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Food Security and Nutrition Sensitive Social Protection to Improve Human Capital Development

Saskia de Pee, WFP

6 October 2026

Food Security and Nutrition are essential for Human Capital Development & SP can contribute

Addressing nutrition can improve:

- Cognitive development
- Education outcomes
- Productivity
- Evidence of intergenerational gains

Link with social protection to:

- Target the most vulnerable
- Achieve development outcomes and improve human capital

“We found that CT programmes targeted to households with young children improved linear growth and contributed to reduced stunting. We found that the likely pathways were through increased dietary diversity, including through the increased consumption of animal-source foods and reduced incidence of diarrhoea.”

Manley et al. Cash transfers and child nutritional outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. 2020.

“CT programmes improved linear growth among young children, reducing wasting and stunting, but effects are heterogeneous and somewhat small overall. More evidence indicates that effects on dietary diversity and the consumption of animal-source foods are increasingly pronounced.”

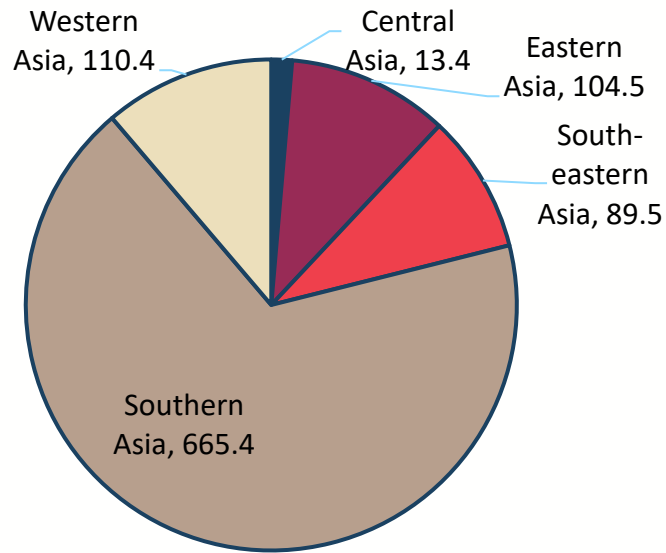
Manley J, Alderman H, Gentilini U. More evidence on cash transfers and child nutritional outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. 2022.

“social protection interventions can contribute to global goals of ending hunger...they can contribute to improving the quality of diets, as evidenced by our findings on consumption of animal source foods and of fruits and vegetables. Third, social protection interventions do appear to “address the causes of poverty, and not simply its symptoms” ([Barrientos, 2010](#)) through their impact on asset holdings”

Hidrobo, M, et al. Social Protection, Food Security, and Asset Formation. 2018.

Context in Asia

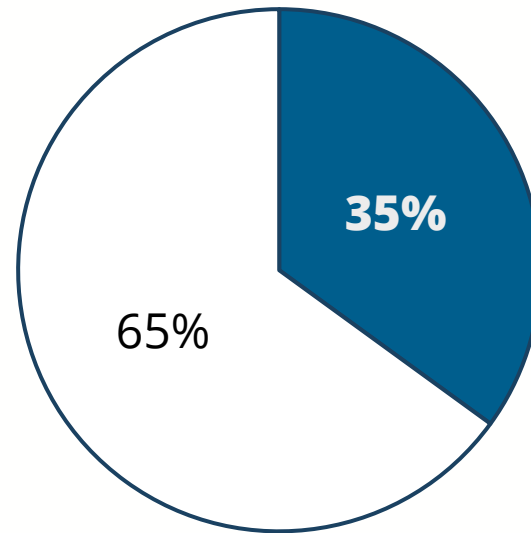
Nearly 1 billion people (983 million) in Asia experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2025



Number of Moderately or Severely Food-Insecure People (millions, 2025)

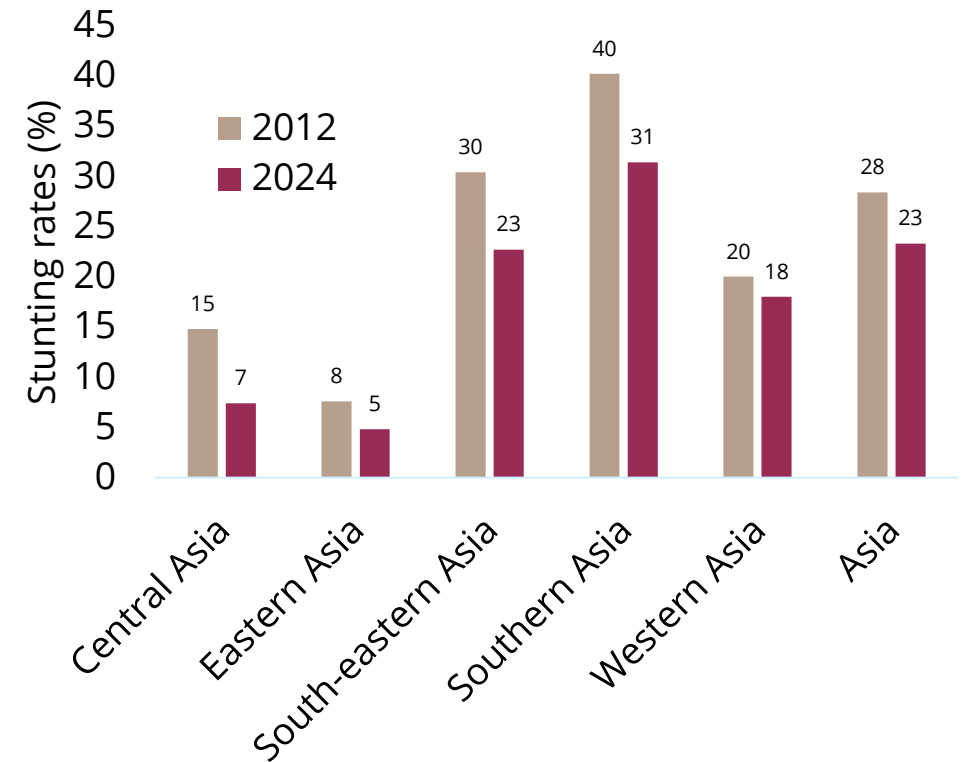
SOFI 2025.

1 in 3 children living in Asia achieved Minimum Dietary Diversity



Children aged 6-23 months consuming at least 4 of 7 MDD food groups in Asia

23% of children living in Asia are stunted, compared to 28% in 2012

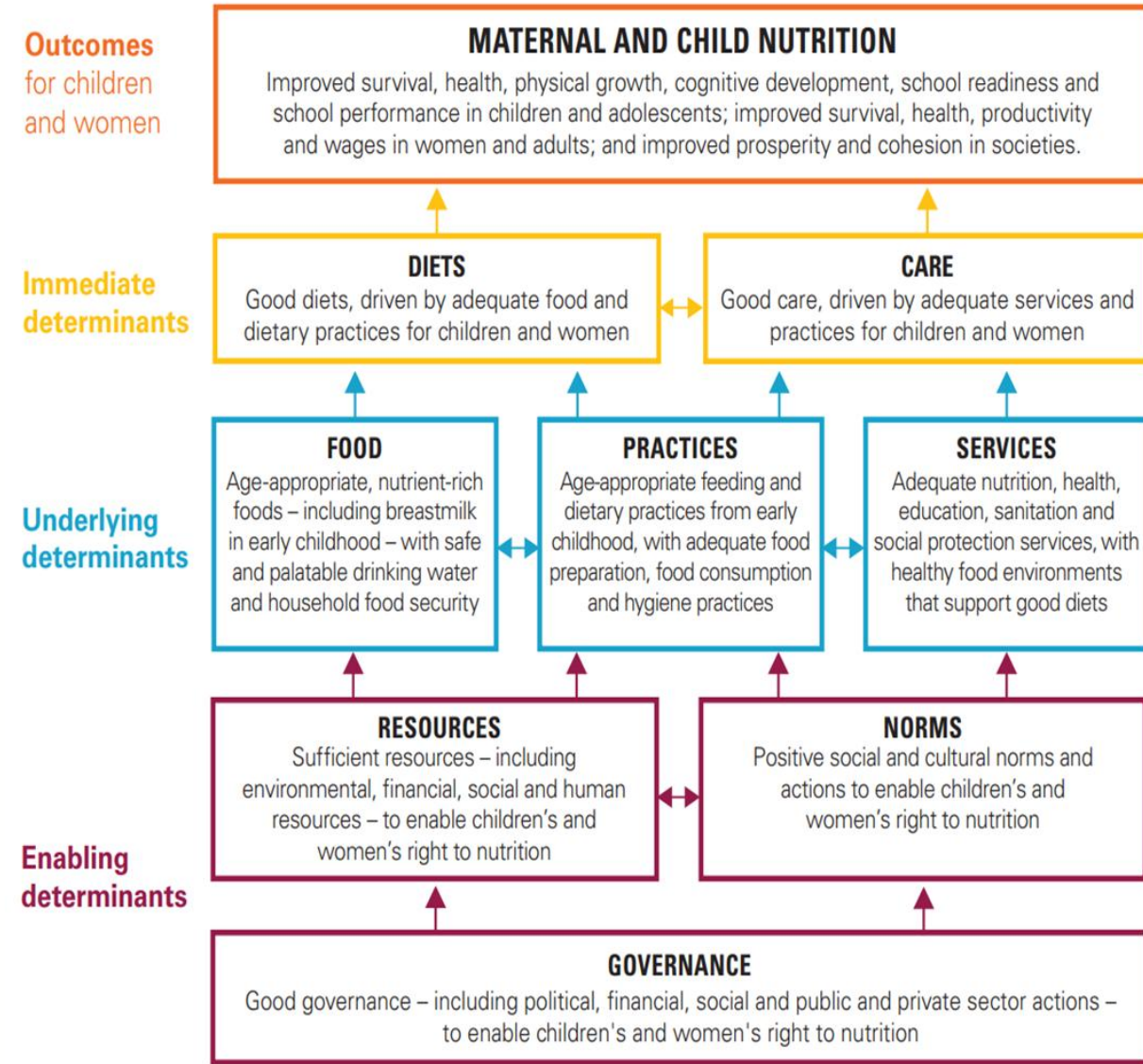


Prevalence of Stunting in children 6-59 months

Social Protection addresses poverty and vulnerability

Addressing enabling determinants of nutrition

- Conditional/Unconditional Social Transfer (Cash, voucher or in-kind)
- In-kind or vouchers
- Public work or livelihood activities
- School meals



Nutrition-Sensitive Social Protection intentionally addresses the underlying and immediate determinants of nutrition

- Conditional/Unconditional Social Transfer (Cash, voucher or in-kind)
- In-kind or vouchers
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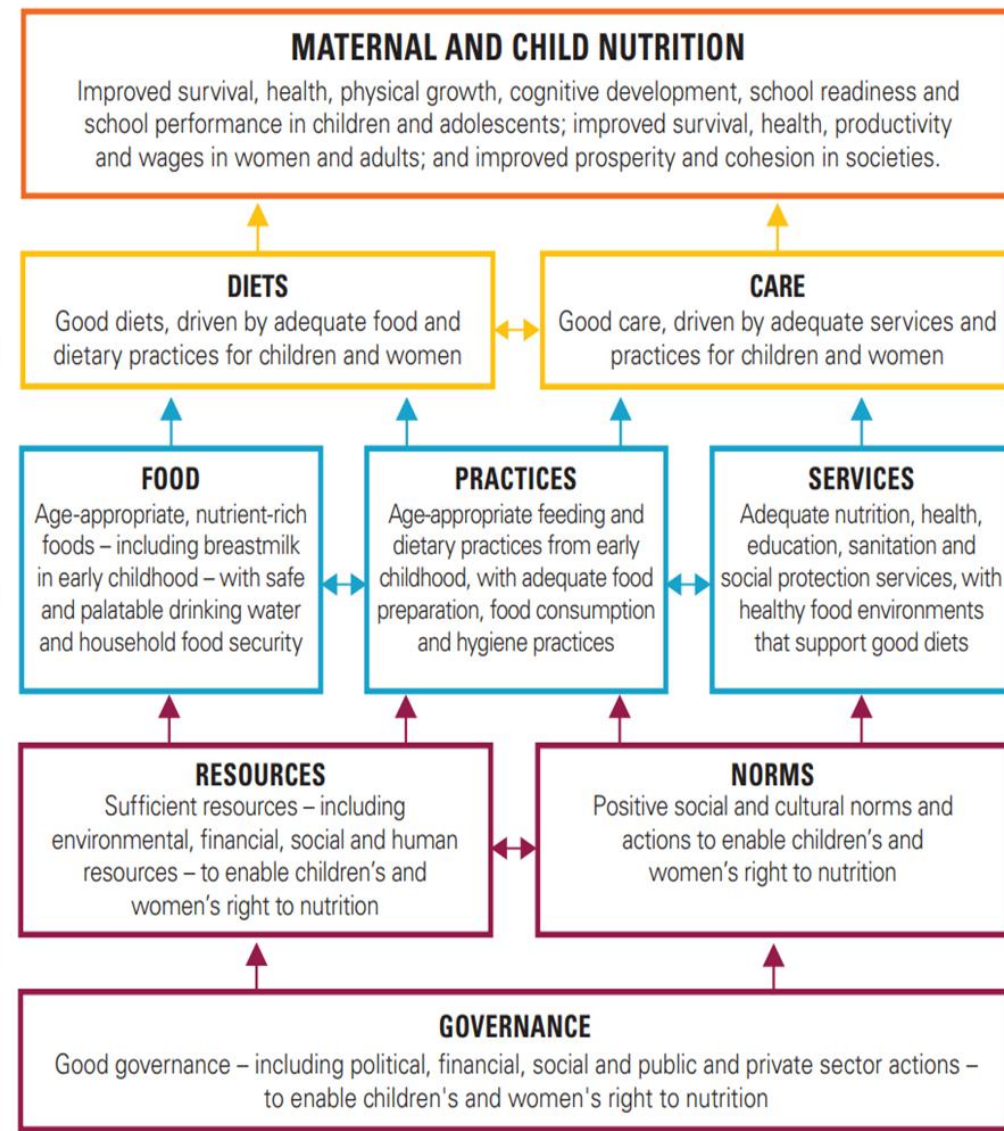


Outcomes
for children
and women

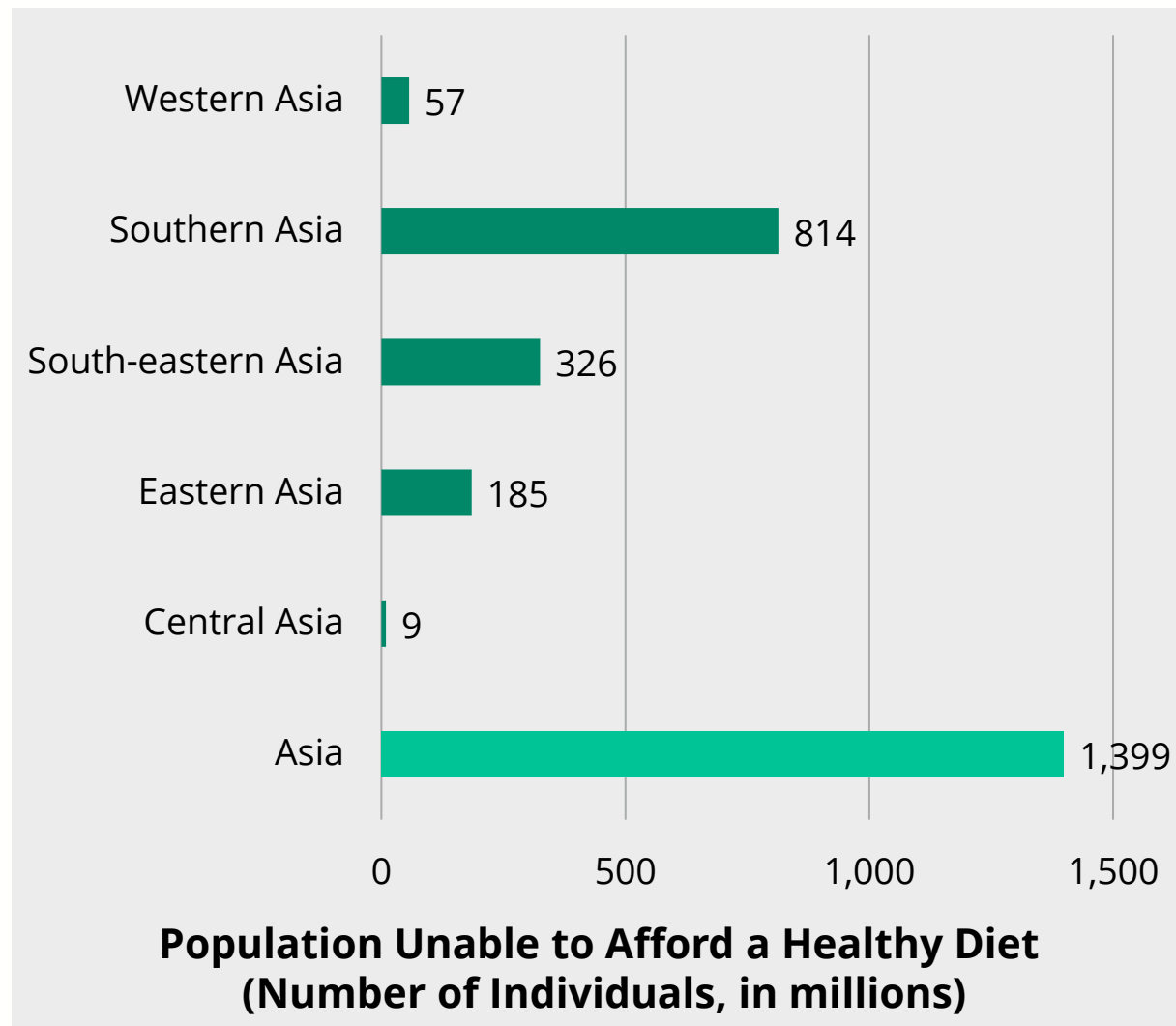
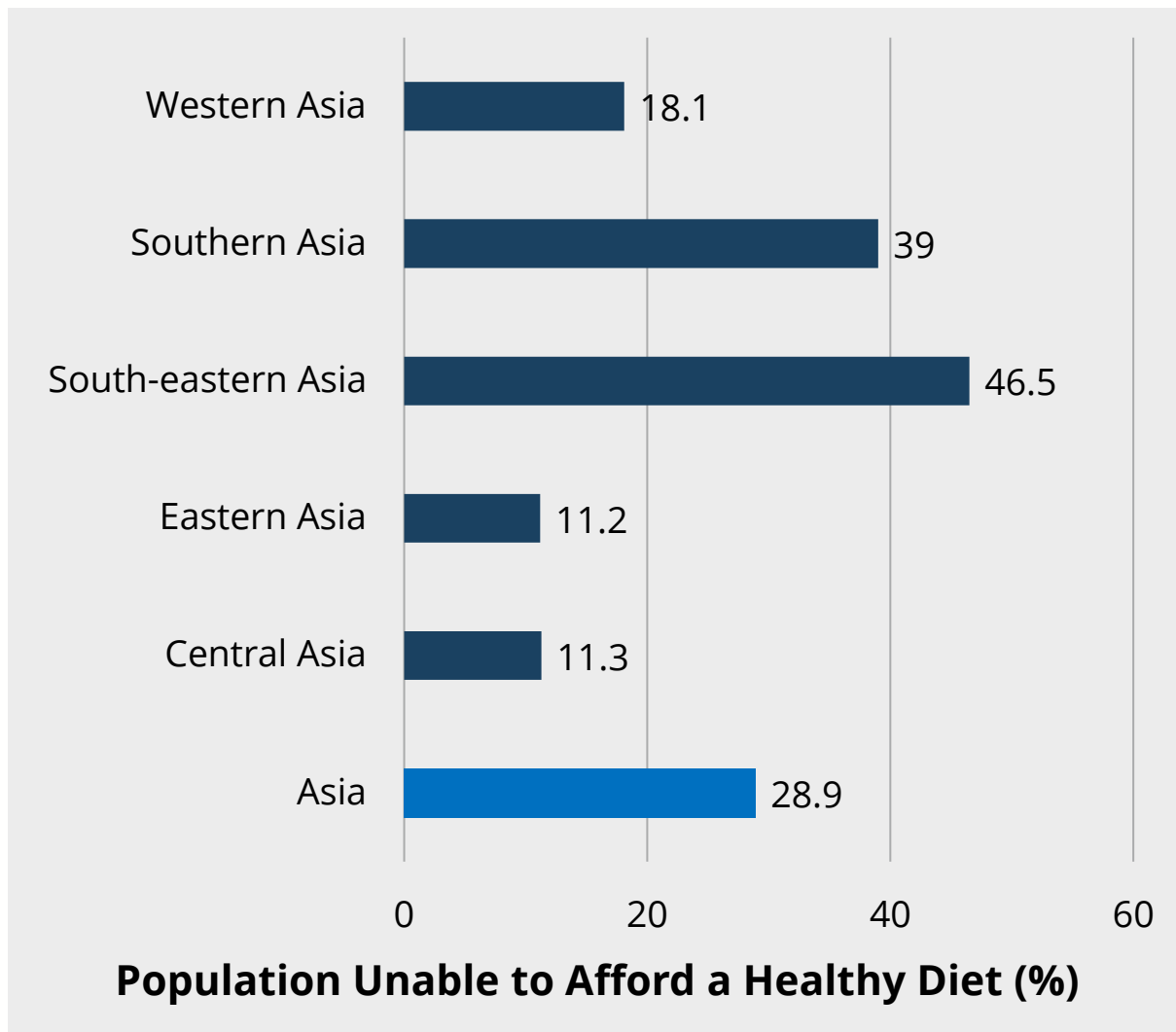
Immediate
determinants

Underlying
determinants

Enabling
determinants



In 2025, 1.4 billion people in Asia were unable to afford a healthy diet, representing 29% of the population



Size and modality of transfers –

The healthy diet affordability gap indicates the extent to which people are at risk of not meeting food & nutrition needs

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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

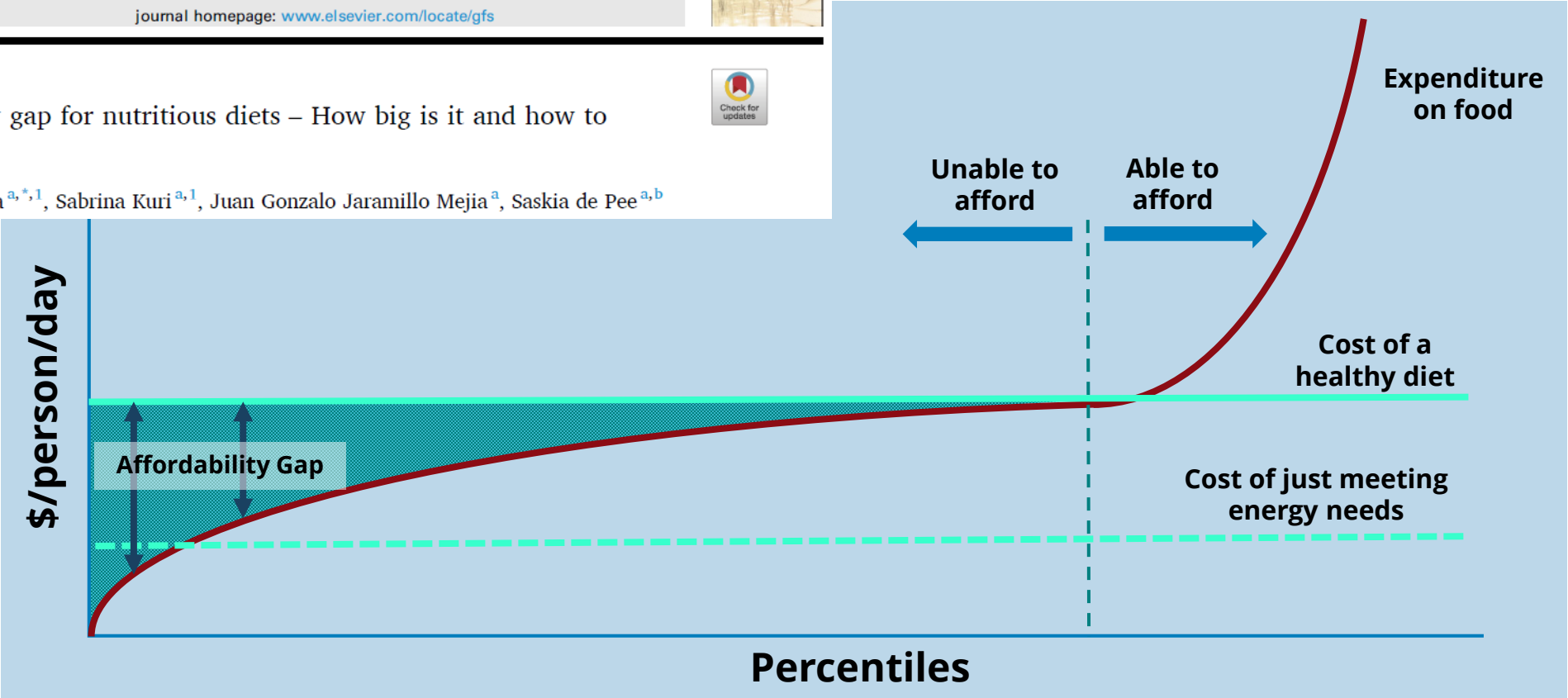
Global Food Security

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/gfs



The affordability gap for nutritious diets – How big is it and how to close it?★

Mysbah Balagamwala^{a,*,1}, Sabrina Kuri^{a,1}, Juan Gonzalo Jaramillo Mejia^a, Saskia de Pee^{a,b}



Reducing the affordability gap: Size, nutritional content and targeting of transfer matter

Reduce the cost of meeting nutritional needs:

- **Food system:**

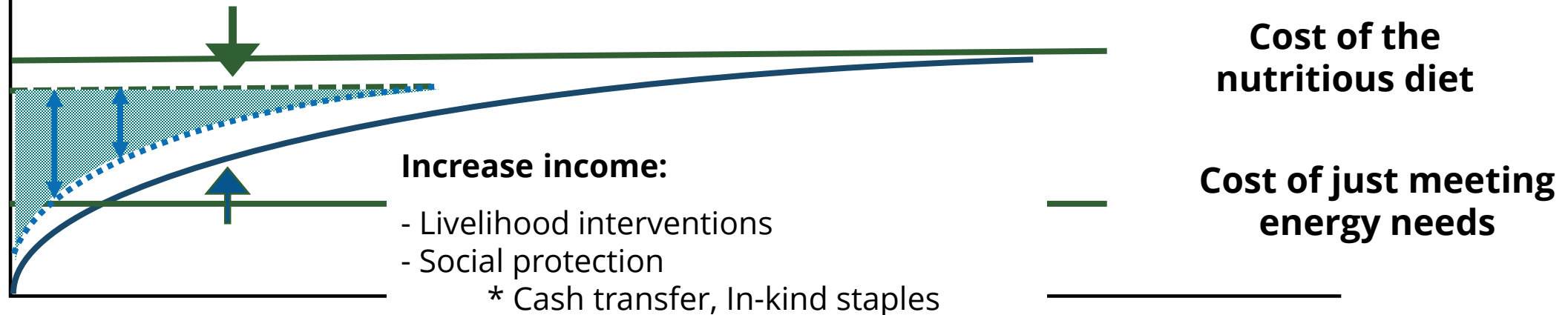
- * increase productivity & diversity of nutritious foods -> increased availability & lower prices
- * reduce post-harvest loss (infra-structure, cold-chain)
- * increase nutritional value – bio/post-harvest fortification

- **Health system:**

- * supplementation for specific target groups (MMS, IFA)
- * promote exclusive & continued breastfeeding

- **Education system:**

- * provide nutritious school meals



Programme features: Entry Points to make social transfer programmes more nutrition sensitive

Coverage

- Define **targeting and prioritization** criteria that account for nutrition
- Revise/establish registration and enrolment process that include nutrition data

Adequacy

- Design the **transfer size** that account of nutrition needs of specific target groups
- The choice of the **transfer modality** to ensure nutrition objective can be met
- **Distribution mechanism, frequency and duration of the programme** account for nutrition considerations

Comprehensiveness

- Foster linkages with **SBC activities**
- Establish and strengthen **linkages** with activities meant to strengthen the **food systems**
- Establish/strengthen **linkages with health systems**, for registration of beneficiaries and/or for delivery of health-based services

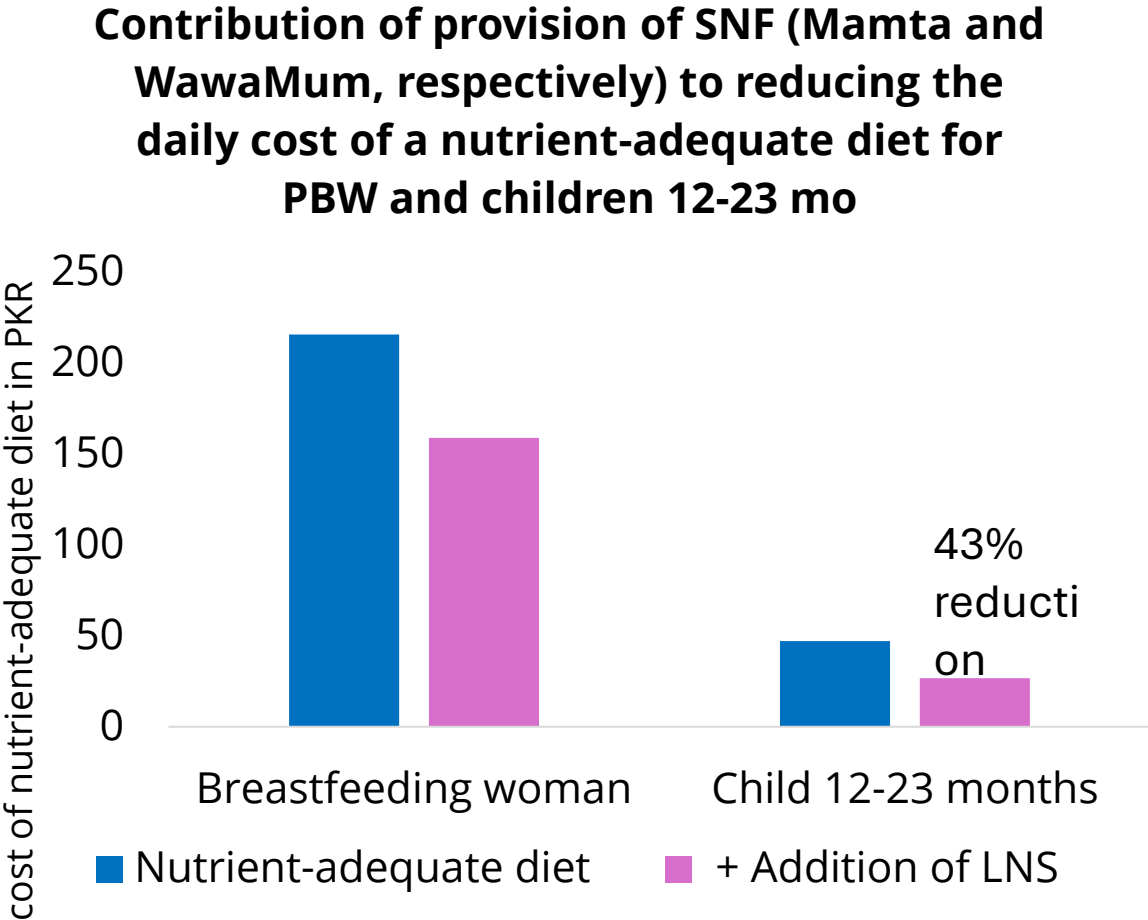
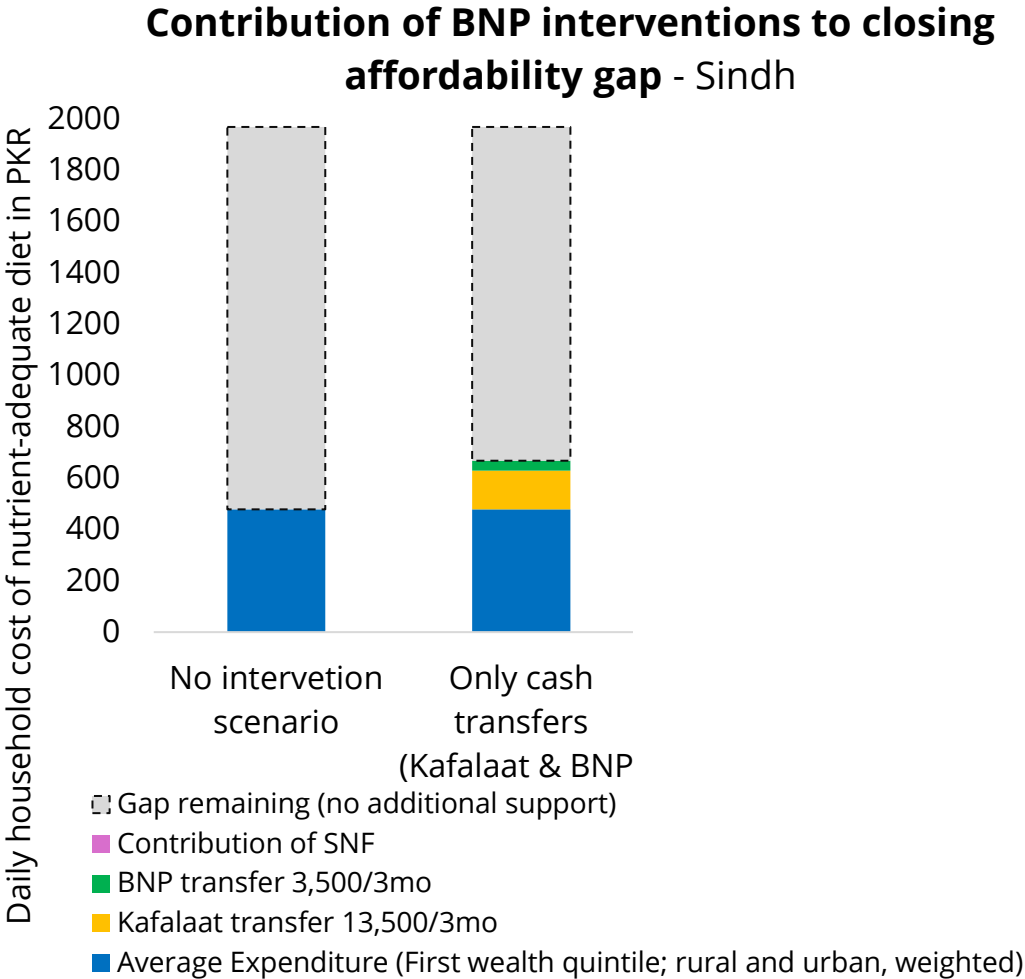
Quality

- Participatory processes that involve the most nutritionally at-risk groups
- Funding mobilization and allocation to ensure sustainability of the nutrition component

Responsiveness

- Preparedness and early warning systems and actions account for nutrition
- Anticipatory actions are designed and implemented reflecting nutrition needs and considerations

Pakistan, Sindh –1st quintile faces large affordability gaps, quantifying impact of cash transfers & nutrition specific interventions



Source: HIES 2024/25; PBS; Enhance

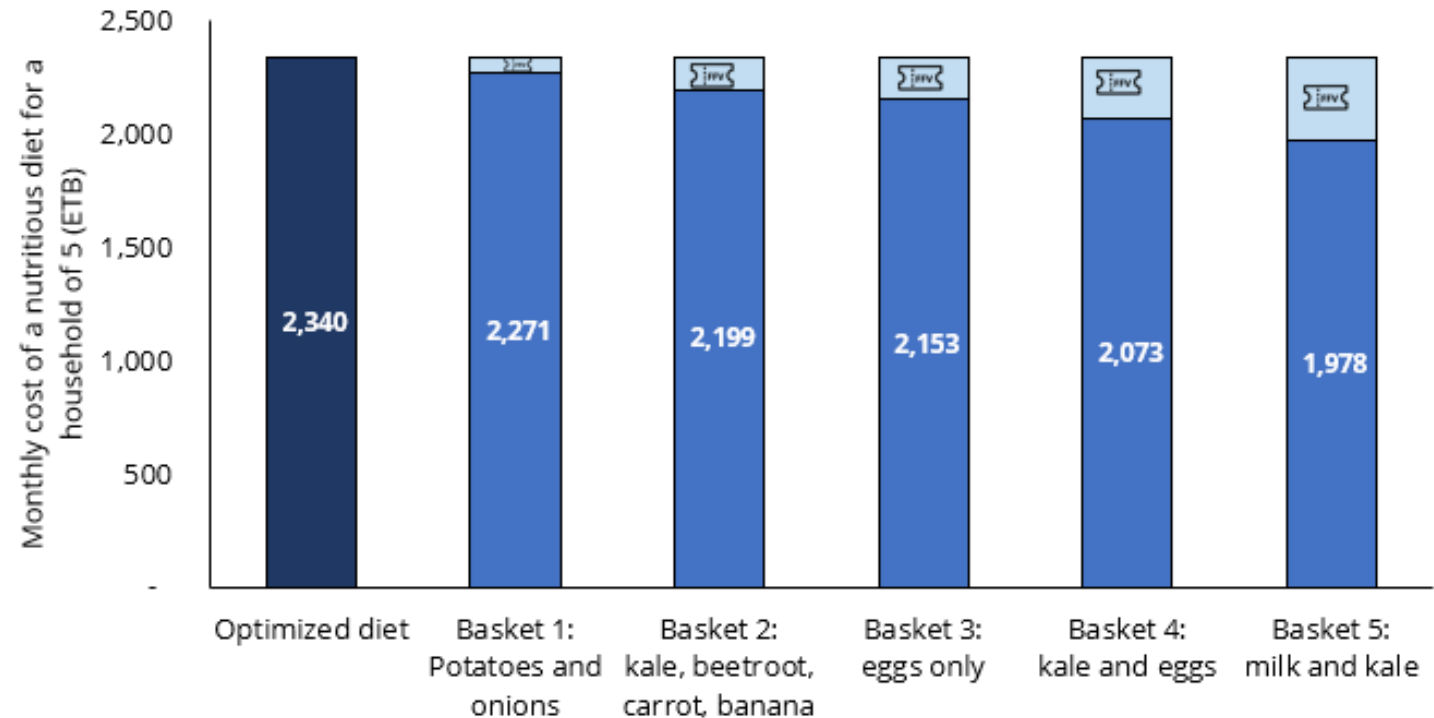
Further Enhancing the Nutrition Sensitive SP Package

Comprehensiveness

In addition to targeting **(coverage)** and deliberate choice of transfer size and modality **(adequacy)**, add:

- a) Social and behaviour change, including nutrition education;
- b) Health services;
- c) WASH interventions;
- d) Food system support.

Fresh Food Voucher, same value, different spending



Transfer amount & choices matter as well as availability, quality and price

Conclusion

A forward-looking social protection agenda is one that supports appropriate human capital development:

Strengthen political commitment, financing, and national social protection systems.

Shift to food security and nutrition-sensitive, multidimensional approaches.

Expand and target coverage, improve adequacy of benefits, establish links for comprehensiveness.

Adapt systems to future challenges and build resilience.

**The question is not whether we can afford to act...
...It is whether we can afford not to.**



Inspired? Further Reading:

Comment

Nutrition-sensitive social protection saves money and lives



The end of 2025 left a bleak outlook on financing for food and nutrition, with international aid decreasing by 40% from 2023 levels and only 0.5% of aid going towards nutrition.¹ As we count a sixth consecutive year of worsening hunger, as official development assistance shrinks, and as humanitarian shocks grow in frequency, we are facing catastrophic and irreversible loss of life and human capital.² Yet one flow of development financing has only grown stronger over the same period: social protection and safety nets.

Social protection programmes have grown immensely in the past decade; they now reach 4 billion people³ and distribute trillions of dollars to the poorest households each year.⁴ Social protection systems—cash transfers, school meals, in-kind food aid, public works, and labour market programmes—are how governments help manage risk, avoid harmful coping strategies, and stabilise consumption patterns during humanitarian shocks (appendix pp 2–3). In low-income and middle-income countries, these systems are increasingly financed by domestic budgets, representing substantial yet sustainable financing flows that can be tapped to achieve nutrition objectives.

Investments in social protection and nutrition programming are separate means towards a shared end: human capital and resilience for the most nutritionally vulnerable populations. Adequate nutrition in the first 1000 days after conception and during adolescence shapes brain development and earnings over a lifetime.⁵ In adulthood, better diets could save 11 million lives per year.⁶ In addition, across the lifecycle, WHO has declared nutrition support as being among the most effective treatments for infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis.⁷ Integrating nutrition into social protection designs aligns programmes with the human capital goals

high-return changes proposed here do not require new, expensive machinery, but instead need more informed and disciplined designs. As financing for social protection continues to grow, the figure illustrates how three dimensions of programme expansion—increases in coverage, comprehensiveness, and adequacy—can achieve outsized human capital at low marginal costs.

Uptake of this type of thinking has overall been slow, but in the past 3 years, initiatives have been building momentum for change. The Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty and the N4G Global Compact for Nutrition Integration are two examples. With support from the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, the Government of Norway, and the Gates Foundation, the World Bank and its clients are integrating nutrition

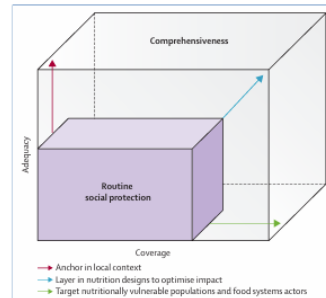


Figure: Leveraging expansions in coverage, adequacy, and comprehensiveness of social protection programming for nutrition impact Adapted from Gentilini (2025).⁸ Coverage: ensure that programmes target the most nutritionally vulnerable people (eg, pregnant people and mothers with children younger than 2 years) for whom the marginal returns on investment is high (up to US\$23 on the dollar)⁹ and those in the food value chain who can

Lancet Glob Health 2026; 14: 103923
Published Online
April 21, 2026
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(26\)00053-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(26)00053-7)

For more on the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty see <https://globalallianceagainsthungerandpoverty.org/>
For more on the N4G Global Compact for Nutrition Integration see <https://scalingupnutrition.org/nutrition-integration/compact>

See Online for appendix



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MIND THE GAP

Using diet cost and affordability metrics to inform food security and nutrition-sensitive social protection

October 2024

*Mia Blakstad, Corina Campian, Kedar Mankad

Social Protection for Food Security and Nutrition: a Business Case



Institute of
development
studies

WFP
World Food Programme

