production to nutrient rich and low environmentally impact foods.
- Invest in food fortification as a mechanism to reduce emissions/footprint and simultaneously meet nutrient needs.

- Integrate early warning system and market/price information into application that farmers and extension workers currently use.
- Address increasing food safety risks emerging from rising temperatures and cold chain disruptions in food storage, handling and preparation.

Disaster risk management

- Improve early warning systems to reach the last mile.
- Expand the food reserve system and make it more nutrition-sensitive by fortifying grain reserves.
- Promote access to finance and weather-based insurance for farmers to protect livelihoods and access to healthy diets before, during and after a disaster.
- Support studies, data systems, surveillance mechanisms to better analyse vulnerability and risk, such as the Children's Climate Risk Index for Cambodia

Health

- Develop FBDGs that incorporate environmental and sustainability considerations.
- Integrate promotion of less environmentally impactful foods in SBC for healthy diets.
- Support climate-resilient WASH services and waste management in facilities and communities to prevent contamination and enable optimal hygiene and sanitation conditions that impact nutrition.

Research on the nexus of climate change, nutrition and food systems

- Model impacts of climate change on diets and nutrition using a range of climate change scenarios.
- Build business cases to invest in food systems to deliver co-benefits for climate and nutrition.
- Identify vulnerabilities to climate change in Cambodia's food systems and understand potential role of domestic, regional and international trade to increase resilience.
- Invest in research related to alternative environmentally sustainable protein sources, including aquaculture.
- Support research to better understand water, soil and food pollution and ways to mitigate and prevent risk.

5. Governance

In order to reach Cambodia's ambitions to achieve upper-middle income country status by 2030 and upper income status by 2050, the Royal Government of Cambodia has committed to strengthening human capital development, food systems and resilience to climate change as outlined in the new Pentagonal Strategy. As the Royal Government of Cambodia develops its Third National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition, under the leadership of the Council for Agricultural and Rural Development, the FNG analysis offers findings to prioritize actions. Furthermore, the Ministry of Planning plays a critical role in coordinating actors and setting standards for food fortification.

- Continue to coordinate and develop a common narrative around barriers to access healthy nutritious diets in Cambodia and identify roles and responsibilities for each sector to address these barriers.
- Use the FNG recommendations to inform the Third NSFSN and ensure that it is backed by financing, adequate budget allocations with a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to measure impact and results on nutrition across key sectors and systems.
- Coordinate fortification efforts including setting standards, strengthening capacities of private sector, and stimulating demand.
- Facilitate capacity strengthening on nutrition, food systems, and climate change across sectors and at subnational level.
- Promote and facilitate public-private partnerships and strengthen the SUN Business Network.
- Use SBC approaches to transform food systems from farm to fork, encouraging behaviour change of producers, value chain actors and consumers.
- Invest in data collection, monitoring and evaluation around nutrition, including consumption data, to track progress for evidence-based decision making.
- Improve disaggregated data, evidence generation to identify, target and reach most vulnerable to malnutrition with multisector interventions.
- Address evidence gaps on climate-nutrition impact pathways and biological and chemical food safety risks across the value chain.

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Cover page:
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This Fill the Nutrient Gap Analysis was funded by:

