

An Analysis of Food Systems for Children in Kenya



Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Overview	3
Introduction	3
Drivers of Malnutrition in Kenya.....	4
Kenya's commitment to nutrition.....	6
The Food Systems Landscape for Children in Kenya.....	6
Food Supply Chains	7
External food environments	8
Personal food environments.....	9
Food Behaviours	10
Key Food Systems Actors in Kenya	11
Challenges and Gaps in Transforming Food Systems for Children in Kenya.....	13
Climate Change Challenges on Food and Nutrition Security	14
Disparities Between Populations	14
Making Food Systems Work for Children in Kenya.....	15
UNICEF's Role in Transforming Food Systems for Children in Kenya	16
Annex I – Summary of key Kenyan policies relevant to children and adolescents.....	21
Annex II– Summary of key actors within the food systems.....	24

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Overview

This landscape analysis provides critical background information on how Kenya's food system influences the diets and nutrition of children and adolescents in Kenya. It gives a brief overview of the drivers of malnutrition in Kenya, including the crisis of child food poverty, and Kenyan commitments as highlighted by key national policies. It then delves into describing the Kenyan food system in relation to the Innocenti Framework on Food Systems for Children and Adolescents (UNICEF and GAIN, 2019), as well as existing challenges and gaps driving multiple manifestations of child malnutrition. The landscape report finally lays out ways forward to ensure that the unique nutritional needs of children and adolescents are met within the food system and spotlights UNICEF priorities in Kenya to address these gaps in line with the overall UNICEF strategy for transforming food systems for children.

Introduction

Kenya's food system is diverse and complex, encompassing activities in food production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption. The country's food system is influenced by various structural, socio-economic and environmental factors (HLPE, 2014; FAO, 2021). The complexity of a food system reflects the influence and effect of many actors working across food supply chains and food environments, including producers, traders and marketers, as well as children, including adolescents, and their families (UNICEF and GAIN, 2019). Challenges such as climate change, food price volatility and supply chain inefficiencies affect food security and nutrition outcomes, particularly in arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) and urban informal settlements (MoALFC, 2021). Food systems exert the greatest single pressure on the planet's environment by contributing to one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions, threatening the rights of children to good nutrition, good physical and mental health, and quality education as well as to a sustainable future (UNICEF, 2021). However, the urgent push to transform food systems often overlooks the specific needs, rights, and potential contributions of children, who are most vulnerable to malnutrition and climate impacts.

The foods children consume play a critical role in shaping their health, growth and future, influencing not only their individual development but also the well-being of communities and nations. Yet, many children today lack access to the diverse and nutritious diets they need to thrive. Nationally, three in five young children are unable to meet basic dietary needs (UNICEF, 2024a). Child food poverty, defined as a lack of access to diverse and nutritious diets, affects over 60 per cent of children nationwide. Severe child food poverty impacts 16 per cent of children, who consume foods from only two or fewer food groups daily. Meanwhile, 47 per cent experience moderate food poverty, accessing only three or four food groups (UNICEF, 2024a). This dietary insufficiency leads to alarming levels of malnutrition, including stunting, wasting and vitamin deficiencies (UNICEF, 2022).

In fact, Kenya faces a triple burden of malnutrition, characterized by the coexistence of undernutrition, overnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. This triple burden affects millions, while geographic disparities are stark with some counties in ASAL regions facing wasting rates exceeding 20 per cent (including Turkana and Wajir; SMART Survey, 2022, 2023 & 2024). Concurrently, overweight and obesity are on the rise, as 8 of every 100 children in Kenya becomes obese every year (Statista, 2020). These issues are rooted in the broader food systems that shape food access, affordability and choices for families, reflecting how deeply food systems impact children's lives and futures.

Drivers of Malnutrition in Kenya

The triple burden of malnutrition in Kenya is characterized by the coexistence of undernutrition, overnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. It affects millions, with under-five child stunting rates at 18 per cent, wasting at 5 per cent and underweight at 10 per cent (KDHS, 2022). Concurrently, overweight and obesity are on the rise, particularly among urban populations and by 2030 Kenya is predicted to have over 1 million obese children (between 5-19 years of age) (Statista, 2020). Micronutrient deficiencies are a serious challenge affecting children and adolescents. A study comparing the nutrition and micronutrient status of children aged 5-17 years living in urban and rural settings showed that anemia affects up to 28 per cent of children, vitamin A deficiency affects 14.7 per cent and zinc deficiency affects up to 34.3 per cent (Evang E. C. et al., 2020). There are wide differences between urban and rural populations.

The triple burden of malnutrition is driven by systemic issues in Kenya's food systems. Undernutrition remains prevalent in poorer regions like the ASAL areas due to food insecurity and limited access to diverse diets (UNICEF, 2024b). Meanwhile, urbanization and the proliferation of ultra-processed foods have increased overnutrition, particularly among middle-income groups (KNBS and ICF, 2023). Micronutrient deficiencies persist due to inadequate consumption of nutrient-rich foods, which is worsened by reliance on staple crops and food price volatility (Evang E. C. et al, 2020). The food system is failing children through limited availability of the nutrient-dense foods they need to grow and develop, while at the same time flooding the market with access to cheap unhealthy foods (UNICEF, 2024a).

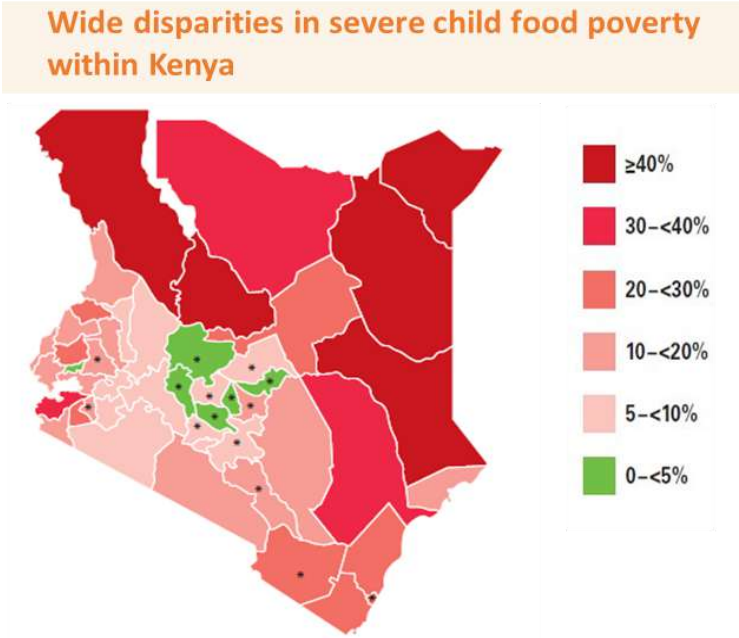
Many young children, regardless of where they live, are unable to access and consume a nutritious and diverse diet. Global statistics also show that severe child food poverty is experienced by children in poor as well as non-poor households, indicating that household income is not the only driver of child food poverty (Figure 1) (UNICEF, 2023b). In Kenya, 16 per cent of children live in severe food poverty, meaning that they consume foods from only two or fewer food groups per day out of the eight defined food groups. Almost half (47 per cent) suffer from moderate food poverty, consuming foods from only 3 or 4 of the defined food groups per day. This means that more than 6 of every 10 Kenyan children suffer from either severe or moderate food poverty (UNICEF, 2024a). Other indicators confirm the precariousness of the Kenyan child's diet: only 25 per cent of Kenyan children 6-23 months of age consumed eggs or flesh foods in the day prior to the survey, and 28 per cent of this age group did not consume any fruits or vegetables (UNICEF, 2024b).

The figures vary widely across Kenya, with the highest levels of child food poverty in the ASAL regions (Figure 1). Wasting levels also tend to differ depending on geography, with the highest levels in the counties in the ASAL region, which covers 80 per cent of Kenya's landmass and experiences relatively low amounts of annual rainfall. The residents of ASAL regions are marginalized and experience high rates of poverty, high vulnerability to economic and climate shocks and variability in rainfall (IPC report, 2021). About 16 million people, or about 30 per cent of Kenya's population, live in these areas and earn their living primarily through a mix of pastoralism and small-scale agriculture. Many of the ASALs suffer from deforestation and overgrazing and are particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change. These factors further reduce the productivity of these areas, threatening livelihoods, food security and nutrition, and biodiversity (IPC, 2021; IUCN, 2024). Wasting is highest, at over 20 per cent, in the ASAL counties of

Marsabit (20.4 per cent), Turkana (22.6 per cent) and Wajir (22.8 per cent). Levels of stunting are more varied, ranging from a high of 37 per cent in Kilifi to a low of 9 per cent in Garissa, both of which are in the ASAL (Marsabit, Turkana and Wajir; SMART Survey, 2024). This shows that geography is not the sole determinant and demonstrates the great variation of malnutrition and its causes even within similar geographies.

Unhealthy diets result not only from having insufficient levels of nutrients from fruits, vegetables and protein-rich foods, including animal source foods and grains, but also from consuming ultra-processed foods high in salt, fat and free sugars. The consumption of unhealthy diets is common in Kenya, which is driving rising levels of overweight and obesity in childhood and adolescence. Of every 100 children in Kenya, 8 become obese every year. These figures are attributed to increased consumption of ultra-processed foods (Statista, 2020). This is true for all children, even those already suffering from food poverty. For example, in Kenya, 27 per cent of children living in severe child food poverty consumed sweetened beverages in the previous twenty-four hours and 5 per cent of them consumed unhealthy foods (UNICEF, 2024a). For adolescent girls, the figures are even higher: 70.5 per cent consumed sweetened beverages in the previous twenty-four hours and 42.8 per cent of them consumed unhealthy foods, such as cakes, candies, ice cream and fried and salty foods (KNBS and ICF, 2023). Increased consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with urbanization, due to the high availability of ultra-processed foods in urban environments.

Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of Child Food Poverty in Kenya



Source: 'Child Food Poverty. Nutrition Deprivation in Early Childhood – Data Tables', Child Nutrition Report, UNICEF, New York, 2024b

Kenya's commitment to nutrition

Kenya has demonstrated a strong commitment to global nutrition targets by aligning its policies with international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the World Health Assembly Nutrition Targets 2025 and the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition. These commitments are enshrined in national documents including the Vision 2030, the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (2012) and the Kenya Nutrition Action Plan, which are geared towards improving food security, nutrition and the health of the population. They reveal how the government aims to fulfil the constitutional right to health and freedom from hunger. Kenya aims to reduce stunting, wasting and childhood overweight, improve exclusive breastfeeding rates, and combat anemia and low birth weight as part of these targets. The government of Kenya also recognizes the fact that there is a need to catalyze food system transformation, and the Agriculture Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy (ASTGS) aims to enhance food systems resilience, improve market access and promote sustainable food production (GoK, 2021). Annex I gives a summary of key policies in Kenya with relevance to food systems for children.

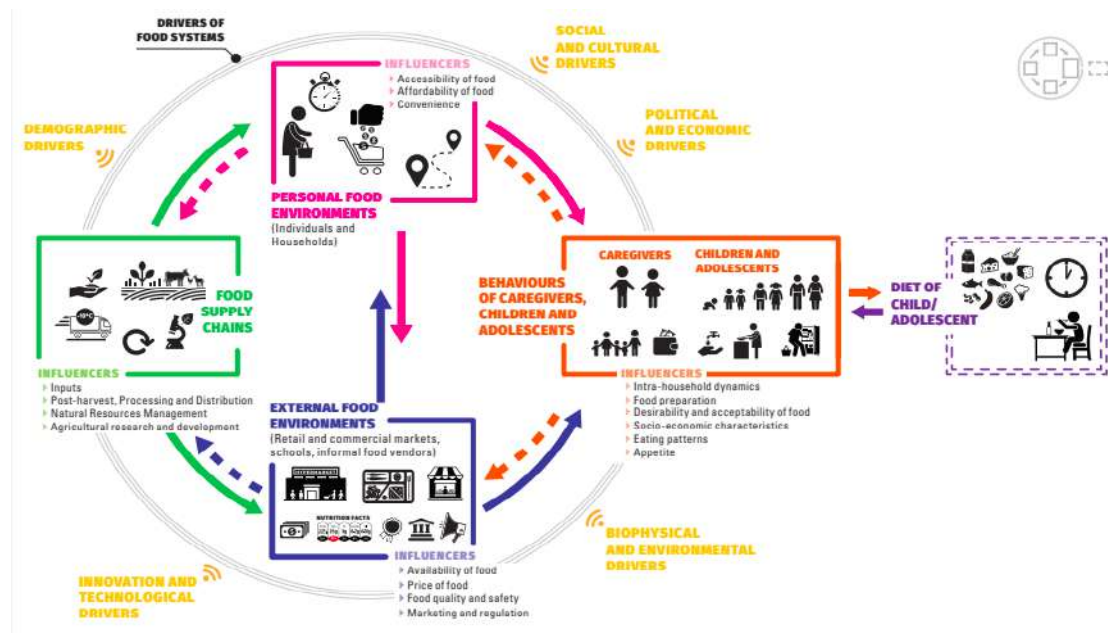
Progress in the implementation of these different policies and strategies has been mixed. Stunting among children under five has significantly decreased, from 38 per cent in 2008 to 17.6 per cent in 2022, nearing the 14.3 per cent target. Wasting rates have dropped to 4.9 per cent, meeting the global benchmark of below 5 per cent. Additionally, childhood overweight is at 3.2 per cent, which is very close to the goal of 4.1 per cent (KDHS, 2022; WHO, 2024). However, progress on other indicators has been less encouraging. For instance, 11 per cent of school-aged children are suffering from overweight or obesity – at the same time, 8 per cent of children in that age group are thin or severely thin (UNICEF, 2023a). Low birth weight remains high, with only a slight reduction from 10.8 per cent in 2012 to 10 per cent, far from the 7.6 per cent target. Despite these successes, there is a noticeable gap between Kenya's ambitious commitments and on the ground outcomes. Regional disparities remain stark, with ASAL regions experiencing higher levels of malnutrition due to poverty, climate vulnerability and limited access to services. Moreover, while Kenya has implemented various multi-sectoral plans, inefficient policy alignment, weak policy enforcement, inadequate funding and insufficient stakeholder coordination have hindered comprehensive progress. Without addressing these systemic issues, Kenya risks falling short of its broader nutrition goals.

The Food Systems Landscape for Children in Kenya

Understanding the food system in Kenya, how it drives children's diets and how it is currently failing children, is critical to understanding how the food system can be transformed to prevent and address child malnutrition. The Innocenti Framework on Food Systems for Children and Adolescents (Figure 2), which guides UNICEF's food systems for children approach, sets out key elements, determinants and drivers of the food system that together shape the diets of children and adolescents. Drivers include demographic factors (urbanization, population growth, migration), political and economic factors, technology and innovation and social and cultural factors. These factors of change affect the principal elements of a food system, including food supply chains (all the activities from production to consumption, including own-production); the external food environment (the different contexts in which consumers interact with food systems to procure food); the personal food environment (the personal characteristics the individual or household brings to these interactions) and the food behaviours of caregivers, children and adolescents. A food system approach to improving the diets of children and adolescents, and to

reducing child food poverty, will seek to understand how these elements work together dynamically, how factors reinforce or detract from one another, including through feedback loops in the system (UNICEF and GAIN, 2019). Using this framework, the following section describes how the food system impacts children’s diets in Kenya.

Figure 2. Innocenti Framework on Food Systems for Children and Adolescents



Source: ‘Food Systems for Children and Adolescents. Working Together to Secure Nutritious Diets’, UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti, Florence, 5-7 November 2018

Food Supply Chains

Food supply chains connect production to external food environments: the physical, economic, political and socio-cultural contexts where consumers interact with food systems, such as retail and commercial markets, schools and informal vendors. Food supply chains in Kenya are underdeveloped because of production issues, from dispersion of production among many small producers and their limited ability to deliver and adopt appropriate technologies, to impacts of climate change and variable weather patterns. Kenyan agriculture is particularly vulnerable to climate change and variability since only 18 per cent of the country is feasible for rainfed agriculture, which is the most common form of agriculture (De Jong et al., 2024). Climate change and variability also have special significance for producers and pastoralists in the ASAL, which are home to 60 per cent of the country’s livestock. These climate-related factors can significantly affect production, productivity and the food and nutrition security of already vulnerable communities, with particularly severe consequences for children’s diets and nutritional outcomes (FAO, European Union and CIRAD, 2023).

In addition, low mechanization, lack of economies of scale and inadequate technology development, delivery and adoption hinder potential productivity increases and production diversification. Limited budgetary allocation to agriculture is a challenge with only 2.4 per cent of the national budget in 2021 being devoted to the sector; this rose slightly above 3 per cent with county contributions. Credit access is also insufficient, with annual needs exceeding available credit by over three times. Supply chain problems further deter private sector investment in the sector (FAO, European Union and CIRAD, 2023).

Food distribution in Kenya is informal, especially for the domestic market, and food loss and waste are a serious issue. The poor quality of transport infrastructure leads to spoilage and rejection of products at markets because the quality has suffered due to poor handling and long travel times (FAO, European Union and CIRAD, 2023). Lack of storage facilities and low levels of food processing, coupled with other market failures, lead to substantial losses. Though Kenya has a relatively industrialized food and beverage processing sector, which makes up a substantial share of the processing industry, losses reported by the processing industry and supermarkets range from 12 to 25 per cent. About 40 per cent of all fruits are lost or wasted, and only 8 per cent are currently processed (De Jong et al., 2024).

External food environments

External food environments are locations where consumers interact with food. They reflect aspects such as availability, pricing, marketing, regulations and the specific properties of vendors and products. (UNICEF and GAIN, 2019). The food environment in Kenya varies widely for children, adolescents and their caregivers. Food access for most consumers in low- and middle-income countries is still dominated by small kiosks and street vendors in an informally built environment mixed with modern retail outlets such as supermarkets (De Jong et al., 2024). Unhealthy, highly processed and energy-dense foods are predominantly sold over more nutritious foods such as vegetables, fruits and animal products (Chege, et al., 2021). According to the UNICEF report on child poverty, the overabundance of ultra-processed foods, even in remote areas, is another significant challenge. These foods, often cheaper and aggressively marketed, displace nutritious options from children's diets. According to the African Population Health Research Council (APHRC) report on school feeding programmes in Kenya (APHRC, 2024), one quarter of foods available in schools are ultra-processed, raising concerns over their impact on student dietary choices and nutritional outcomes.

Food environments shape opportunities and conditions that influence food choices and when they are unhealthy, they drive poor diets (Asiki et al., 2019). For children this impact is especially harmful as the availability and marketing of nutrient-poor foods heavily affects their preferences, purchase requests and consumption habits. This is particularly concerning since children often lack the maturity to recognize the persuasive nature of advertising, making them vulnerable to its influence (Keding, G., 2016). Exposure to marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks occurs through various channels, including traditional media and emerging digital platforms. This targeted marketing, often using attractive tactics like promotions, freebies and product placement, aims to influence children's food choices and foster brand loyalty. The increasing use of social media, paid online ads and data harvesting allows for more precise targeting of children, making them susceptible to unhealthy food marketing and potentially compromising their long-term health (WHO, 2019).

Food safety concerns resulting from poor hygiene and sanitation and other factors that could lead to food contamination are pushing consumers towards supermarkets, which are perceived as having better hygiene (De Jong et al., 2024). More and more sales are being made through supermarkets, which offer a broad range of staples, fruits and vegetables, and processed foods, with more consistent supply and quality. A study in Nairobi showed that food safety, physical access to food and purchasing power were the key factors of the external food environment that influenced food acquisition (Pradeilles et al., 2021). In addition, emerging and re-emerging food safety challenges, which include widespread malpractices in food production, processing, preservation, labelling and vending, have led to low consumption of healthy foods like fruits and vegetables, which have been exposed several times as containing unacceptable levels of chemicals (CGA, 2020; National Food Safety Policy (Draft), 2021).

Personal food environments

The personal food environment reflects individual and household-level factors that consumers bring with them to the external environment, such as the ability to access or afford foods, convenience and desirability. Affordability, accessibility, desirability and convenience are important drivers of food choices and diets. Income poverty means that families cannot afford the necessary nutritious and diverse foods for their children because their economic resources are not sufficient and social protection systems fail to bridge the gap (UNICEF, 2024a). Lifestyle changes, economic growth and urbanization are encouraging shifts in diets toward more consumption of processed foods and animal source proteins. Healthy and diverse diets are out of reach for many Kenyans.

Affordability of nutritious foods is constrained. In Kenya, 38.6 per cent of the population is poor, rising to 40.3 per cent among children aged 0-17 (KNBS, 2023). As of 2021, 74 per cent of Kenyans could not afford a healthy diet. Rural dwellers spend more than 60 per cent of their income on food, and those in urban areas spend 49 per cent (De Jong et al., 2024). The Demographic and Health Survey highlights that stunting affects 27.6 per cent of children in the lowest wealth quintile versus 8.7 per cent in the highest. Only 16 per cent of children aged 6-23 months in the poorest households achieve adequate dietary diversity compared to 60.3 per cent in the wealthiest (KNBS and ICF, 2023). Almost 80 per cent of Kenyans cannot afford a healthy diet, which would exceed half of their daily per capita income (Food Systems Dashboard, 2024). Additionally, complementary foods like calcium and animal-protein sources are less affordable, varying across regions (Ryckman et al., 2024).

Food choices are influenced by ease of access, convenience and time. In Nairobi's informal settlements, residents often trade off these factors when choosing where to buy food (Downs et al., 2022; Pradeilles et al., 2021). Women in focus groups noted balancing the convenience of street vendors against home preparation, which involved cost, time and water availability (Downs et al., 2022). Convenience, especially time saved, influenced some to buy prepared foods when children were at school. For family-sized meals, home cooking was preferred for being cost-effective. Poor urban consumers frequently shop at kiosks and mom-and-pop stores due to proximity and lower prices compared to supermarkets, which offer more fresh produce but are costlier (Chege et al., 2021).

The desirability of food in Kenya is influenced by factors such as taste, convenience, affordability, societal perceptions and cultural preferences. The desirability of ultra-processed foods and fast foods is a key driver of their increasing consumption in Kenya, shaped by sensory appeal, convenience, affordability, social influence and aggressive marketing. These foods are specifically engineered to be hyper-palatable,

with high levels of fat, sugar, salt and artificial flavor enhancers that stimulate cravings and reinforce habitual consumption (Monteiro et al., 2019). The widespread marketing strategies employed by multinational food corporations, including colorful packaging, celebrity endorsements, social media advertising and promotions targeting young consumers, further increase their desirability (Kelly et al., 2022). Social and cultural factors also contribute, as fast-food consumption is often associated with status, modernity and urban lifestyles, making it particularly appealing to younger populations in Kenya (Oyando et al., 2023).

Food Behaviours

Food behaviours in Kenya are shaped by a complex interplay of individual, household and systemic factors that influence children's access to and consumption of nutritious foods. Household food choices are often constrained by affordability, availability and cultural preferences, with informal markets playing an important role in determining access to diverse and safe foods (Githiri et al., 2020). Additionally, social and behavioural norms influence feeding practices, including breastfeeding and complementary feeding, which impact child nutrition outcomes.

The 2022 Kenya DHS shows that while 71 per cent of children 6-23 months old experienced an acceptable minimum level of meal frequency, only 37 per cent of children in this age range living with their mother consumed a diet with an acceptable level of minimum dietary diversity and only 31 per cent consumed a diet that was at least minimally acceptable (KNBS and ICF, 2023). This means that a significant proportion of Kenyan children under two years old are experiencing child food poverty – severe child food poverty refers to children who consume two or fewer food groups daily out of a total of eight. Furthermore, poor care and feeding practices are related to issues of affordability and accessibility but also lack of access to timely and quality information and counseling about good practice and healthy choices, meaning that many children do not consume a sufficiently healthy diet (UNICEF, 2024a).

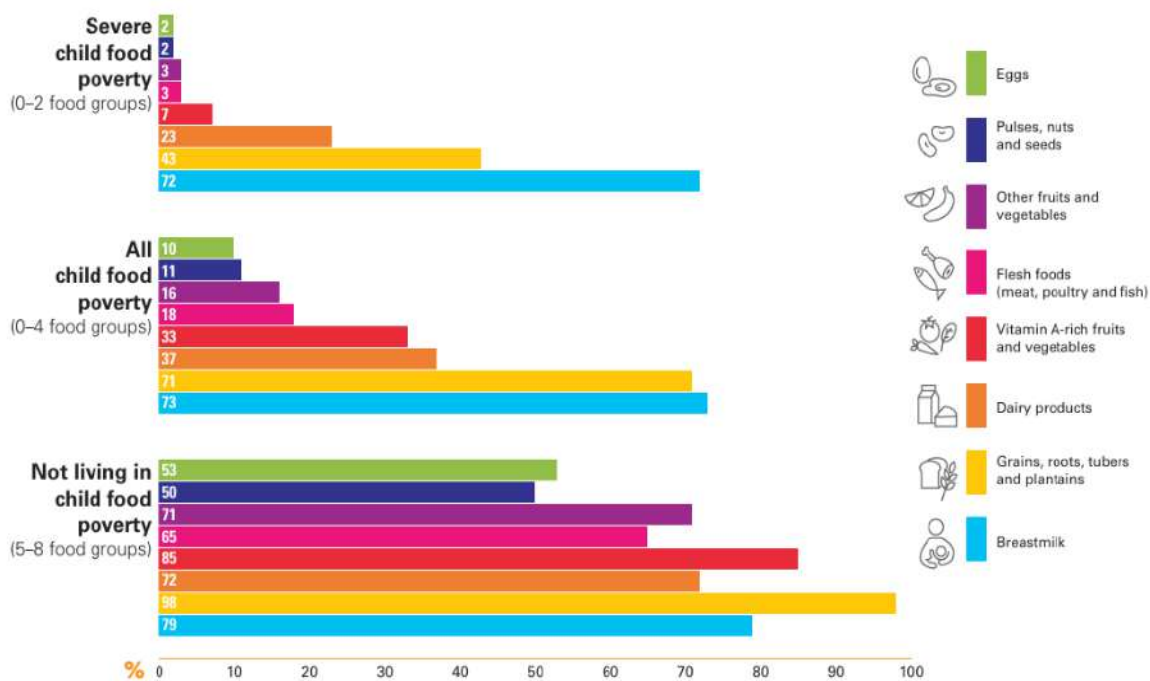
For younger children in Kenya, appropriate foods for complementary feeding remain limited in quantity and quality. Introduction to other foods and liquids can start as early as the first months, but they are often low in energy and micronutrients (UNICEF, 2018). Unhygienic preparation and storage of complementary foods, which is common in many households in Kenya, further predisposes many infants to disease. Traditional cultural practices, family pressure, economic constraints and food insecurity all influence complementary feeding (UNICEF, 2018). The 2022 Kenya DHS further indicates that 59.9 per cent of children under 6 months living with their mother are exclusively breastfed, which shows significant improvement since 2008 (32 per cent) but is still far off the global nutrition target of 70 per cent. Breastmilk is a vital source of nourishment, with 72 per cent of children living in severe child food poverty in early life being fed breastmilk (as shown in figure 3). For these children, diets often consist primarily of breastmilk along with dairy products and/or starchy staples like rice, maize or wheat, highlighting their reliance on these limited commodities for survival.

Older children and adolescents in Kenya display diverse food behaviours influenced by socio-economic factors, urbanization and shifts in dietary patterns. As they acquire more autonomy over their food choices, they are increasingly exposed to processed and ultra-processed foods, often high in fats, salt and sugar due to aggressive marketing and the proliferation of fast-food outlets (UNICEF, 2024a). The Kenya Nutrition Action Plan, 2018, indicated that adolescents in both urban and rural areas frequently consume energy-dense snacks and sugar-sweetened beverages, contributing to rising obesity rates and non-

communicable diseases (MoH, 2018). Additionally, school food environments play a critical role in shaping dietary behaviours, yet many lack structured meal programmes that promote nutritious eating (Wanjohi et al., 2022). Economic constraints also affect food choices, as low-income households often rely on inexpensive, calorie-dense foods that may lack essential nutrients (Downs et al., 2022). Social influences, including peer pressure and cultural perceptions of body image, further shape the dietary habits of older children and adolescents.

Figure 3. Percentage of children consuming food groups by type and child poverty status, 2022

Children living in severe child food poverty are rarely fed nutrient-dense foods



Source: UNICEF global database 2023

Key Food Systems Actors in Kenya

The complexity of food systems means there are many actors and the economic, political and socio-cultural importance of food systems means that these actors have a large stake in seeing that the food system works to meet their own objectives. These objectives vary, and at times may conflict with each other, creating a dynamic environment. Additionally, the unique needs of children and adolescents are often not reflected. Annex II provides a summary of key actors in Kenya’s food system while the critical role of the government and private sector is described below.

National government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) play a critical role in shaping food system policies and practices. Food systems are multidimensional, and the various aspects fall under the mandates of different MDAs in agriculture and livestock development, health, water and sanitation, environment and forestry, as well as trade and industries. This therefore indicates that integrated

approaches are key in achieving food security, healthy diets and social and economic well-being, as well as environmental sustainability (Dengerink et al., 2022). However, coordination, currently the weakest link in Kenya's food systems, is the leading cause of the current underperformance (MOALD, 2024). Devolution in Kenya has significantly empowered county governments, positioning them as key players in the food system. By adapting national policies and implementing them in local contexts, county governments drive transformation through agricultural services, infrastructure development and community-based initiatives. The role of county governments is crucial, as they not only manage local food systems but also influence regulations related to trading, markets and zoning. Research and academia, schools, civil society and national and international development partners also have a stake in how the food system is shaped and how it works (FAO, European Union, and CIRAD, 2023).

The private sector, including producers and enterprises of all sizes, agribusinesses and food firms across the supply chain, from processing, retail, marketing and distribution, is an important actor in the food system. Compared to other African countries, Kenya is relatively industrialized. The food and beverage sector is among the largest, contributing around 55 per cent of manufacturing value. Agri-food processing primarily concerns coffee; milling of rice, maize and wheat; processing of oils and fats; and processing of milk and other dairy products. Processing capacity is concentrated in the Nairobi area, and the main private sector organization representing these firms is the Agriculture Sector Network (ASNET), an affiliate of the umbrella group Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) (FAO, European Union and CIRAD, 2023; De Jong et al., 2024), which plays a critical role in Kenya's food system by influencing food production, processing, distribution and retail. As the country's agribusiness landscape expands, private sector actors, including multinational corporations, local food processors, retailers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), contribute significantly to food availability, accessibility and affordability (Juma et al., 2021). The scale of private sector involvement is extensive, with agribusinesses employing millions and contributing approximately 33 per cent to Kenya's GDP, emphasizing its economic importance (KNBS, 2022). Private sector investments drive innovation in food processing, packaging and preservation, enhancing food safety and extending shelf life (Omosa, 2020). Additionally, private actors play a pivotal role in shaping consumer food choices through marketing, branding and pricing strategies, which influence dietary patterns and nutrition outcomes (Melesse et al., 2021). Partnerships between the private sector and the government, such as public-private partnerships (PPPs), have been instrumental in improving agricultural productivity, promoting food fortification and enhancing supply chain efficiencies (FAO, 2021). However, concerns have been raised over the dominance of large food corporations, which may prioritize profit over nutrition, leading to the proliferation of ultra-processed and unhealthy foods (Moodie et al., 2021). Smallholder farmers play a major part as they provide 65 per cent of all market produce. They produce more than 70 per cent of maize, 80 per cent of milk, 85 per cent of fish and 70 per cent of beef and related animal products. Larger farmers, with more than 5 ha of land, supply 35 per cent of agricultural produce to national and international markets. Major cooperatives, such as dairy and farmer federations, bring these producers together to facilitate production and sales. Traders and private-sector service providers for inputs such as fertilizers and seeds are also important (FAO, European Union and CIRAD, 2023).

While these actors are active players in the operation of the food system, government, civil society and development agencies in Kenya are focused on promoting transformation of the system itself. The Ministry of Agriculture is leading a whole-of-government effort supported by the United Nations agencies that deal with food and agriculture to transform agri-food systems to be more sustainable and more effective in achieving food and nutrition security for all. This effort includes comprehensive participatory discussions with a wide range of food system stakeholders and development of tools, such as the Financial Flow for Food systems (3Fs) budget tool developed by the World Bank and IFAD that calculates how much of the government budget goes to food system transformation efforts.

Challenges and Gaps in Transforming Food Systems for Children in Kenya

Kenya faces significant challenges in transforming its food systems to meet the nutritional needs of children. Service delivery gaps, policy weaknesses, inefficient policy alignment across sectors and resource constraints collectively undermine efforts to ensure children access diverse, safe and nutritious diets. These gaps perpetuate high rates of child malnutrition, food poverty and diet-related illnesses, particularly in vulnerable regions like ASALs. Addressing these challenges is crucial to fostering the health and development of Kenya's younger population.

Service delivery gaps manifest in inefficient and underdeveloped food supply chains, which are further hampered by low agricultural productivity, poor infrastructure and weak regulation. Smallholder farmers, who produce a substantial proportion of Kenya's food, face significant barriers such as limited access to inputs, inadequate technologies and insufficient market linkages. These issues result in high levels of food loss, estimated at 12–20 per cent of crop production, and poor-quality produce that fails to meet safety standards. Climate change exacerbates these problems by intensifying variability in rainfall, reducing agricultural yields and destabilizing rural livelihoods. Moreover, urbanization has led to a dietary shift toward unhealthy, ultra-processed foods, which are cheap and widely marketed but lack nutritional value, particularly for children.

The policy landscape, while robust in its frameworks, suffers from significant implementation and coordination weaknesses. Kenya's policies, such as the National Nutrition Action Plan and agricultural investment strategies, emphasize the importance of improving child nutrition and food security. However, the translation of these policies into tangible, on-the-ground impact is often limited by inadequate enforcement and monitoring. For instance, efforts to regulate the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages, particularly to children, remain insufficient. Targeted advertising and easy access to these products continue to influence unhealthy eating habits, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas. Meanwhile devolution of governance to county levels, while offering opportunities for localized solutions, has also created disparities. Some counties lack the resources and capacity to implement nutrition-sensitive interventions, while national-level coordination mechanisms remain underdeveloped.

Structural and institutional barriers also impede progress. Coordination among stakeholders, including government ministries, private sector actors and development partners, is often fragmented. A lack of alignment on strategies for food system transformation limits the potential for collaborative solutions. Furthermore, social protection systems fail to bridge the gap for households most in need, leaving children in vulnerable communities without the necessary support to access nutritious diets.

Resource and capacity gaps further hinder progress. Agricultural funding remains low, with the sector receiving only 2.4–3 per cent of the national budget, far below the level needed to drive meaningful transformation. Access to credit for smallholder farmers and food producers is limited, with demand for loans far exceeding supply. These financial constraints prevent farmers from adopting sustainable practices or scaling up their production. At the consumer level, income disparities and high food prices make nutritious diets unattainable for the majority of Kenyans. Approximately 74 per cent of the population cannot afford a healthy diet, with rural households spending more than 60 per cent of their income on food. This financial strain disproportionately affects children in poorer households, where dietary diversity and quality remain inadequate.

Additionally, gaps in knowledge and behaviour contribute to poor dietary outcomes for children. Caregivers often lack access to accurate information about nutrition and feeding practices, while unhealthy food environments promote the consumption of nutrient-poor, ultra-processed products. School environments, which could play a pivotal role in promoting healthy diets, are frequently inundated with ultra-processed foods, undermining efforts to instill better eating habits.

Climate Change Challenges on Food and Nutrition Security

Climate change poses significant risks to food and nutrition security in Kenya, worsening existing vulnerabilities. The country's agriculture, which is predominantly rain-fed, is increasingly affected by erratic weather patterns, prolonged droughts and unpredictable rainfall. These conditions reduce crop yields and livestock productivity, threatening the availability of food, particularly in ASALs, which constitute over 80 per cent of Kenya's territory. For instance, pastoralist communities in ASAL regions, who rely heavily on livestock, face severe disruptions to their livelihoods due to reduced grazing lands, water scarcity and increasing desertification.

Extreme weather events, such as floods and droughts, not only diminish food production but also disrupt supply chains. Poor rural infrastructure amplifies these challenges, leading to increased food losses and reduced market access. Additionally, climate change has contributed to the emergence of pests and diseases, such as the desert locust infestations and more virulent pathogens, further undermining food security.

The nutritional impact of these challenges is profound. Limited food availability and reduced diversity directly impact diet quality, increasing malnutrition risks for children and vulnerable populations. Climate stress also exacerbates poverty, making it harder for families to afford nutritious foods. Combined with these challenges, the intensification of climate shocks further destabilizes local food systems, leaving communities increasingly dependent on external aid.

Disparities Between Populations

Kenya faces stark disparities in food and nutrition security, driven by socioeconomic and geographic inequities. Rural areas, particularly in ASAL counties like Turkana, Marsabit and Wajir, experience the highest levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. These regions face persistent challenges due to poverty, limited access to education and weak infrastructure, which restrict their ability to access diverse and

nutritious diets. Stunting and wasting rates are significantly higher in these counties, reflecting chronic and acute undernutrition.

Conversely, urban areas face a growing burden of overweight and obesity, particularly among adolescents and women, driven by the increased consumption of ultra-processed foods and sedentary lifestyles. However, urban slums also grapple with food insecurity due to income disparities and high food prices, leaving many households unable to afford healthy diets.

Disparities are also evident across wealth and education levels. Children in wealthier households or with mothers who have higher levels of education are more likely to have diverse diets, while those in poorer households suffer from severe or moderate food poverty. Gender dynamics further exacerbate inequities, as women and girls in marginalized communities often bear a disproportionate burden of food insecurity due to cultural practices and limited access to resources.

Making Food Systems Work for Children in Kenya

Transforming Kenya's food system to prevent and address malnutrition in children requires addressing systemic challenges that limit access to nutritious diets. Kenya faces a triple burden of malnutrition – undernutrition, overnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies – driven by food insecurity, urbanization and the rise of ultra-processed foods. Many children, especially in ASAL regions, suffer from food poverty due to inadequate food supply chains, climate change and economic barriers. Meanwhile, urban environments promote unhealthy food choices, increasing childhood obesity.

The food system's inefficiencies stem from poor agricultural productivity, limited infrastructure and weak policy enforcement. Smallholder farmers struggle with low mechanization, lack of access to finance and climate variability, leading to high food losses. Supply chains remain underdeveloped, making nutrient-rich foods expensive and inaccessible for many families. Additionally, aggressive marketing of unhealthy foods, particularly targeting children, further exacerbates poor dietary choices.

Strengthening food systems governance is essential to ensuring children's specific nutritional needs are prioritized. Coordinated action among government agencies, the private sector, civil society, development partners and local communities is crucial for achieving a well-functioning system. Currently, fragmented efforts and weak policy alignment hinder progress. Greater collaboration across sectors – agriculture, health, education and trade – can drive more effective policies, such as stronger food safety regulations and targeted nutrition programmes. Decision-making must also include marginalized communities, particularly in ASAL regions, ensuring interventions address their unique food security challenges.

A child-centred food system must consider the full age range of children, including adolescents, whose nutritional needs are often overlooked. Policies and programmes should be adapted to ensure that food environments promote healthy choices at home, in schools and in communities. Children should be actively engaged in shaping these strategies, reinforcing their right to good nutrition. Finally, clear budgetary commitments and stronger accountability mechanisms are necessary to translate policies into action. By aligning governance structures with children's needs, Kenya can build a more equitable and resilient food system that supports their long-term health and development.

UNICEF's Role in Transforming Food Systems for Children in Kenya

UNICEF is committed to ensuring that children's specific needs are central to the food system transformation agenda. Addressing the "double failure" of food systems – failing to provide affordable, nutritious foods while flooding markets with unhealthy options – is essential for preventing malnutrition and improving child nutrition outcomes. UNICEF aims to collaborate with partners and support the government to transform Kenya's food system to meet children's nutritional needs and eliminate malnutrition. This will be achieved by strengthening child-centred food governance, improving food environments to promote healthy options and ensuring access to nutritious foods through local production and private sector partnerships. Additionally, efforts will focus on encouraging healthy eating habits among children, adolescents and caregivers to drive long-term change.

By advocating for a food system that prioritizes children's nutrition, UNICEF intends to ensure that healthy options are affordable, convenient and appealing, so that families and children can make better food choices. To tackle child food poverty in Kenya, UNICEF recognizes the need to promote diverse, healthy diets tailored to children's unique nutritional needs. By incentivizing local production and stimulating consumption of nutritious, safe and affordable foods for young children, UNICEF aims to improve the food that children eat. Protecting children's rights to a healthy food environment is crucial and UNICEF supports the Government of Kenya in their development and implementation of policies and standards that influence the availability, accessibility and affordability of safe and nutritious food for children. For example, strengthening regulations on marketing unhealthy foods aimed at children and implementing clear nutritional labeling can empower families to make informed food choices. Fiscal policies, such as taxes on sugary and unhealthy foods, can further discourage the consumption of harmful products.

Conclusion

Transforming Kenya's food system is essential to ensuring that all children have access to safe, nutritious and affordable diets. The current system presents significant challenges, including high levels of food poverty, undernutrition, rising childhood obesity and regional disparities that leave millions of children without adequate nourishment. Weak agricultural productivity, underdeveloped supply chains and the growing influence of ultra-processed foods further contribute to poor nutrition outcomes. While Kenya has made progress in reducing stunting and wasting, many children still struggle to meet their basic dietary needs.

A well-governed, child-centred food system requires stronger coordination among government agencies, the private sector, civil society and local communities. Policies must be aligned across sectors such as agriculture, health, education and trade to create a supportive environment for improved child nutrition. Localized interventions should address the specific challenges of vulnerable populations, particularly in ASAL regions. At the same time, targeted regulations, such as restrictions on unhealthy food marketing, can help shape healthier food environments for children.

Sustainable solutions must also prioritize investments in agriculture, infrastructure and social protection to enhance food security. Engaging children and adolescents in shaping food policies and programmes will

ensure their needs are at the centre of food system transformation. Stronger accountability, clear budgetary commitments and improved data monitoring are necessary to track progress and scale up effective interventions. With a focused and coordinated effort, Kenya can build a food system that not only addresses malnutrition but also promotes long-term health and development for all children.

UNICEF is committed to supporting this transformation by advocating for policies that prioritize child nutrition, strengthening partnerships with government and private sector actors, and implementing initiatives that improve children's foods, food environments and dietary practices. By ensuring that children's unique nutritional needs are addressed in every aspect of the food system, UNICEF aims to create lasting change that safeguards their health and well-being, contributing to a more sustainable and equitable future for all children in Kenya.

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Annexes

Annex I – Summary of key Kenyan policies relevant to children and adolescents

Policy	Year	Description	Nutrition and Food systems relevance
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Health and Nutrition	Kenya Health Policy 2014-2030	Outlines the government's strategy for improving the health of its citizens. It acknowledges the country's health challenges, including high rates of communicable diseases, maternal and child mortality, and a growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs).	It gives opportunity to address six global nutrition targets: Stunting, wasting and overweight in children U5, anemia in women of reproductive age, low birth weight, exclusive breastfeeding.
	Kenya National NCD Strategic Plan 2021-2026	This plan outlines the nation's strategy for combating NCDs such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and mental health conditions over a five-year period (2021/22 to 2025/26). It addresses NCD risk factors like tobacco use, harmful alcohol consumption and unhealthy diets, and aims to reduce premature mortality from NCDs by one-third by 2025.	Food labelling, regulating marketing of unhealthy foods, food fortification, reduction of sodium intake, elimination of industrially produced trans fatty acids, reformulation of foods to reduce content of fats, sugars and salt in foods.
	Kenya Nutrition Action Plan (KNAP) 2022-2027	The National Nutrition Action Plan spells out the investment required for Kenya to address malnutrition in all its forms and for all ages. The plan adopts a multisectoral approach and promotes cross-sectoral collaboration to address the social determinants of malnutrition sustainably.	Food labelling, regulating marketing of unhealthy foods, food fortification, reduction of sodium intake. The plan involves cooperation in all the food systems for children, including improving diet, behaviour and food environment.
	National School Health Policy 2018	The policy complements national health and education policies and defines a comprehensive school health program (CSHP) to address the health and education needs of learners, teachers and their families by providing quality health education and health services to promote the overall health, hygiene and nutrition of children.	Improving children's foods through provision of safe foods in schools, school feeding programmes and promoting healthy diets for the prevention of obesity and NCDs.
	National Policy for Maternal, Infant, and Young Child Nutrition	National policy guidelines for every care facility to establish and maintain a responsive mother/caregiver support programme for optimal infant and young child nutrition.	Promotion of healthy diets and nutrition for young children.
	Complementary Feeding Framework	This framework provides action that Kenya can take to promote adequate, safe and nutritious complementary foods for infants and young children.	This provides an opportunity to incorporate the first food initiative.
	SUN Strategy 2022-2027	The SUN Strategy will help Kenya end malnutrition in all its forms, through collective action.	The strategy provides an opportunity to strengthen multi-sectoral as well as partnership initiatives.
	SUN Business Network Kenya Strategy	The SUN Business Network (SBN) aims to increase the availability and affordability of safe, nutritious foods to consumers, especially those on low incomes.	Improving children's food through partnership and collective effort among all SUN members.
	Maternal Infant and Young Child Nutrition Strategy	MIYCN strategy provide strategies that help in optimizing maternal and child feeding practices.	Food system transformation through behaviour change.
	MIYCN-E operational manual	Provide guidance on delivering maternal infant and young child nutrition in the context of emergency.	It provides a platform to address food systems during emergencies.
Agriculture	Kenya Agri nutrition implementation strategy 2020-2025	To increase availability, access and consumption of affordable, safe, diverse and nutritious foods at all stages of the food chain.	Provides an opportunity to improve children's food and consumption.

	Agricultural Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy (ASGTS)	The ASGTS is a nationwide sectoral strategy aimed at developing and transforming the agricultural sector to enhance food security and achieve sustainable agricultural growth to achieve the constitutional right that “Every person has the right to be free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality.”	Improving children’s foods through agricultural transformation.
	National Agricultural Investment Plan (NAIP) 2019-2024	The NAIP is a nationwide sectoral document that accompanies the ASGTS. The overall objective of the NAIP is to accelerate the transformation of Kenya’s agriculture towards an agricultural sector that sustainably supports Kenya’s development and 100 per cent food security goal.	Food systems transformation through agricultural interventions to achieve 100 per cent food security.
	Kenya National Adaptation Plan 2015-2030 (NAP)	The aim of the NAP is to consolidate Kenya’s vision on climate adaptation supported by macro-level actions that relate to the economic sectors and country-level vulnerabilities to enhance long-term resilience and adaptative capacities.	Improving children’s diets through the adoption of strategies and policies to mitigate climate change through promotion of climate-smart agriculture.
	Ending Drought Emergencies Initiative: Common Program Framework for Drought Risk Management	The Ending Drought Emergencies Initiative (EDE) recognizes that droughts cause emergencies because the foundations needed to support sustainable livelihoods in drought-prone areas, principally security, infrastructure and human capital (education, health and nutrition), are often weak. The EDE integrates activities and investments of the national and county governments and development partners to address these issues in a more aligned and coordinated manner.	Building resilience for sustainable food systems.
	National Plan of Action for Children in Kenya	A detailed plan for improving the welfare of Kenyan children, guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It outlines the current situation for Kenyan children in areas like health, education and protection from abuse and neglect, highlighting achievements, challenges and planned actions for 2015 to 2022. The plan is structured around the four pillars of the UNCRC: survival, development, protection, and participation, and emphasizes coordination, monitoring and evaluation to ensure its effective implementation.	Policy commitment to addressing the six global nutrition targets: Stunting, wasting and overweight in children U5, anemia in women of reproductive age, low birth weight, exclusive breastfeeding.
	Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health (NCAH) Policy	Outlines a framework for improving health outcomes for newborns, children and adolescents in Kenya by promoting evidence-based interventions, strengthening health systems and addressing social determinants of health. The policy highlights the need for a continuum of care approach, integrating maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health services.	Policy commitment to addressing the six global nutrition targets: Stunting, wasting and overweight in children U5, anemia in women of reproductive age, low birth weight, exclusive breastfeeding.
Legislations and	Excise Duty Act 2015	The Excise Duty Act has introduced new tax measures on select beverages and food products. Fruit and vegetable juices, whether containing	Mandatory taxation of sugar sweetened beverages.

regulations		added sugar or other sweeteners, are taxed at KES 10 per litre, while food supplements face a 10 per cent tax. Additionally, water and other non-alcoholic beverages, excluding fruit and vegetable juices, are subject to a tax of KES 5 per litre.	
	National Plan of Action for Children in Kenya	A detailed plan for improving the welfare of Kenyan children, guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It outlines the current situation for Kenyan children in areas like health, education and protection from abuse and neglect, highlighting achievements, challenges and planned actions for 2015 to 2022. The plan is structured around the four pillars of the UNCRC: survival, development, protection, and participation, and emphasizes coordination, monitoring and evaluation to ensure its effective implementation.	Policy commitment to addressing the six global nutrition targets: Stunting, wasting and overweight in children U5, anemia in women of reproductive age, low birth weight, exclusive breastfeeding.
	Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health (NCAH) Policy	Outlines a framework for improving health outcomes for newborns, children and adolescents in Kenya by promoting evidence-based interventions, strengthening health systems and addressing social determinants of health. The policy highlights the need for a continuum of care approach, integrating maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health services.	Policy commitment to addressing the six global nutrition targets: Stunting, wasting and overweight in children U5, anemia in women of reproductive age, low birth weight, exclusive breastfeeding.

Annex II– Summary of key actors within the food systems

Category	Improving Children's Foods	Improving Children's Environment	Improving Food Practices
Caregivers and Community Groups	Caregivers/Parents, Farmers Groups, Women's Groups, Youth Groups, Community Leaders, 4K Clubs, Schools	Caregivers/Parents, Children, School Staff, Parent-Teacher Associations	Schools, Children, 4K Clubs, Youth Groups, Farmers Groups & Networks, Mother-to-Mother/Father-to-Father Support Groups, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)
Government and Regulatory Bodies	Ministry of Health, Ministry of Transport and Energy, Ministry of Social Protection/Health, Ministry of Education, National and County Government, Attorney General's Office and Law Drafters, Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS)	Council of Governors, Members of Parliament and Political Wings, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development, Gender and Social Protection, Law Society of Kenya (LSK), Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS)	County Governments, Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Livestock, Department of Children, Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries (MOALD), Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of ICT, Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, Ministry of Interior, Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate, Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS)
Food producers and Traders	Food Vendors, Food Processors, Small-Medium-and-Large Food Enterprises, Transporters, Importers of Micronutrients	Food Vendors, Food Retailers, Food and Beverages Companies Retail Traders Association of Kenya (RETRAK)	Small and Micro Enterprises
Advocacy and Support Organizations		SUN Movement, Civil Society Organizations (KEPSA, Kelin, KMA, LSK)	KEPSA Foundation, Blue Economy
Research and Education	Research Institutes, e.g., KEMRI, Universities	Academia and Research Institutions	Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO), Research Institutions



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