

Unhealthy diet is one of the four major risk factors for NCDs, the leading cause of death globally. Nearly 80% of NCD deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries. The NCD epidemic is thwarting poverty reduction efforts.¹

NCDs are directly related to unhealthy lifestyles that are affected by adverse physical and social environments in cities. International experience demonstrates that solely targeting individual behavior change is ineffective, as is promoting public awareness about diet, unless there is also a concerted effort to ensure supportive environments with accessible and affordable healthy food choices. Public health research suggests we must concentrate on environmental and policy approaches to create sustained changes and control chronic diseases.²

As people transition from subsistence to urban livelihoods, those who in the past produced their own food are now almost completely reliant on purchased food. This has changed access and availability of healthy and unhealthy foods. Unhealthy eating patterns are thus rising, particularly in low-resource settings and among marginalized women and children.³

Fruit and vegetables are important components of a healthy diet, as are other high-fiber foods. According to the World Health Report 2002, low fruit and vegetable intake causes about 31% of heart disease and 11% of stroke worldwide. Up to 2.7 million lives could potentially be saved annually if fruit and vegetable consumption were sufficiently increased.⁴

Consumption of foods high in saturated and trans-fat, salt, and sugar causes at least 14 million NCD-related deaths.⁵ However, measures encouraging the food industry to reformulate products to provide healthier options, while important, fail to encourage people to consume nutrient-dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, and legumes, and does not address issues of access and availability.

¹ WHO Global Status Report on Noncommunicable Diseases, 2010.

² Brownson, R.C., Haire Joshi, D., and Luke, D.A., (2006). Shaping the Context of Health: A review of Environmental and Policy Approaches in the Prevention of Chronic Diseases. *Annual Review Public Health*, 27, p. 341-370.

³ Ericksen, P.J., (2008). Conceptualizing food systems for global environmental change research. *Environmental Change*, 18, p.234-245.

⁴ World Health Organization (2002). *World Health Report (2002): Reducing risks, promoting healthy life*. Geneva.

⁵ Beaglehole, R., et al., (2011). Priority actions for non-communicable disease crisis. *The Lancet*, 377, p., 1438-1447.



Urbanization and changing food production and distribution practices have reduced the accessibility of healthy foods for the poor



Suggested strategies to improve diet for NCD prevention include:

- Work with the agricultural and economic sectors internationally, nationally, and locally to increase the availability of fruits, vegetables and other healthier foods at affordable prices.
- Control the quality of and consumer information about food through regulation and monitoring of content, packaging, and marketing.
- Work with local authorities to encourage urban planning and design that ensures access to healthy food outlets in all communities.
- Reduce levels of added salt, fat, and sugars in manufactured foods and the marketing of certain energy dense, nutrient poor foods and drinks to children.
- Remove subsidies for the production of unhealthy commodities such as tobacco, and gradually transfer subsidies from meat and dairy products to fruit and vegetables.

