

Educating Consumers to Cope with High Food Prices



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Table of Contents

Preface	1
1 How households respond to high food prices	5
2 Strategies households can use to protect nutrition and self-reliance	9
3 Nutrition education and communication strategies	15
4 Information sources	17





Preface

When food prices are very high, governments and civil society organizations seek ways to prevent deterioration in the nutritional status of the population. Long experience on every continent shows there are many reasons that nutritional risks rise when food costs more and there is no single solution for coping with the situation - each country, community and household uses a combination of strategies to help people cope. Nutrition education and communication can help people maintain nutritional well-being even though purchasing food has become more difficult.

Actions are needed at many levels. At the national level, actions that have been carried out in many countries include tax reductions or subsidies for essential food products, school feeding and relief food, loan schemes, cash transfers and job programmes. While

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these strategies may be vitally needed, they are beyond the scope of this booklet. Here, the aim is to focus on the many actions households and communities can take

to protect their health when they have the necessary awareness and knowledge. These actions may require innovative thinking and make new demands on individuals, households and communities to mobilize local resources. In addition to short-term safety net strategies, investment for medium and long-term development is

needed to enable people to cope with the immediate situation and build sustainable solutions for the future.

This booklet provides examples and suggestions to stimulate ideas about how people's own capacities can be strengthened so that they can feed themselves with dignity now and in the future. Very modest amounts of outside assistance may be required for some activities. Information

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about how to implement nutrition education and communication strategies as well as new small-scale food production techniques can be found in other FAO publications.

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How households respond to high food prices

When the prices of basic foods go up, consumers struggle to spend more for foods. Food insecurity becomes more common since many people are unable to afford sufficient, nutritionally adequate and safe food to meet their needs. Households must have the means to cope with these situations in the short, medium and long term. Nutrition education, combined with other actions, can help families to be resilient and achieve nutritional well-being.

The poor in rural and urban areas who purchase their food throughout the year are affected the most by rises in prices of basic foods. In many African countries, for example, groundnuts, sorghum, millet and cowpeas are vital components of the diet and their prices are high in urban areas. Meat prices have risen in Asia and rural and urban households must find new sources of meat; rice and vegetables are not sufficient. Shoppers in Latin America must find new sources of fruits and vegetables to cope with the high costs of food.

Some of the ways that households respond to high prices can have negative effects on nutritional and health status. Other coping strategies enable households to withstand the shock of high food prices without deterioration in nutritional status or exposure to increased food safety risks. Skills and knowledge about food and nutrition can make a critical difference.

To cope with high food prices, households adjust their use of resources and consumption patterns. Some coping mechanisms have positive or little impact on nutrition, while others can be risky. The major ways that households adjust are described below.



Consumers who have access to a range of foods begin to eat foods that are less preferred or of lower quality. Eating a variety of foods is fundamental for good nutrition, yet diets may become less diverse as more expensive foods are avoided. Some foods satisfy the sensation of hunger but they are less nutritious. Changes in the composition of meals to reliance upon a few foods can mean that the diet provides less

essential vitamins, minerals, fats and proteins.

People lower their food expenses by reducing their number of meals and decreasing portion sizes. The very poor may avoid eating meals for days. In Afghanistan, high food prices add to the long-standing problems of food insecurity. People are relying more on tea and bread and eating fewer, less varied meals.

Within households, food is rationed and some household members may eat less so that others can have more. If the household is ignorant of the nutritional needs of each household member, and the vulnerable ones do not receive sufficient food, this is a health risk.

Because of the need to spend a higher proportion of income on their food, people spend less on other basic necessities such as health care and education.

To save on water and cooking fuel, washing and cooking time may be reduced. This may

result in foods that are not sufficiently cleaned and cooked to be hygienic and safe. Foods that have become contaminated should be thrown away; when they are eaten to avoid waste, people become seriously ill.

Households may collect wild foods more often when prices are high. If there is knowledge of when to collect these foods and how to use them, this can be a good way to add food to the diet and even

bring income to the household. However, if people are ignorant of the ways to use such foods, they can become very sick.

Some households cope by borrowing food from relatives and friends or buying food on credit. To meet their immediate food consumption needs, they may sell their productive assets. This means that their ability to produce food in the future will be reduced.

Migration to find work and send money home is a common coping strategy. The remittances from family members who go to cities and other countries help; however, the loss of the productive family member increases the burden of work and child care for the household members who remain.

In general, more time may be devoted to activities outside the home to gain income and less time is spent on the care and feeding of infants and children, the sick and the elderly. Because of the need to spend a higher proportion of income on their food, people spend less on other basic necessities such as health care and education. Children, especially girls, may drop out of school to save on school expenses or because they are needed to help at home, to grow food or to earn wages. In some societies, girls enter into marriage at a very young age as a way to reduce the burden on the family. Children - especially girls - may be placed in schools because the school provides food. Sometimes the household is broken up and children are sent to live with rural and urban relatives.



Vulnerable people

When food is less available and is of lower quality, this can severely affect vulnerable household members, such as children under five years of age and pregnant and breastfeeding women. The foetus and young children have special nutritional needs because of their rapid physical growth and mental development. A woman's needs for energy and most nutrients increase during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Mothers should eat a variety of foods to obtain the vitamins, minerals and protein for their own health and that of their babies. In addition to the meals shared with the family, mothers need to have extra snacks for their health and the health of the baby. Other vulnerable groups include women-headed households, ill persons, and people living with HIV, the elderly and orphaned children. With education, all household members understand that vulnerable individuals have particular nutritional needs.



Strategies households can use to protect nutrition and self-reliance

With high prices, it is essential for people to know how to acquire a low-cost diet that is nutritionally adequate and safe for all household members with the resources that are available. In addition to understanding what constitutes a healthy diet, they need the ability to purchase, grow, store and prepare foods that are safe and that provide the best nutritional value for money. Locally available skills, knowledge and products should be identified and promoted to encourage resilience and positive behaviours. Practices that create risks should be discouraged.

FOOD PRODUCTION

Varied diets can be achieved through diversification of food production. Information about the availability of different nutritious foods that are grown or reared in the area can be disseminated. Providing information through radio or billboards in markets about the nutrition value and the cost of foods enables households and producers to compare foods and select the most nutritious ones.

Usually women are responsible for producing food at the subsistence household level, but all household members can be involved. After considering the quality of land, property rights, access to water and labour, training can be provided to improve agricultural skills, tools and information to make food production more efficient. This may lead to higher amounts of food being available and savings on purchased foods.



Home gardens provide direct access to fresh vegetables, and other food products that provide vitamins and minerals. This may improve the diet and the surplus production can provide income. In addition to producing vegetables and fruits, small animals, such as chickens and rabbits, can be reared at the household level. Some crops such as roots and tubers that can remain in the ground provide a type of insurance since they can be picked and prepared when they are needed.

Community gardens in both urban and rural areas connect consumers to locally grown foods. Such gardens require organizational skills and trust; they can allow sharing of knowledge, labour, equipment and products. Surplus produce can be sold at the market or donated to orphanages and other needy people.

School gardens are increasingly found in many countries, in different forms and sizes. Vegetables, trees and bushes can be grown. Occasionally, small animals are also kept such as ducks, rabbits, chickens, goats and even fish. In cities where schools have limited space or lack open earth, gardens can consist of plants growing in containers. These gardens serve as living classrooms where children can practise many skills that may be useful later in their lives. The freshly harvested garden produce contributes to improving children's nutrition, particularly if it is integrated into regular school meals. Parents and the community can become involved in learning gardening techniques and healthy eating habits can be adopted in the children's homes.

COLLECTING WILD FOODS

All household members can help to catch animals, harvest fruits and other types of food. An inventory of the underutilized wild foods in an area can be made and publicized. This might include leaves, plants, seeds, bulbs, fruits, nuts, roots, birds, beetles, ants, bees and honey, wasps, worms, grasshoppers, crickets, moths, butterflies, rodents, aquatic life and other animals.

Open-mindedness towards indigenous nutrient-rich foods is required as well as knowledge and skills about how to harvest,

process and prepare these foods. Making use of this knowledge and these foods can lead to savings in household food expenditures and contribute to a nutritious meal.

The high cost of beef in Cambodia has stimulated villagers to catch field rats, which are used to prepare spicy dishes. Children can catch the rats to help their families. The catch is so high that some rats are sold locally, while others are exported to neighbouring Vietnam and Thailand.

In the smaller countries of the Asia-Pacific region, such as Tuvalu, Marshall Islands and Kiribati, where fertile land is extremely limited, people increasingly capture sea foods as a way to cope with the high cost of foods.

HOUSEHOLD FOOD STORAGE

Actions can be taken to introduce, develop, improve and encourage methods for storing and preserving foods. Storing and preserving food well makes it possible to use these products throughout the year, contributing to food security. Knowledge of food preservation is usually locally available or it can be taught by government services. Some practices that were used in the past can be reintroduced. For example, information on drying fruits and vegetables, souring milk and porridge, fermenting and germinating cereals and legumes - which improve their nutritional quality, preserving fish and meat, can make meals more nutritious. Improved handling of foods after harvesting helps to retain their nutrition value. Reducing crop losses through use of appropriate storage can mean more food is available to eat.

FOOD BUDGET AND WISE SHOPPING

In places where there is more than one shop or market, information can be provided about the 'best buys' that are being offered. Consumers may become aware of which foods are good value for money from a nutritional point of view and where they can find the best prices for foods. In Chile, more people are buying their fruits and vegetables at free markets ("ferias") because the produce costs one-third of the price in supermarkets.

Through communication and training, shoppers become more aware of how to buy the least expensive foods that can be used to meet their basic food needs. Countries with dietary guidelines can draw attention to the least costly choices in each food group. Consumers can learn to compare prices and search for sales, bargains and special prices. They can learn whether differences in taste, colour and quality of the cheaper brand are important for health or not.

Consumers can learn to distinguish among foods that seem similar but have different nutritional values and prices. Being aware of this provides an opportunity to choose cheap nutritious foods for the household. Calculation skills and nutrient knowledge are required of a household member or another person. A nurse, home economics assistant, home-based care worker or an agricultural extension worker should know how to make such calculations. They can communicate this information to the people in the community.

In order for the household to buy the cheapest sources of various nutrients, they need to know all types of foods available and be willing to try foods they have never eaten before. Before people try a different food, they need knowledge and skills to use these less costly sources of food. People can become aware of the fact that certain foods may contain mixtures of nutrients which make them better value for money compared to other food sources.

Shoppers can manage their household finances more carefully and learn to budget. They can learn to resist temptations and pressures to buy items that are not needed. For example, they should plan their food purchases, know how much money they have to spend on food, and not take more money to the market than they need. This can prevent unnecessary purchases. Raising awareness of nutritious snacks and drinks can reduce spending on snacks that are not good value from a nutrition point of view.

Shoppers can make the most of their purchases by learning to check the “sell by” dates. The freshest products will last longer. They can plan to purchase the fruits, vegetables and other foods that are in season since they are often the cheapest as are locally produced vegetables and fruits. The establishment of local markets boost small farmers’ income and increases consumers’ access to fresh produce

Shoppers should find out whether a more expensive food actually provides better value for money. They can recognize how the weight of the food when it is purchased compares with the amount of food that will actually be consumed. Some foods satisfy needs better at less cost.

BUY FOOD IN LARGER AMOUNTS

If a household or households can afford to purchase larger quantities of food at one time and they are able to store the food safely, buying in bulk can save money. Having food in the house encourages exchanges of foods with neighbours or family. These local safety nets are very important to helping communities maintain resilience.

Another option is for different households to form a group to buy food in 'bulk' and share storage and transport costs in order to save money. This requires organizational skills and trust. In South America, groups of friends organize themselves to buy sugar, oil and rice in large quantities, which they then divide for each household to get their share. The groups go to special stores where only large quantities of each item are sold and the costs are lower.

FOOD FOR SMALL CHILDREN

Breastmilk is the best way to feed infants –it provides the most nutrition and it protects the infant from infection. Most babies should breastfeed exclusively for the first six months of life. This means that an infant receives only breastmilk from the mother or a wet nurse, or expressed breastmilk, and no other liquids or solids. Most children should breastfeed for two years and, if possible, beyond.

Besides breastmilk, babies over 6 months of age need additional foods for growth. At 6 months, complementary foods should be introduced. Complementary foods can be prepared at home with local foods. Recipes for these foods should be promoted. Encouraging mothers to prepare nutritious complementary foods at home instead of buying processed products is nutritionally beneficial for the child and saves money. In many countries mothers require nutrition education to learn how to prepare nutritious complementary foods for their child to grow healthily.

IMPROVING HOUSEHOLD INCOMES

Earning more income through the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and experiences is another way of responding to higher prices. For example, basket weaving, cloth making, handicrafts, processing foods, rearing of poultry, rabbits and goats can generate income. To help households balance income-earning activities with child feeding and care, community action to establish child care facilities should be encouraged. Children should not become involved in extraordinary labour to the point that they quit school.

MONITORING THE IMPACT OF HIGH FOOD PRICES

Loss in food purchasing power often results in the reduced quantity, diversity, frequency and safety of meals. These changes need to be monitored, understood and addressed in order to help people cope and adapt to the situation, without compromising their health and nutritional status.

Nutrition education and communication strategies

Nutrition education and communication can provide practical advice and information to assist households in obtaining food and using it efficiently. Governments and civil society organizations should develop strategies that are well-targeted to the households which are at greatest risk of nutrition problems.

THE RIGHT MESSAGE FOR THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

Before action can begin, the specific nutrition problems to be addressed should be chosen and the particular groups in the population that require advice should be identified. Information about the current food practices, perceptions, knowledge and attitudes, obstacles and opportunities should be obtained. To be effective, the nutrition messages must be understood and remembered and their advice must be feasible for the household to follow. Developing realistic messages requires testing in the community. This can avoid costly mistakes.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION

The choice of communication mode or technology depends on the audience that needs to be reached, as well as the message, the budget and the level of experience of the organization. Interpersonal communication such as face-to-face conversations, group discussions, meetings, one-to-one counselling and home visits has the advantage of allowing for immediate feedback and flexibility. Education programmes



reach directly into the community to develop new skills and knowledge. For example, in Afghanistan and Zambia, cooking demonstrations have been crucial in motivating and empowering women to improve their children's complementary foods.

Mass media allows such programmes to reach a large audience through newspapers, comic books, magazines, product packages, brochures, radio, television, songs, posters, and many other channels. The disadvantage of these

channels is that the message cannot be changed easily once it is launched. Some countries have daily radio programmes that inform shoppers of the "best buys" in the market and tell consumers which foods are in season. They give practical advice on how to save money on foods and eat a nutritious diet. Promotion of nutrition messages through music and art can make use of local artistic talent. When the songs and posters are locally produced, the information is readily understood and easy for people to remember.

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