



2 ZERO HUNGER

ZERO HUNGER

I. SUMMARY

Food systems face numerous multidimensional threats, including conflicts, climate change, and price and supply shocks. These challenges hinder progress in human health and security, poverty, inequality, and development efforts, while worsening environmental degradation. Several structural issues in the region compound these challenges, such as growing instability in food systems, demographic shifts, including ageing farmers, market concentration, barriers to adopting farmer-friendly technologies, limited access to finance, erosion of traditional knowledge and rapid urbanization affecting fragile urban food systems.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 underscores the global commitment to address the interconnected issues of food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. As we pass the midpoint between the adoption of the SDGs in 2015 and the target year of 2030, it is essential to evaluate the progress and challenges in achieving SDG 2 across the Asia-Pacific region and other parts of the world.



I. SUMMARY

Since the last regional SDG 2 Goal Profile (March 2021), global and regional food insecurity, malnutrition and hunger indicators have worsened due to the cascading impacts of overlapping crises. These crises include the disrupted recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of the war in Ukraine, climate disasters, shocks to global commodity and energy markets, and the deteriorating financial and macroeconomic health of countries in the region.

Progress in food security and nutrition has stagnated, if not reversed, between pre- and post-COVID years (FAO, IFAD, *et al.*, 2023). While moderate or severe food insecurity improved slightly in Asia between 2021 and 2022, levels are still much higher than 2019 pre-pandemic levels. The number of undernourished people has also increased from 2019 pre-pandemic levels. In Oceania, specifically,¹ the number of undernourished people rose for three consecutive years between 2020 and 2022.

With over 400 million undernourished people in Asia-Pacific, food security requires urgent attention. COVID-19 has undone years of progress, with an assessment of regional food system risk suggests rising risk in all six dimensions of food security (ESCAP and WFP, 2024)² namely availability, access, utilization, stability, agency and sustainability, after years of improvement (ESCAP and WFP, 2024). With current projections, the Asia-Pacific region will only achieve the SDGs by 2065.

Member States can focus on several priority areas to achieve SDG 2 targets, including implementing food policies, making investments and building capacity to address bottlenecks in food value chains that hinder food availability, access and stability. Some countries promote local food production, including urban agriculture, while others improve social policies to enhance food access and affordability for vulnerable populations. Strengthening urban food systems, rural-urban linkages and leveraging technology and innovation along the rural-urban continuum can significantly improve food availability and accessibility, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Additional SDG 2 priorities during crises include transitioning to sustainable agriculture practices such as nature-based solutions and climate-smart farming. Implementing measures to stabilize food price inflation, manage shocks in food and energy prices, enhance market information systems and stabilize financial health through tax and fiscal

¹ For the purposes of the SDG 2 Goal Profile, ESCAP subregional groupings have not been used.

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measures is also crucial. Furthermore, reducing food waste and loss and implementing sustainable agriculture approaches like agroecology or regenerative agriculture can enhance the resilience of smallholders, who produce most of the region's food, while also improving food availability, and diversity and reducing the environmental footprints of the food system.

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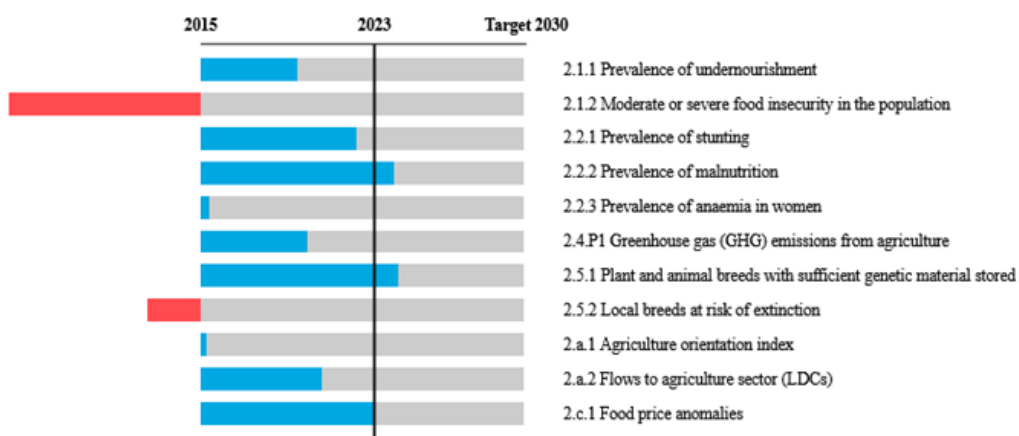


Figure 1 - Progress on Goal 2 indicators towards the 2030 targets

Source: ESCAP (2024).

Approximately 402 million people, or 55 per cent of the global total, experienced hunger in 2022 (FAO, UNICEF, *et al.*, 2023). While this figure is lower than in 2021 (414 million), it remains significantly higher than the pre-pandemic level in 2019 (344 million). Between 2021 and 2022, there was some progress in reducing hunger in Asia, with moderate or severe food insecurity slightly improving from 1,151.5 million in 2021 to 1,144.9 million in 2022 (24.5 per cent and 24.2 per cent, respectively). The number of people facing severe food insecurity decreased to 467 million in 2022, down from 486 million in 2021, yet still higher than the pre-pandemic level of 377 million in 2019 (FAO, UNICEF, *et al.*, 2023). The prevalence of undernourishment (SDG Indicator 2.1.1) in Asia was slightly lower in 2022 (8.5 per cent) compared to 2021 (8.8 per cent) but remained higher than 2019's pre-pandemic level (7.4 per cent). The trend between 2021 and 2022 was consistent across all regions except for Western Asia, where the

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number of undernourished individuals increased from 29.6 million (10.2 per cent) to 31.6 million (10.8 per cent) during this period.

In Asia, the average number of people who cannot afford a healthy diet in 2022 hovered around 1.974 billion people, or 44.4 per cent of the global total. This figure represents 25 million more people who could afford a healthy diet than in 2021 and 96 million more than in pre-COVID 2019 (FAO, UNICEF, *et al.*, 2023). In Southeast Asia, fewer people could afford a healthy diet in 2021 than in 2019 (54.9 per cent versus 52.3 per cent of the total population, or 357.4 million compared to 335 million). In South Asia, the number of those who could not afford a healthy diet declined slightly in 2021 (1.40 billion) compared to the year before (1.42 billion) but was still higher than in pre-covid 2019 (1.34 billion). The healthy diet cost, measured by PPP dollars per person per day, jumped by 9.1 per cent in Asia from 2019 to 2021. The increase was only slightly lower in Southeast Asia (at 8.5 per cent) but much higher in South Asia at an 11.4 per cent increase (FAO, UNICEF, *et al.*, 2023).

In 2022, Asia had 31.6 million children under five suffering from wasting, 80 per cent of which were in South Asia (25.1 million). The number of children under five affected by stunting was 76.6 million in 2022, a decrease from 106.8 million in 2012. A significant portion, 70 per cent (53.7 million), of these stunted children were in South Asia (FAO, UNICEF, *et al.*, 2023).

Undernutrition persists among school-aged children and adolescents, while overweight and obesity are also on the rise, increasing the risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases. The number of overweight children has remained relatively stable for over a decade, standing at 17.7 million in 2022 compared to 18.2 million in 2016. However, the number of obese adults (over 18 years old) has significantly increased in Asia over the past decade, rising from 181.7 million in 2012 to 231.8 million in 2022, marking a 27 per cent increase over the span of 10 years. The upward trend in adult obesity is evident in South Asia and Southeast Asia, though East Asia had a slight decline (FAO, UNICEF, *et al.*, 2023).

The prevalence of severe food insecurity is higher for women in Asia than men, at 9.9 per cent versus 8.5 per cent as of 2022. The gender gap widens further for South Asia (21 per cent for women compared to 17.8 per cent for men) and Western Asia (11.5 per cent for women compared to 8.6 per cent for men) in 2022 (FAO, UNICEF, *et al.*, 2023). Notably, the limited progress made on anaemia among women of reproductive

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age has wide-ranging health impacts and implications for the well-being of children and families.

The minimal change in agricultural orientation despite the escalating threats to the food system is noteworthy, alongside the increasing number of local plant varieties at risk of extinction, representing a loss of valuable assets and a potential pathway for enhancing climate resilience and diversity of production.

Overall, available data indicate that Southeast Asia is not making progress towards reducing hunger and food insecurity and is only making some strides towards reducing child malnutrition. Among the potential reasons, the COVID-19 pandemic likely hindered at least some progress towards these SDG 2 targets, as populations continue to grapple with recovering income losses from the pandemic's aftermath. Moreover, populations have faced rising prices of food, agricultural inputs and energy due to the conflict in Ukraine. Public policies may have been inadequate in addressing these shocks, particularly among vulnerable populations.

A. AREAS WITH PROGRESS

The war in Ukraine disrupted the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery for many countries and triggered global and regional shocks affecting food, energy and supply chains. It has reverberated through the macroeconomy, leading to general inflation, currency depreciation and strains on government finances. Faced with the challenges posed by these overlapping crises, which have interrupted the post-COVID-19 recovery, some countries have made notable strides in addressing zero hunger and malnutrition.

ENDING ALL FORMS OF MALNUTRITION

Progress on significant child nutrition indicators should be celebrated, with certain subregions within the Asia-Pacific region on track to achieve some of the nutrition targets by 2030. Most subregions within the Asia-Pacific region have made progress towards SDG 2 indicators, particularly in terms of child stunting, wasting and exclusive breastfeeding. Progress on SDG 2 targets was reported for all subregions except the Pacific (excluding New Zealand and Australia), where trends are worsening (see Table 1). However, the trends in child overweight are deteriorating, and progress on low birthweight is uneven across subregions in the Asia-Pacific region.

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Table 1 – Progress in nutrition and health indicators in Asia-Pacific

	Child stunting (%)			Child overweight (%)			Child wasting (%)		Low birthweight (%)			Exclusive breastfeeding (%)		
	2012	2022	2030	2012	2022	2030	2022	2030	2012	2020	2030	2012	2021	2030
WORLD	26.3	22.3		5.5	5.6		6.8		15.0	14.7		37.0	47.7	
ASIA	28.2	22.3		4.8	5.1		9.3		17.2	17.2		39.0	51.5	
Central Asia and Southern Asia	39.3	29.4		2.9	2.9		13.7		25.4	23.5		46.5	59.4	
Central Asia	14.7	7.7		8.2	5.0		2.1		6.3	6.0		29.2	44.9	
Southern Asia	40.3	30.5		2.7	2.8		14.3		26.1	24.4		47.2	60.2	
Eastern Asia and South-eastern Asia	16.0	13.9		6.5	8.0		4.2		8.1	8.7		30.3	41.5	
Eastern Asia	7.7	4.9		6.6	8.3		1.5		5.5	5.5		28.4	35.3	
South-eastern Asia	30.4	26.4		6.4	7.4		7.8		12.8	12.5		33.4	48.3	
OCEANIA EXCLUDING AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND	40.9	44.0		9.3	13.9		8.3		17.4	17.9		56.6	59.5	
Australia and New Zealand	3.4	3.4		12.4	19.3		n.a.		6.4	6.4		n.a.	n.a.	

Source: FAO, IFAD, et al. (2023).

FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION POLICIES AND ACTIONS

Food system transformation pathways in several countries have provided important support for strengthening policy frameworks and boosting action. In **Japan**, local governments are invited to draft incentive-based plans for farmers and businesses to access various supportive measures, including tax exemptions. **Türkiye** has conducted informational meetings on sustainable food systems and initiated initiatives such as the Save Your Food Campaign (FAO, 2024a) to reduce food waste. **Timor-Leste** is developing a national food fortification law.

Thailand is addressing carbon neutrality and biodiversity loss in agriculture, ensuring social protection and equity, improving supply chain resilience with trading partners, and advancing understanding of pathways for food systems transformation (FAO, 2024b). In **Sri Lanka**, a joint food security assessment mission with international organizations and stakeholders is being conducted to identify areas where vulnerability is forecasted (FAO and WFP, 2023). In **Nepal**, the Food Security National Committee is conducting a provincial-level review of food systems, and a monitoring and evaluation framework incorporates the country's climate vulnerabilities. **Samoa** has established a long-term plan, including geographical demarcation to all its 52 districts, with most of these communities participating in fisheries and agriculture. In **Uzbekistan**, a new initiative connects agricultural research, education and best

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practices related to innovation while simultaneously encouraging youth to join agriculture.

INTEGRATED RESPONSES TO HUNGER AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Many countries enacted measures and interventions specifically targeting zero hunger and poverty. Cash transfers for pregnant women, school feeding programmes and food safety laws are being implemented in **Cambodia**. In **Pakistan**, the country responded to the impacts of the 2022 floods and the financial crisis on food security by focusing on input subsidies and strategic reserves. In 2022, the government also expanded the coverage of the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) (a national initiative to alleviate poverty among women) from 4.144 million beneficiaries in the first half of 2021 to 5.152 million in the same period in 2022 with funding increasing from 51.24 billion rupees to 74.34 billion rupees, respectively. Still, these programmes only reach a portion of the country's needs and require more structural reforms.

In the **Maldives**, several long-term national policy measures to transform food systems have been put in place. These include reducing food imports by 2–3 per cent by 2030, introducing crop diversification by identifying 17 target crops, continuing to practice the most sustainable fisheries in the world and contributing to knowledge-sharing among coastal/island states, digitizing agriculture, reducing land rents and import duties, and identifying spaces for local production. Risk and vulnerability are an important area of attention.

In **Indonesia**, the National Economic Recovery Program (Pemulihan Ekonomi Nasional/PEN) was transformed from a programme designed to respond to COVID-19 impacts (2020) to tackle rising hunger and malnutrition in response to geopolitical tensions in 2022. The programme included fiscal and monetary policies to increase domestic consumption, promote business activity, and refocus food production programmes to maintain and/or increase rice production to fulfil domestic demand. The government enacted measures to minimize the impacts of the war in Ukraine on food production by subsidizing fertilizer for small-scale farming. The government also moved to shore up food reserves to overcome sudden price spikes. Under the social protection policy, Indonesia expanded credit for MSMEs (Kredit Usaha Rakyat/KUR) and expanded cash assistance for street vendors, stalls, and fishermen in the priority districts and cities identified for extreme poverty alleviation and accelerated the

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distribution of various social protection programmes to low-income workers and households.

In the **Philippines**, long-term industrialization and modernization plans have been set in place for smallholders and fisheries stakeholders. Specific to the zero hunger strategy, the government issued in May 2023 a new Executive Order to reorganize the Inter-Agency Task Force on Zero Hunger (IATF-ZH), placing it under the Department of Social Welfare and Development. Additionally, the national anti-hunger initiative, Filipinas Kontra Gutom (PKG) underwent rebranding as the Walang Gutom 2027 movement, which included reframing the Zero Hunger Strategic Communication Framework and pushing for a new social safety net programme used the food stamp approach. In rebuilding resilient agrifood systems in response to the global economic crisis in 2022, the government enacted several anticipatory actions and response measures, including introducing new subsidies (including for fertilizer and substitutes) to support customers and setting minimum prices for some commodities while increasing/decreasing minimum support prices for some. The government also reduced import tariffs on select commodities and implemented quotas on certain imports. Measures such as the Mobilization of the Quick Response Fund (QRF) and the maintenance and distribution of buffer stocks of seeds, planting materials and livestock were introduced. Furthermore, the government enacted several financial initiatives including agricultural credit programmes, the AgriNegosyo (ANYO) Loan Program, the Kapital Access for Young Agripreneurs (KAYA) Program, the Survival and Recovery (SURE) Loan Assistance Program, and the Rice Farmers Financial Assistance (RFFA) Program.

LOCAL INITIATIVES AND CAPACITY-BUILDING

In Viet Nam, from 2019 to 2022, the Department of Economic Cooperation and Rural Development (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) implemented several interventions in collaboration with academia and local authorities. These included training and awareness-raising on zero hunger, establishing and enhancing an agricultural and value chain model to improve nutrition, and enhancing the leadership and coordination capacity of the government at both national and local levels to execute the National Action Program for Zero Hunger within the food system framework.

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The programme aims to assist smallholder farmers, kindergartens and semi-boarding and boarding primary schools in mountainous ethnic minority areas, focusing on interventions in Lang Son Province, where malnutrition rates are notably high. Specifically, the government promoted nutrition-sensitive agriculture across various stages, including farming, breeding and the processing of Indigenous products.

B. AREAS REQUIRING ATTENTION AND ASSOCIATED KEY CHALLENGES

The food systems in Asia and the Pacific are encountering significant challenges, yet, there is genuine momentum to redesign and transform the agrifood system, aligning with the development pathways outlined during the United Nations Food Systems Summit in 2021. These challenges primarily stem from the overlapping crises after the post-COVID-19 period, including economic shocks resulting from the war in Ukraine, compounded by various regional and localized natural and climate disasters.

Structural challenges also contribute to the complexities arising from growth-inducing inequity, rapid urbanization, demographic shifts such as an ageing population and youth rural-urban migration, and persistent wars and conflicts. Furthermore, the region grapples with mounting challenges related to climate impacts and the limited and degrading state of natural resources, including land, water and biodiversity loss. Rising inequality, gender disparities concerning access to resources, economic inclusion, agency, regional disparities and market concentration exacerbate the hurdles. Moreover, rural-urban migration and food insecurity among smallholder farmers further compound the region's challenges.

The key challenges to achieving SDG 2 in Asia and the Pacific arising from these multifaceted issues are below.

ECONOMIC SHOCKS, HIGH INFLATION, AND LIMITED FISCAL SPACE LIMIT THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO PROMOTE FOOD SECURITY.

Since 2022, one significant challenge countries and households face has been the sharp rise in food and energy prices. This increase has severely impacted purchasing power, elevated the cost of healthy diets and contributed to coping mechanisms, often leading to decreased food security and increased malnutrition. The macroeconomic shocks resulting from overlapping crises and subsequent high inflation have

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intensified pressure on governments to implement more direct support measures. However, reduced fiscal space, diminished foreign exchange reserves, and increased government debt and debt servicing costs have constrained many governments' ability to provide the necessary support to enhance food access, availability and invest in agricultural productivity measures. Several countries in the region require additional capacity to support their populations effectively and ensure the achievement of food security and nutrition objectives.

DEPENDENCE ON IMPORTS, WHICH HAVE BECOME MORE UNSTABLE AND UNRELIABLE, COUNTERS THE INCREASED DEMAND FOR LOCAL PRODUCTION AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY.

More countries are responding to the ongoing overlapping crises by formulating new policy blueprints focused on bolstering domestic food production and availability, enhancing access and managing food market risks and stability. These efforts involve strategic measures such as establishing food reserves, diversifying food trade and promoting short supply chains. However, improving production necessitates investments and the provision of critical inputs, including fertilizer, which is largely imported, and fuel, the cost of which has escalated while subsidies remain unsustainable.

Solutions will vary depending on the local or national context, including the potential for increased productivity and the scope for diversifying food production. Measures such as diversification of trading partners to mitigate risks to supply chains, shortening supply chains, and more effective investments in research and extension services are essential for making progress towards greater food self-sufficiency and security of supply.

WITH RAPID URBANIZATION, GAPS REMAIN IN URBAN FOOD GOVERNANCE IN AGRIFOOD TRANSFORMATION.

Rapidly increasing urbanization and the adoption of a systems approach to agrifood have shifted the focus towards the consumer end of the food system, highlighting urban food ecosystems and rural-urban agrifood linkages. One challenge is the necessity for a clear understanding of urban food governance to ensure better food availability, access and affordability of healthy diets, particularly among the urban poor and the most vulnerable populations.

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Another challenge is effectively addressing the rising obesity rates among urban residents, especially children and adolescents, attributed to easy access to cheaper, convenient, pre-prepared and fast foods that are often energy-dense and high in fats, sugars and salt, contributing to malnutrition. Additionally, ensuring food security entails linking food safety with the provision of safe water to prevent parasites, bacteria or other diseases.

With proper urban food governance, characterized by multi-layered and multi-stakeholder food policy coordination, it becomes easier to secure sufficient availability of diverse and sustainably produced vegetables and fruits to meet the daily requirements of healthy diets for everyone.

However, challenges persist, including weak rural-to-urban market linkages, the exclusion of small-scale farmers, particularly women farmers, from value chains and low youth participation. A significant challenge in agrifood transformation is the diversity of market intermediaries separating small-scale producers from final buyers and consumers. Investing in storage infrastructure and digital technologies can significantly enhance rural-urban linkages and improve producers-to-consumer direct market connections through e-commerce and other online marketing platforms. Establishing and implementing basic food safety and quality regulations and standards remain challenging yet essential for progress.

A LACK OF PRICE AND MARKET INFORMATION AND CAPACITY GAPS IN EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS OFTEN HINDER FOOD POLICY AIMED AT IMPROVING ACCESS TO HEALTHY DIETS.

The economic shocks and disruptions in markets and trade lead to supply shortages, variability and uncertainty, with adverse effects on food availability, particularly for countries heavily reliant on imports but with limited financial resources. During times of crisis and geopolitical shifts, timely access to information, monitoring, and analysis of commodity markets, prices and trade data becomes crucial to facilitate prompt policy actions, adjustments, and preventive measures to address shocks, price fluctuations and supply variability. However, gaps in country data availability and analysis, particularly concerning market information and monitoring, hinder proactive policy responses. Some countries must strengthen their capacity for market intelligence, data collection, monitoring and analysis to address these challenges effectively.

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FOOD SYSTEM RISKS ACROSS ALL FOOD SECURITY DIMENSIONS ARE RISING.

The six food security dimensions identified by the High-level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security—availability, access, utilization, stability, agency and sustainability—offer a valuable framework for evaluating food security challenges (HLPE, 2020). An ESCAP-WFP analysis of 49 Asia-Pacific countries shows that the region has experienced some improvements in food security dimensions such as food availability and the healthy and safe utilization of food. However, there has been a significant rise in vulnerability and risks associated with market and financial stability since the 2010–2011 food price crisis, along with slow and insufficient progress in sustainability, posing threats to food security. The COVID-19 pandemic has notably exacerbated risk trends for all food security dimensions (ESCAP and WFP, 2024).

Food and energy price increases have exacerbated poverty and food insecurity among the most vulnerable populations in Asia and the Pacific. In 2021, 44 per cent of people in Asia could not afford a healthy diet, up from 43 per cent in 2019. Climate change further compounds these challenges. Floods and droughts threaten food security in the region, leading to increased migration flows and humanitarian crises. Climate change is also projected to decrease crop productivity in tropical and subtropical regions, pressure fisheries and livestock and impact soil and water resources across many subregions.

Moreover, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that the food system contributes 21 to 37 per cent of heat-trapping gases emitted by human activities globally. This includes emissions from food-related forestry and land-use changes and food loss, waste and disposal. Therefore, a climate-smart transformation of the food system is crucial for achieving SDG 2 in the region.

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C. AVAILABILITY OF DATA

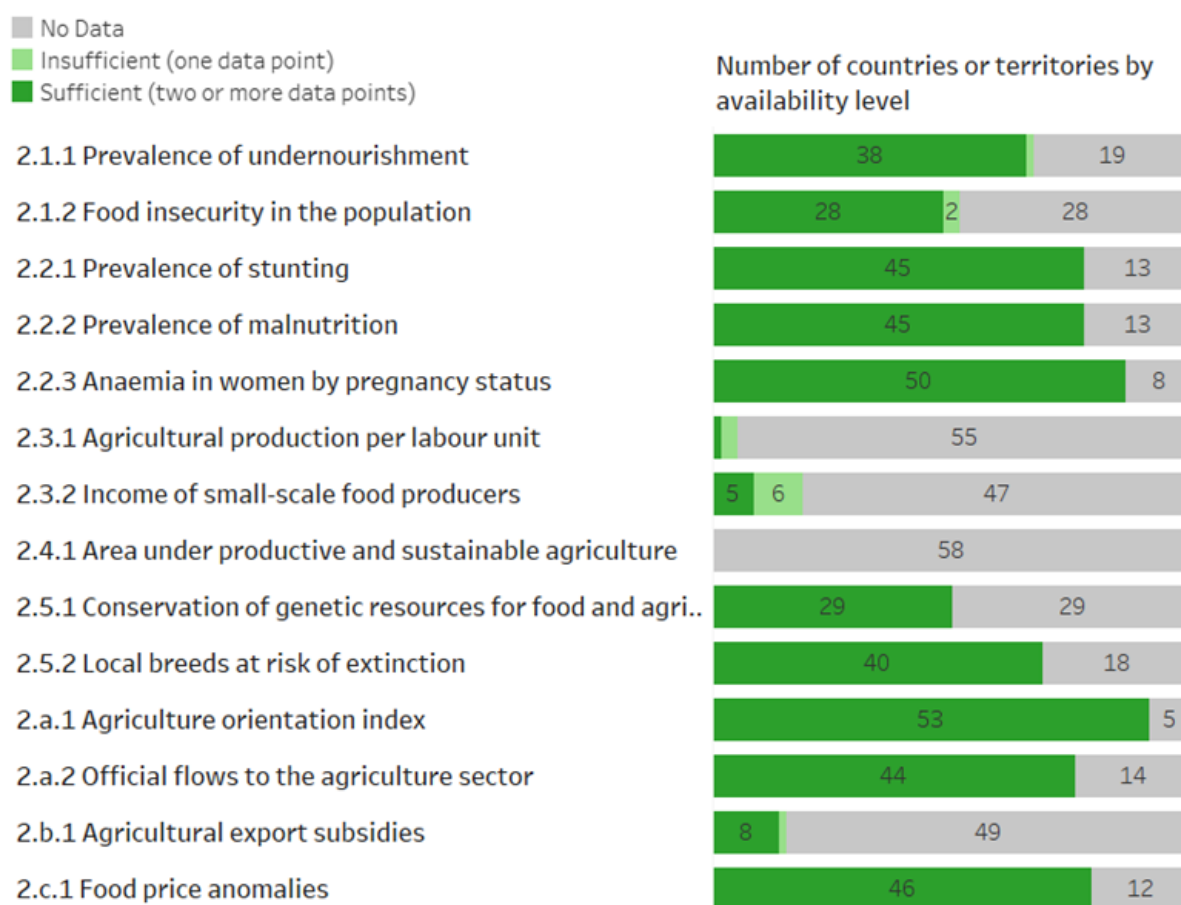


Figure 2 – Data availability for indicators in Goal 2

Source: ESCAP (2024).

While SDG 2 data availability is sufficient for at least half of the Member States covered by ESCAP, three significant gaps remain. Firstly, data regarding the area under productive and sustainable agriculture is missing for all countries. Secondly, information on the income of smallholders, who produce approximately 80 per cent of all food consumed in the region, is only sufficient for five countries. Thirdly, data availability for assessing progress on labour productivity is even more constrained.

Addressing these data gaps is crucial and should be urgently prioritized to facilitate sustainable food systems transformations and ensure food security and nutrition for all.

III. HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY CONSIDERATIONS

SDG 2 and the right to food are mutually reinforcing. The SDGs serve as a potentially transformative tool to advance people's full enjoyment of the right to food, encompassing four key elements: availability, accessibility, adequacy and sustainability. Furthermore, international human rights standards regarding the right to food can provide guidance for achieving SDG 2. This involves eliminating barriers such as inequality and the inequitable distribution of food and productive resources, involving historically marginalized populations in policymaking, and implementing legal protections that address inequality and exclusion.

Ratifying human rights instruments represents a crucial initial step in addressing gaps at the national level, as it signifies states' acknowledgement of their obligations as duty-bearers to individuals and groups who are rights-holders. A human rights-based approach, incorporating principles such as participation, universality, indivisibility, equality, non-discrimination, accountability and the rule of law, is essential for achieving SDG 2. International human rights mechanisms have provided extensive guidance on realizing the right to food and other economic, social, and cultural rights, underscoring its connection to SDG achievement (OHCHR, n.d.).

"Leaving no one behind" (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, encompassing the commitment to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition for all. Regrettably, many children across Asia and the Pacific continue to be left behind, facing disparities in both opportunities and outcomes.

Across 25 countries with available data for the 2016–2022 period (see Figure 2), the prevalence of stunting across Asia and the Pacific varies significantly, ranging from 2 per cent in Tonga (2019) to over 45 per cent in Afghanistan (2022) and Timor-Leste (2016) (ESCAP, 2024). However, the average prevalence conceals wide inequalities within children under 5 in many countries. There are substantial gaps between the furthest behind (orange dots) and furthest ahead (blue dots) children, particularly in South and Southwest Asia. On average, 47.6 per cent of children in the furthest behind

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groups are stunted in this region, including in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan, but excluding the Maldives and Türkiye (ESCAP, 2024).

Typically, the furthest behind children are boys living in poorer households with more than one sibling, and their mothers often have lower levels of education. Addressing these disparities and ensuring the inclusion of all children, regardless of their background, is essential for achieving SDGs related to food security and nutrition.

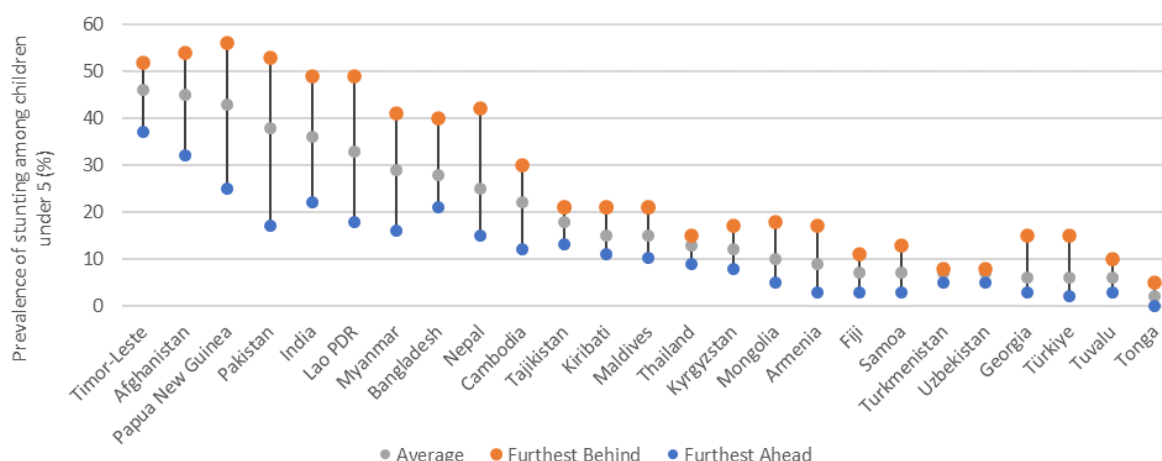


Figure 2 – Prevalence of stunting among children under five in Asia-Pacific

Source: ESCAP (2023).

Note: ESCAP elaborations based on Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys from 25 countries from 2016–2022.

Wasting is less prevalent in Asia and the Pacific compared to stunting, resulting in lower inequalities. However, in regions such as South and Southwest Asia, and Southeast Asia, including Timor-Leste, India, Maldives, Bangladesh and Lao PDR, where it is prevalent, the furthest behind group consists once again of boys from poorer households with mothers of lower education levels.

In contrast, overweight is less common in the Asia-Pacific region compared to stunting, but there is an increasing trend over time. The furthest behind group concerning this form of child malnutrition includes boys from urban households with mothers who have at least a secondary education. Household wealth is not as significant a factor as in other forms of child malnutrition. Among the furthest behind children, the prevalence of overweight exceeds 10 per cent in Pacific countries such as Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea, as well as in upper-middle-income countries like Thailand, Türkiye, and Armenia (Figure 3).

IV. PROMISING INNOVATIONS AND PRACTICES

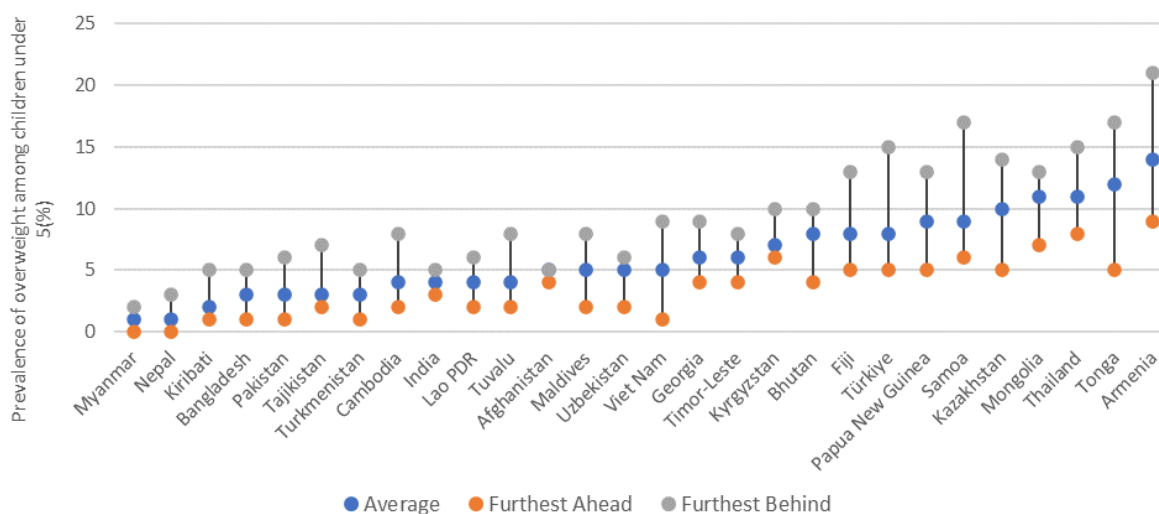


Figure 3 – Prevalence of being overweight among children under five in Asia-Pacific

Source: ESCAP (2023).

Note: ESCAP elaborations based on Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys from 28 countries from 2010–2022.

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STRENGTHENING FOOD ENVIRONMENT BY IMPROVING SUPPLY OF HEALTHY DIETS

As diets gradually converge across the rural-urban continuum, policies and legislation need to promote healthy, formal, informal food environments and empower consumers to make nutritious food choices. Singapore has implemented a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach led by the Health Promotion Board to improve the supply of healthier options in the food away-from-home sector while also increasing demand for these options among consumers.

To enhance the availability and accessibility of nutritious foods, the government provides research-based support to the industry to produce healthier base ingredients, such as wholegrain noodles with a high fibre content. The Healthier Dining Programme, building on the earlier Healthier Hawker Programme established in the early 1970s to improve the safety of street foods, supports food outlets in

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incorporating healthy options through reformulation grants. These grants can cover the cost of purchasing healthier ingredients, paying for healthy cooking classes, or funding research and development. Separate grants are also available to promote healthier food and drink options.

To increase demand, awareness-raising campaigns utilize simple messages to highlight healthy options. Food items endorsed by the Healthier Dining Programme are labelled with "Healthier Choice" meal identifiers on menus, menu boards, countertops, shelves and packaging. Additionally, the Eat, Drink, Shop Healthy Challenge campaign promotes healthier options and offers rewards for selecting healthier choices through a smartphone app.

These efforts are supported by a whole-of-government approach, including a commitment to using healthier ingredients in all catering services in government institutes, including schools. This commitment has been instrumental in encouraging investment in product innovation and reformulation.

STRENGTHENING RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES THROUGH SMES

Urbanization fosters progressive interconnectedness and gradual dietary convergence across the rural-urban continuum, offering both opportunities and challenges. On the positive side, urbanization facilitates more diversified diets, increased adoption of processed foods, greater off-farm income opportunities and improved productivity for farmers who are well-connected to cities. However, challenges arise from the increased availability and demand for energy-dense foods high in fats, sugars and salt, leading to malnutrition, inadequate production of fruits and vegetables, high prices of nutritious foods, and the exclusion of farmers from more formal food value chains.

A crucial link along the rural-urban continuum is small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly in Small and Intermediate Cities and Towns (SICTs), which are vital in ensuring connectivity between primary producers and final consumers. Many SMEs in SICTs capitalize on their proximity to production areas and serve as intermediaries connecting the rural hinterland to expanding urban and peri-urban agglomerations of all sizes. Midstream SMEs are essential for rural investment, off-farm employment, the modernization of the agrifood sector, the enhancement of

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utilities such as water and energy, and the integration of small farms into expanding urban food markets.

INVESTING IN TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATIONS FOR IMPROVED HEALTHY DIETS

Peri-urban and rural markets play a crucial role in driving the transformation of agrifood systems. The level of connectivity between rural and urban areas significantly influences agrifood systems, affecting the availability of affordable healthy diets and the livelihoods of urban and rural primary producers, processors and traders. Given that a substantial portion of the population resides in peri-urban areas of SICTs, investing in these areas can significantly impact healthy diets for their populations.

Adopting appropriate technology and innovation is essential for improving the food environment. One promising example is vertical farming, which requires only a small plot of land, can be conducted indoors and enables food cultivation in urban and industrial spaces, thereby contributing to the development of shorter supply chains.

However, achieving this requires more integrated urban planning and suitable governance structures where subnational governments actively formulate and implement coherent policies that extend beyond agrifood systems and transcend normal administrative borders. Such approaches are crucial for fostering sustainable and inclusive development in peri-urban and rural areas, ensuring the availability of nutritious food and promoting the well-being of both urban and rural populations.

PROMOTING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN AGRICULTURE THROUGH FARMERS ORGANIZATIONS

The transformation of food systems requires empowering rural communities, smallholders and rural youth. Farmers' organizations are crucial in promoting smallholder empowerment and have a comparative advantage in attracting rural youth. They can also address young farmers' critical productivity and socioeconomic constraints, including access to financing and skills and knowledge gaps in agribusiness, land, financing and markets.

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Data and information collected from farmers' organizations and stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region (IFAD, 2021) point to these organizations' need to develop dedicated strategies and mechanisms for engaging rural youth and creating space for youth in policy processes and dialogue. Since youth are early adopters of digital solutions, promoting technological innovation can effectively engage them.

Collaboration with key stakeholders, including the private sector and government agencies, who have a vested interest in achieving national food security and nutrition goals, can simultaneously accelerate youth engagement and technological innovation. By fostering collaboration and providing opportunities for rural youth to participate in decision-making processes, the agricultural sector can harness their potential to drive positive change and contribute to the sustainable transformation of food systems.

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To generate renewed progress towards food security and nutrition in Asia and the Pacific, and to put the region back on track towards achieving SDG 2, solutions are needed to transform food systems and to reduce and mitigate the impacts of various challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and, increasingly, severe climatic shocks. These solutions should particularly focus on vulnerable populations. Below are some identified priority actions to consider:

PRIORITY 1: PRIORITIZE MULTI-PRONGED ACTION AND TARGETED SUPPORT TO PROMOTE ACCESSIBLE AND AFFORDABLE DIETS, INCLUDING THROUGH SOCIAL SAFETY NET PROGRAMMES.

Tackling malnutrition requires enacting fortification programmes, strengthening regulations and laws and promoting nutrition and health awareness and education. Homegrown feeding, school feeding and other nutrition-specific approaches are also essential. Safety net policies are also necessary, including cash transfers to vulnerable women, children and other groups. Social protection measures can be complemented by strengthening local value chains, reducing food waste and loss, and providing subsidies to manage high inflation and food price rises, which affect people's purchasing power. These measures require rebalancing and realigning less

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prioritized measures to ensure financial sustainability during national financial constraints.

PRIORITY 2: INVEST IN SUSTAINABLE, CLIMATE-SMART AND DIVERSIFIED FOOD PRODUCTION, BUILDING ON AGROECOLOGICAL PRINCIPALS, DIGITAL INNOVATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE MECHANIZATION.

Food system transformation for food security and nutrition necessitates recalibrating food production strategies. This includes increasing food production and productivity, strategic investing in crop and food diversification for balanced nutrition, and promoting agroecological, climate-smart and other sustainable food production practices including for the livestock sector. Attention should be paid to reducing the use of chemicals, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss and resource depletion, while sustaining soil health and food output. A One Health approach to food systems that consider human, animal and environmental health needs to be upheld.

Large-scale investment in sustainable mechanization is critical for enhancing the sustainability and efficiency of food production. This includes policy support through harmonizing standards and increased capacity for testing and adaptation. Moreover, digitalization and digital-enabled farm advisories, smart farm technologies and utilizing big data, AI, and Internet of Things tools are essential to improve food production, processing, marketing and trade. For most countries in the region, investing in digital agriculture innovations and last-mile digitalization are top priorities. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that applying these technologies might also entail risks.

Success in promoting much-needed youth engagement in agriculture and successful technological innovation efforts are likely to be strongly linked. Targeted support for youth engagement, including the provision of resources and mentorship, is required.

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PRIORITY 3: PRIORITIZE ENHANCED SUPPLY AND DEMAND-SIDE FOOD POLICIES TO RESPOND TO CURRENT FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS AND RISKS WHILE ADDRESSING TRADE-OFFS AND SYNERGIES TO TRANSFORM THE FOOD SYSTEM IN THE AFTERMATH OF OVERLAPPING CRISES

Ensuring food security and nutrition for all in the aftermath of the overlapping crisis requires enhanced food policies in support of supply-side actions (e.g., promoting local production, short-value chains, improving rural-urban market linkages) and demand-side interventions (promoting affordable and accessible food, calibrated social protection and safety net policies, food fortification, and other nutrition measures) in light of the financial constraints faced by many governments in the region stemming from the cumulative economic and financial impacts of the overlapping crises. While food security has become the top policy priority for most countries in the region, the responses to perceived priorities, risks and means have varied. Some countries focus more on improving market linkages (value chain development) and investing in export-oriented products (hard currency earner), while others focus on stimulating local food production and promoting urban agriculture and local value chains. Also, strategic agrifood systems transformation for enhanced food security requires a balancing act between open trade policies and support for domestic food production and increased food availability and access.

PRIORITY 4: STRENGTHEN LOCAL VALUE CHAINS AND RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES TO IMPROVE NUTRITION AND ACCESS TO FOOD AMONG THE URBAN POOR AND THE MOST VULNERABLE.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent crises underscored the urgency to shift the agrifood paradigm towards more balanced domestic sources versus imported food to ensure food security for the populations. Improving food availability requires connecting shock-proof supply chains, enhancing food market linkages, including rural-urban connections and implementing measures to strengthen resilient supply chains through storage and logistics infrastructure. Additionally, investments and incentives to reduce food loss and waste at farm and post-farm levels are crucial. Enhancing food access for the most urban poor and vulnerable necessitates improving urban food governance, and integrating the urban food agenda into urban planning. This integration should encompass urban agriculture, advanced smart

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farming, and digital technologies that facilitate rural-urban market linkages, promote short food value chains, and enhance nutrition and health awareness in urban settings.

PRIORITY 5: STRENGTHEN CAPACITIES FOR ENHANCED RISK ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT IN RESPONSE TO PANDEMICS, DISASTERS AND THEIR IMPACTS ON FOOD SYSTEMS.

Lessons from the crises dictate investments to promote disaster-proof and resilient food value chains capable of withstanding shocks and disruptions from natural or human conflict sources. This involves integrating risk management strategies into policy formulation, investing in data and information systems, and developing capacity for data analysis and information management to enhance robust decision-making along the food value chain. Countries must invest in and develop capacity in risk assessment and management based on reliable data on market, price, stock and policy along agrifood commodities and value chains most vulnerable to shocks. Disaster-related risk management frameworks and models that take into account food system components can inform humanitarian assistance and emergency support to help populations in disaster situations receive adequate and timely nutritional diets. It is also important to recognize the multiple dimensions of risk, and to understand the “risk profile” of each country, considering risks to the six dimensions of food security, the evolution of risk over time, and the situation of particularly vulnerable groups, while also monitoring changes in near-term risk. Risks faced by increasingly vulnerable smallholders need particular attention and investment.

PRIORITY 6: INVEST IN RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND NEW TECHNOLOGY TO ADAPT OUR FOOD SYSTEMS TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS TO SCALE TRANSFORMATION.

There is a need to invest in research and development, revitalize extension services to promote diverse, nutrition-oriented, agroecological and nature-positive food systems building on both Indigenous and scientific knowledge.-.

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Transboundary and multistakeholder partnerships and networks are crucial for streamlining efforts and ensuring the scaled-up adoption of best practices in food system transformation. Funds need to be directed to local governments, food producer organisations, and local communities for them to be fully engaged in designing and implementing food system transformation. Dialogues across countries to address transboundary water management issues, building on transparent data, are increasingly important in the context of climate adaptation.

Many countries are also exploring new models and approaches to increase private investments and reduce the reliance on governments, which face growing financial constraints due to global economic crises. Consequently, there is a greater need to strengthen private-public partnerships to make the necessary investments to scale successful best practices addressing food security and nutrition challenges.

PRIORITY 7: MINIMISE FOOD LOSS AND WASTAGE

Reducing food loss and waste is a critical strategy for enhancing food security and nutrition, mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, alleviating water and land resources pressure, and promoting productivity and economic growth. Technology-supported supply chain management is essential to achieving nutritional security to minimize food loss. Utilizing food waste sustainably, particularly through low-cost and less sophisticated methods like livestock-based food waste management, can help achieve SDGs in developing and underdeveloped economies. Key actions for preventing and reducing food waste and loss include raising awareness, fostering state and non-state collaborations and partnerships, improving information on identifying critical points of food loss and waste along supply chains and at the consumer level, and supporting Member Countries in adopting coherent governance frameworks that integrate or directly address food loss and waste prevention and reduction.

PRIORITY 8: ENHANCE FARMERS' LIVELIHOODS AND PROSPERITY

Farmer and producer organizations and family farmers are agents of change in sustainable food production. It is critical to reduce production costs and ensure access to quality seeds, land, water resources, finance, technology, and knowledge to make farming viable and sustainable and to improve farmers' prosperity. Farmers and consumers need targeted intervention to improve market linkages and ensure fair

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prices. Investment in entrepreneurship skills is also needed, including supporting youth engagement in innovative agriculture practices. Integrating and empowering rural women in sustainable livelihoods, including through security of land tenure and inheritance rights, is also critical.

VI. CREDITS AND REFERENCES

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