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Creating a **healthy**
future in Africa
through food

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Introduction

Food plays an essential role in our lives; it provides us nutrients for the growth and repair of body tissues, and it provides us with the energy we need for our bodies to function.

Healthy and nutritious food is a key building block not only for a healthy life but also for a prosperous society.

Healthy food is of critical importance for infants and children as their bodies and brains require a wide range of nutrients to develop. An insufficient intake of vital nutrients including healthy fats, proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and other micro-nutrients could impede the mental and physical development of children and could have a long-lasting negative impact on their lives.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations recognises both the direct positive impact of improved nutrition on productivity and the indirect

benefits on life expectancy, which together positively impact the economy.

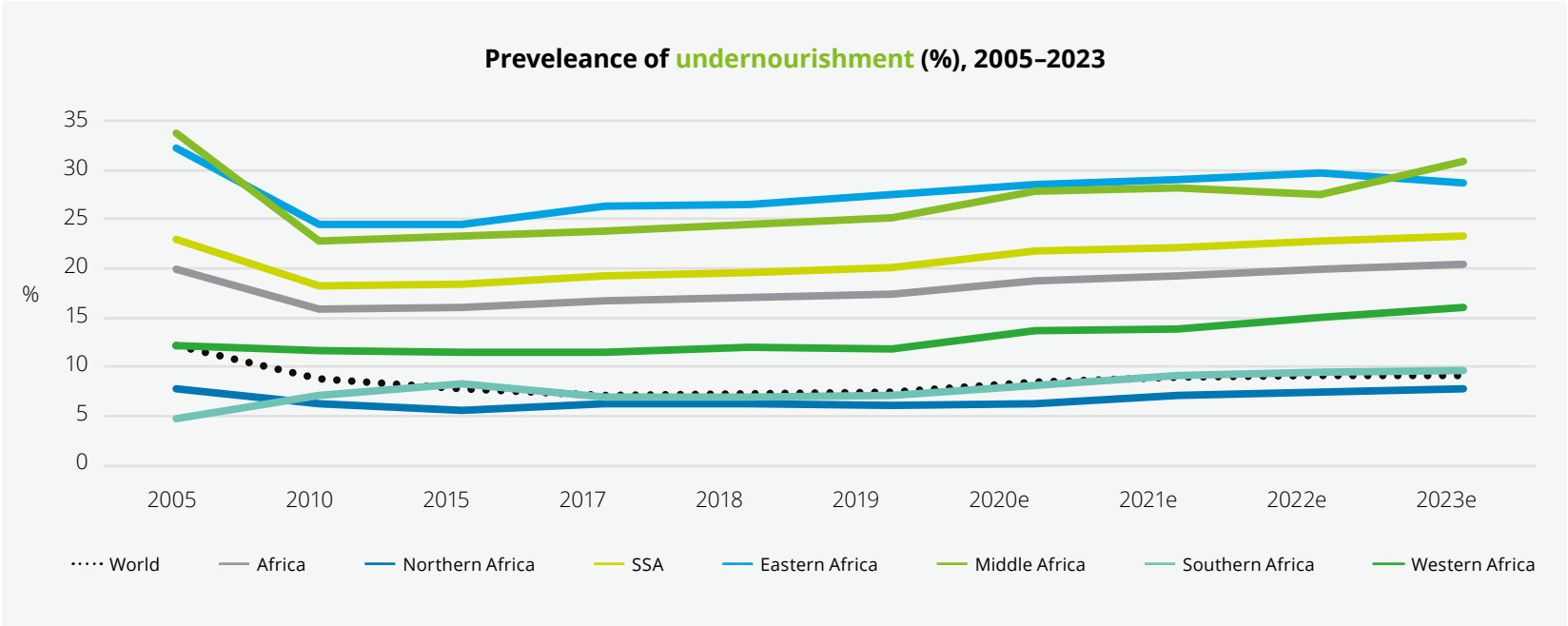
However, strong population growth will make it increasingly difficult for many African countries to ensure food security if food systems are not fundamentally transformed. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) estimates that in the next 25 years, Africa's population will grow by almost one billion people, making the transformation of food systems a key priority for the continent. This transformation needs to be well managed to avoid the prioritisation of high-volume staples that might help with meeting the caloric requirements, but potentially jeopardise the availability of nutritious and affordable food on the continent.



Too little food

While there is ample evidence that the right food is critical for our well-being, for millions of people access to food is still a huge challenge. The IMF estimates that approximately one in three people in Sub-Saharan Africa lives on less than US\$2.15/ day, limiting their ability to access sufficient food. With close to 300 million Africans classified as undernourished in 2023, Africa accounted for roughly 40% of all undernourished people in the world, making it the continent most severely affected region in the world.

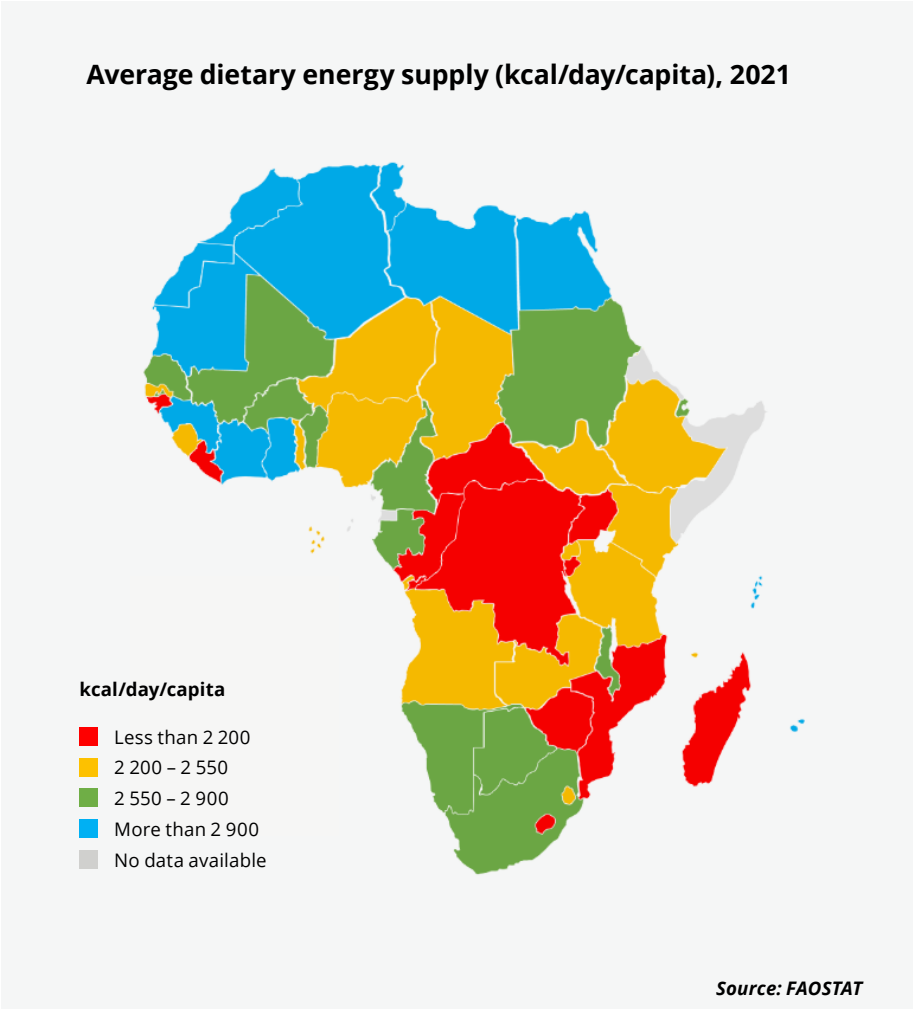
Within Africa there are also stark differences. Eastern and Middle Africa are the most severely affected regions on the continent with close to one in three people in these regions suffering from undernourishment. While the prevalence of undernourishment in Southern and Northern Africa is similar to the global average.



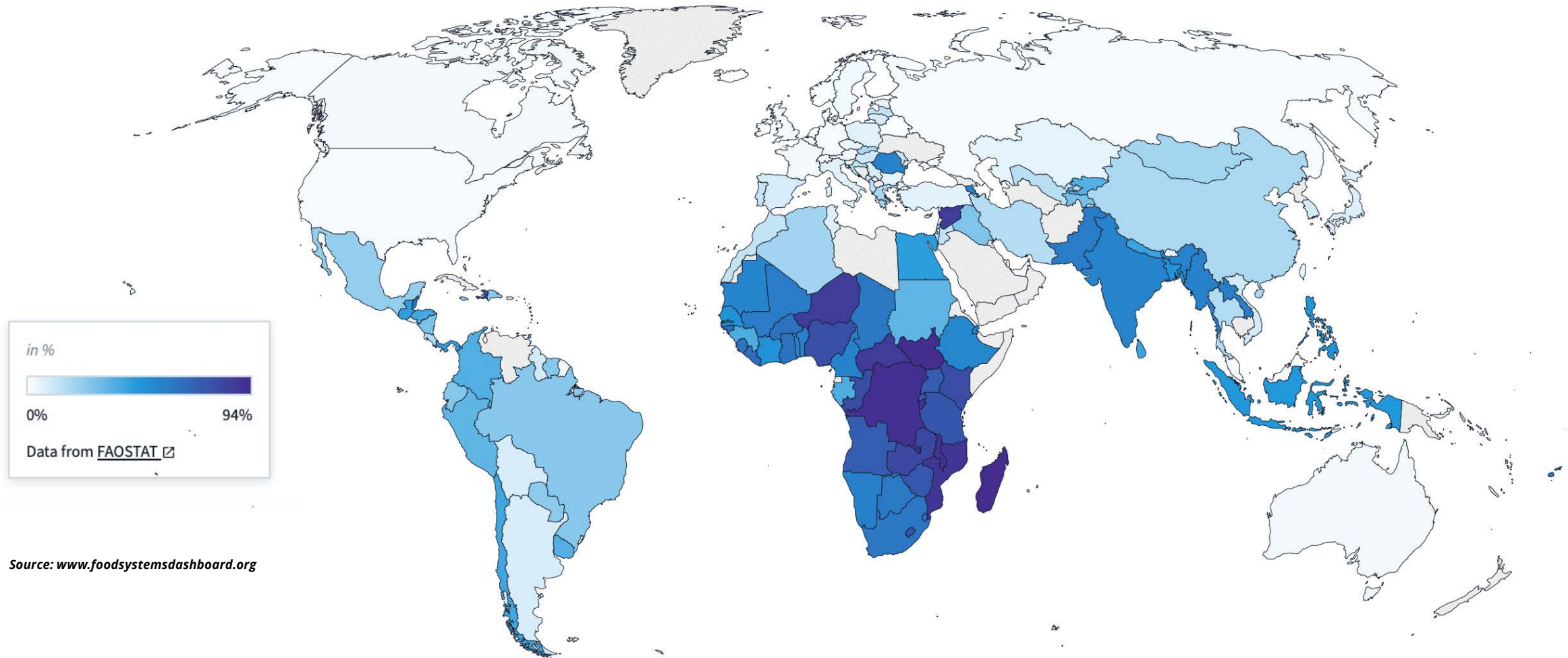
Source: World Bank

In 2021, eight out of the ten countries with the lowest average dietary energy supply were in Africa. These eight countries' dietary energy supply was below the FAO's recommended daily energy supply for adult women (2,200kcal/day/person). In almost half of all African countries the dietary energy supply was below the recommended amount for adult men (2,900kcal/day/person).

In addition to insufficient dietary energy, more than one billion Africans were unable to afford a healthy diet. In just over 50% of the countries in Africa, less than 20% of the population was able to afford a healthy diet in 2021. In Madagascar, the country with the lowest level of healthy food affordability in the world, only 2% of the population was able to afford a healthy diet.



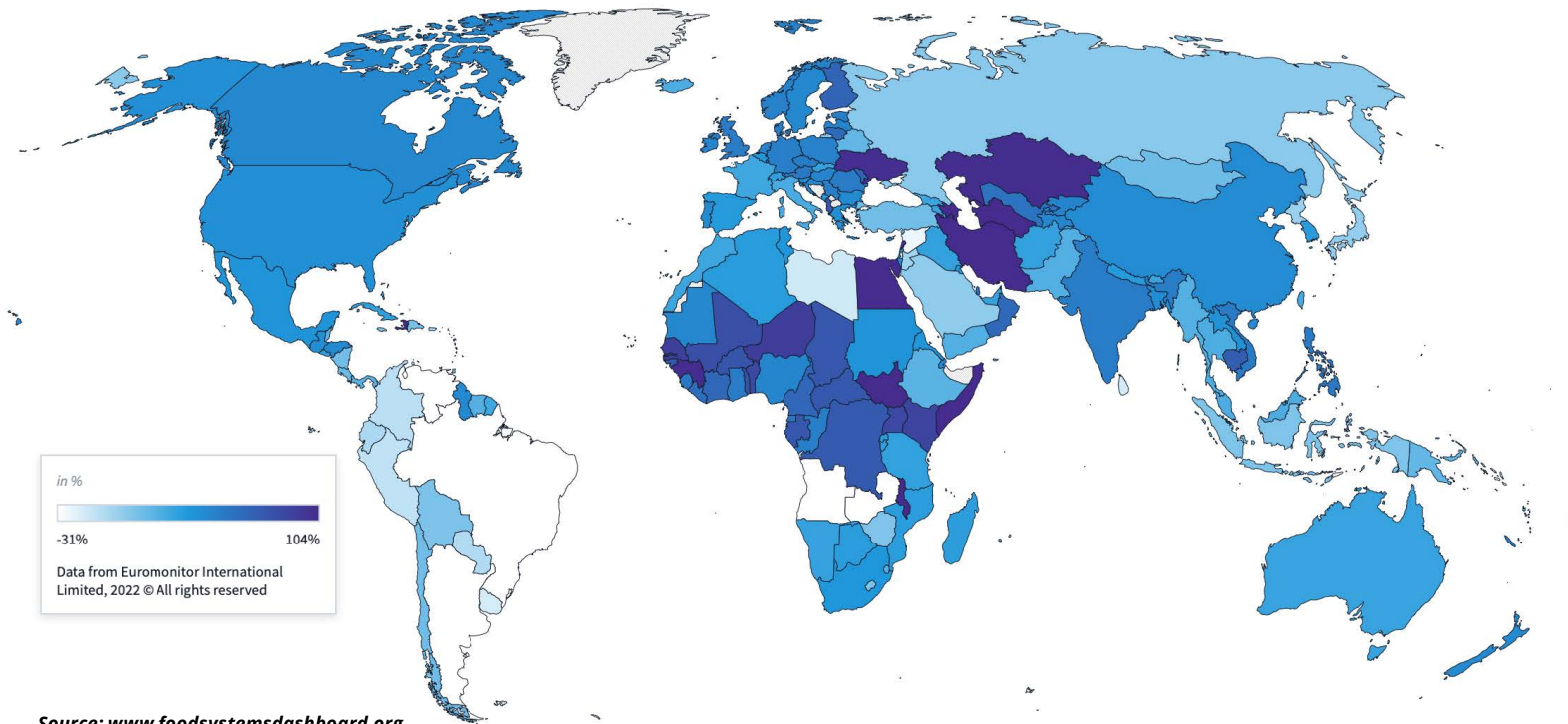
Percent of the population who **cannot afford a healthy diet (%)**, 2021



Source: www.foodsystemsdashboard.org

Too much of the wrong food

Growth of ultra-processed food over the last five years (%), 2021

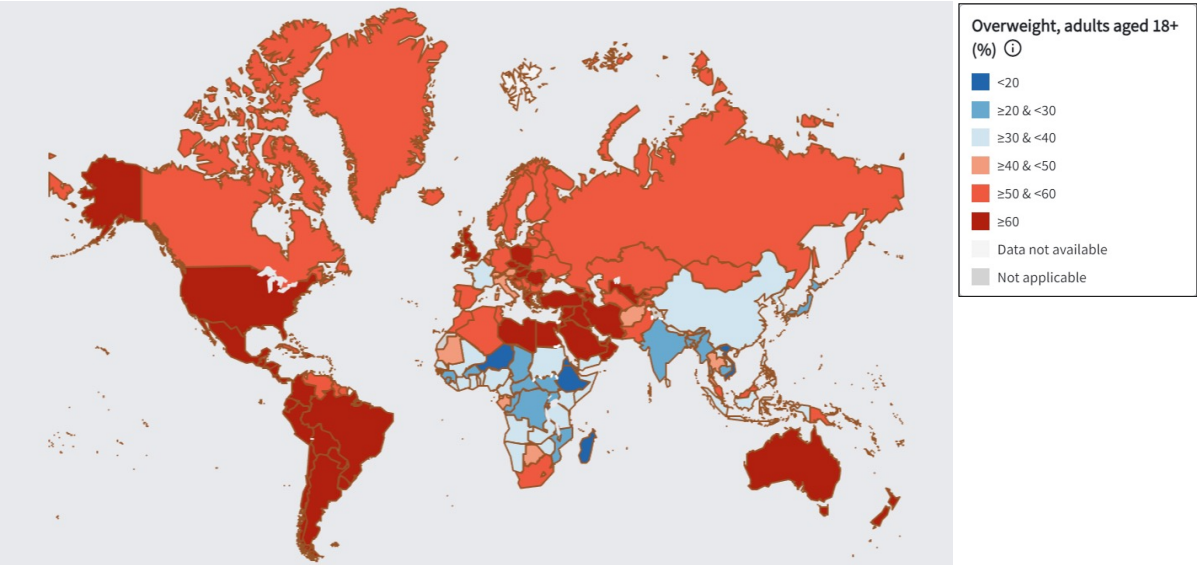


Source: www.foodsystemsdashboard.org

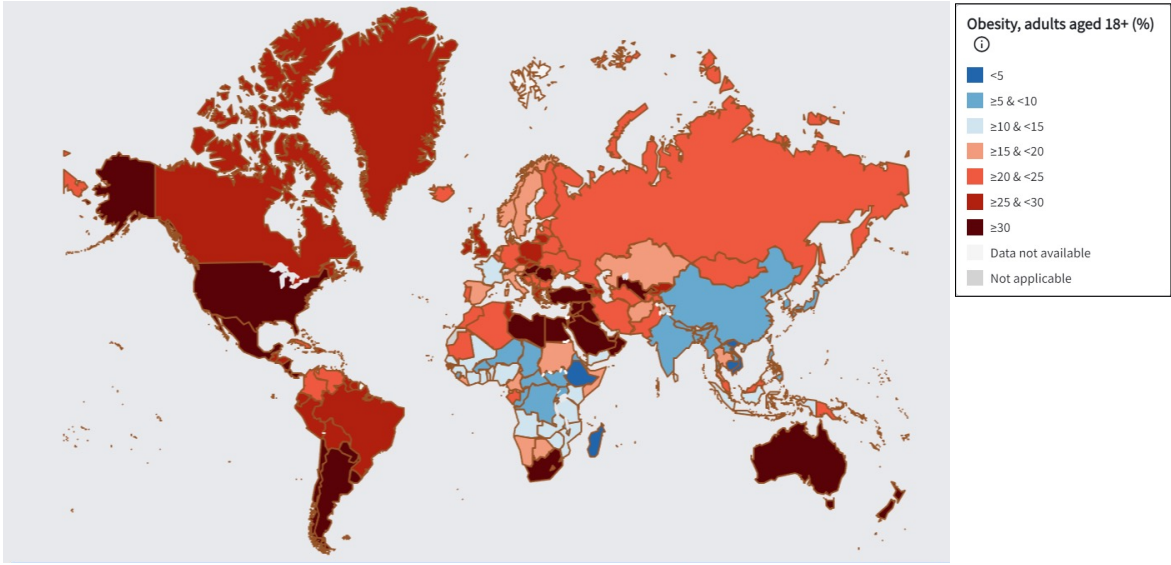
While many Africans struggle to access enough food, there is also a growing number of people consuming an increasingly unhealthy diet including, ultra-processed food. Ultra-processed food is not as common in African diets as in other regions; however, sales of such food items have increased rapidly in Africa in recent years. Five of the ten countries with the fastest growth in sales of ultra-processed food between 2017 and 2021 are in Africa. Changing lifestyles, the availability and cost of healthy food as well as rapid urbanisation is driving the consumption of ultra-processed food.

Studies link ultra-processed food to a higher risk of developing non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes, depression, and can ultimately cause early death. Another important risk factor causing NCDs is overweight and obesity. Obesity is, for example, regarded as one key precursor for type 2 diabetes. While Africa still has the lowest prevalence of diabetes among adults compared to other regions, the International Diabetes Federation estimates that Africa will see the fastest growth in diabetes between now and 2045. The increase in the prevalence of overweight and obesity might accelerate the rise in diabetes. Africa's healthcare costs linked to diabetes will also increase rapidly from currently about US\$12.6bn to US\$46.7bn in 2045.

Share of **overweight adults** (%), 2022



Share of **obese adults** (%), 2022



Global – Overweight adults aged 18+ (2022)

Total – 43%

Males	43%
Females	44%

Global – Obesity, adults aged 18+ (2022)

Total – 16%

Males	14%
Females	18%

Source: <https://ncdportal.org/>

Creating a healthy future through food

Given the negative health and socio-economic implications of the lack of nutritious food and the growth in unhealthy food consumption, it is important to empower people to make better food choices. This needs to include education, awareness raising and other approaches that enable consumers to afford sufficient and nutritious food.



Food literacy and food labels

Food literacy is an effective measure to drive healthy food choices. It creates a nexus between food, nutrition, and health. The FAO recommends that food literacy education takes place at schools given that eating and health habits are formed at an early stage in life. Another effective measure to guide healthy food choices is front-of-pack labelling (FOPL) that informs consumers about the nutritional value of food items. However, compulsory food labelling remains the exception in Africa. In 2020, the last year for which comparative data is available, only Egypt had policies on mandatory nutrition labelling for packaged foods – globally there were 63 countries. For FOPL to be effective, the WHO recommends that such labelling is “interpretive, based on symbols, colours, words, or quantifiable elements”.



School meal programmes

Given high poverty levels in many African countries, school meal programmes could be an effective way to provide nutritious food to children. Free meals for learners also provide incentives for children to attend school and are likely to improve overall educational outcomes. According to the World Food Programme, school meal programmes can increase school enrolment and attendance by up to 10%. Furthermore, school meal programmes can be incorporated into food literacy education.



Nudging towards healthier food

Another way to nudge consumers to making healthier food choices could be either through taxes on unhealthy food or to provide subsidies or incentives for healthy food. The World Health Organisation (WHO) suggests that taxation on sugary drinks is an effective measure to reduce sugar consumption. Amongst other data points by the WHO, a tax that raises the cost of a sugary drink by 20% could reduce consumption by 20% and by doing so, prevent obesity and diabetes. Furthermore, the additional government revenue could be used for awareness and health campaigns. Alternatively, governments could support initiatives that make healthy food more affordable through subsidies. In Belgium and France, a system akin to a social security system to food is being trialled that offers coupons for healthy food to low-income households. While this system requires substantial funding and might not be easily replicated in an African context, it could serve as inspiration to create incentive schemes or subsidies to make healthy food more accessible.



Fortification

Due to affordability challenges, many people consume a very unbalanced diet that often lacks the whole spectrum of nutrients required for a healthy life. Therefore, food fortification initiatives can play a major role in increasing the access and the availability of a broader spectrum of nutrients. While only a very limited number of countries globally have national biofortification programmes, two-thirds of them are in Africa. It is encouraging to note, that in the majority of African countries maize or wheat flour fortification has been made mandatory. These two foods are often staples in the diets of the majority, making fortification programmes more effective. As highlighted in our Future of Food in Africa report, some countries have made great strides in increasing access to nutrient-enriched foods. In Nigeria, for instance, between 2017 and 2020 the share of population reached with wheat flour fortified with iron and folic acid increased from 54% to 92% and the population reached with sugar fortified with Vitamin A increased from 31% to 96%.



Support local agricultural value chain

All these initiatives should be underpinned by investments into local sustainable agricultural value chains to increase food self-sufficiency and reduce exposure to global food price fluctuations. Governments and development finance institutions need to play a role in strengthening supporting critical infrastructure such as transport networks, electricity supply, irrigation, and distribution networks. In addition to these efforts, the private sector will need to support the development of local supply chains by creating mechanisms for small-holder farmers to gain market access and become part of the formal sector's supply chains. While this approach could reduce the cost of healthy and nutritious food, it will also create local employment opportunities and potentially increase purchasing power within the communities. Furthermore, it will increase food production and hence contribute to food security on the continent. Given rapid population growth in Africa, this will be a critical component of ensuring food security and access to nutritious and affordable food.

Regardless of which approach African countries will follow, it is critical that the decision to act is not delayed. The experience from other parts of the world which face huge healthcare costs due to the high prevalence of non-communicable diseases should be a warning of how the future in Africa could look like if we do not act promptly and collectively. Today, Africa still has a low NCD burden, and should from the experience of other regions to avoid costly implication of NDCs driven by food choices. Taking decisive and bold actions to change Africa's food systems will require political will, the support of the private sector and investments; however, the return on these investments will be to the benefits of future generations that will be more likely to live healthy and prosperous lives.



Mandatory limits or banning of unhealthy ingredients

To increase the impact of nudging efforts, government can also opt to put mandatory limits on unhealthy ingredients or even ban them. For example, the removal of trans fats in food products is mandatory in most parts of Europe and America; however, it is not yet very common in Africa with only Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa having banned trans fats in food as of 2023. Similarly, while most European and American countries have national plans to reduce the salt intake, only South Africa has such plan in place.



Endnotes

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- x. WFP (2023): Ready to learn and thrive: School health and nutrition around the world – 2023. URL: <https://www.wfp.org/news/new-report-confirms-game-changing-impact-health-and-nutrition-school>
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