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Food environments and dietary change in urban Africa and South-East Asia

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Abstract

Undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and obesity are becoming increasingly prevalent in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), especially in deprived urban communities. Despite the growing awareness that the food environment influences dietary habits and nutrition-related health outcomes, robust comparative evidence from these communities remains limited. The FETE (Food Environments in Transitioning Economies) project aims to close this knowledge gap. The project is composed of research organisations in Ghana, Malaysia, South Africa, and Tanzania and is coordinated by the Thünen Institute in Germany. The project applies a harmonised, interdisciplinary approach to analyse the development of the food supply over the past 40 years, food policies and actors promoting healthy diets, and the structure of urban food outlets and the characteristics of residents influencing accessibility, affordability, convenience, and desirability on a local scale.

The results for the four countries reveal that economic growth, as reflected by rising GDP per capita over the past 40 years, has been associated with increases in food supply, particularly in fats and proteins. Animal protein supply has grown faster than plant protein supply. Malaysia and South Africa have higher supplies, while Tanzania and Ghana have lower but changing levels, reflecting different stages of economic development and the nutrition transition. Fiscal and regulatory policies, which directly affect food affordability and accessibility, are mostly concentrated in general VAT systems, targeted sugar-sweetened beverage taxes, and nutrition-sensitive food taxes or subsidies. The external urban food environment is marked by significant differences in the spatial distribution of food outlets. In Malaysia, formal retail dominates, while in Ghana, informal systems prevail. Tanzania has a mixed system, and in South Africa, the distribution is highly centralised. Although 52.8 % of survey participants had adequate dietary diversity (highest in Malaysia at 72.1 % and lowest in Ghana at 41.7 %), more than half (63.2 %) were overweight or obese. Three-quarters indicated eating out. Personal food environment vulnerability profiles differed across countries. Vulnerability to accessibility was highest in South Africa and lowest in Tanzania. Vulnerability to affordability was most pronounced in Tanzania and Ghana. Vulnerability to convenience was highest in Tanzania and Malaysia.

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