Children’s ‘lived experience’ of the food environment in the Philippines
Acknowledgments

This publication was prepared by the Nutrition Sections at UNICEF Philippines Country Office and East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, and the Nutrition Center of the Philippines with the support of the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London.

Lead Authors: Fiona Watson, Corinna Hawkes, Nikka Oliver, Cherry Maramag, Mary Christine Castro, Alice Nkoroi and Maria Evelyn Carpio.

Design: KikoMonster Creative Studio, ITMonsters Graphic Design & Branding, and Hazel Rosie Bayaras

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The diets of Filipino children are changing. Children are eating fewer fruits and vegetables, and more sugary, salty and fatty products. Three quarters (74%) of 13–15-year-olds eat less than three portions of vegetables per day while more than one third (38%) drink at least one carbonated drink per day.¹ Poor diets are contributing to a triple burden of malnutrition with undernutrition, in the form of poor growth and micronutrient deficiencies, co-existing with increasing rates of overweight. This triple burden of malnutrition is being driven by systems that are failing to provide children with adequate diets, space to play and exercise, access to safe water and hygienic environments, and financial security. The combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and economic recession are intensifying these systemic failings, with rising food, fertilizer, and fuel prices hitting poor families particularly hard.

Unravelling the complexities of how systems affect what children eat and how they live is not easy. An important starting point is children themselves. Observing the realities of children’s lives and listening to what they say allows us to better understand how the world shapes children. Reflecting on children’s real-life experience is essential for identifying policies and actions that can address systematic problems and contribute to improving their diets.

UNICEF set out to listen and consider the ‘lived experience’ of children across the Philippines, from Catbalogan, Gandara, Godod, Mondragon, Valenzuela, and Zamboanga. All these children come from areas where malnutrition is rife and from less wealthy groups. They are the sons and daughters of construction workers, street vendors, pedicab drivers, farmers, security guards, tailors and the unemployed, among others. Over 100 children ranging in age from 6 months to 18 years participated. Older children took part in interactive focus group discussions and in-depth individual interviews. The caretakers of younger children were interviewed, and a small number of children were observed over a two-day period as they went about their daily lives. This information was collected in the first six months of 2021 when COVID-19 restrictions were in place and schools were closed.

¹ World Health Organization (WHO). 2015. Global School-based Student Health Survey Philippines: 2015 Fact Sheet
Study methods

On-site data collection was carried out in five study areas. In a further study area, Valenzuela, only remote data collection was conducted due to COVID-19 restrictions. The study areas were selected because they were already UNICEF-assisted areas with high levels of malnutrition (undernutrition and/or overweight) based on 2019 survey findings. The study areas are spread across three regions which vary in income level ranging from a 1st class city with a high income to a 5th class municipality with a low income.

Data were collected by trained researchers from the Nutrition Center of the Philippines on the following:

Observation of 5 children aged 6 to 10 years over a 2-day period (one weekday and one weekend day). A pre-tested checklist was used to record food and drink consumed, and activities of the children and their caretakers.

Individual in-depth interviews with 16 caretakers of children aged 6 months to 10 years and 19 adolescents aged 11 to 18 years. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to elicit information on the child’s daily routine, dietary practices, and influences.

Focus group discussions were conducted with 32 adolescents aged 11 to 15 years and 32 adolescents aged 16 to 18 years. In each discussion session, 6 to 8 participants were brought together to engage in hands-on creative activity and to participate in a group discussion, guided by a trained facilitator.

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the local dialect and audio recorded. Audio recordings were transcribed and translated to the English language. Thematic analysis was carried out using NVivo (Release 1.0 QSR International, 2020). The study was conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, so children were not going to school but were doing on-line learning. Ethics clearance for this study was given by ethics committees in each of the five study sites.

What became clear was that children of all ages from different parts of the Philippines experience some of the same features in their environments that affect what, when, where and why they eat the foods that they do. There are additional factors that influence specific age groups or operate in specific contexts. Understanding the ‘lived experience’ of children made it possible for UNICEF to identify the policies that the Government of the Philippines and other stakeholders need to strengthen to ensure that children are able to access healthier diets and living conditions to support their growth and development.
Meet the children

UNICEF developed four child profiles based on the information collected. Each profile represents the collective experience of many children from the same location and of the same age.

BEA  I am 9 months old and live in Gandara, a small rural town in Samar Island with an estimated population of around 35,000.² The town is located along a river surrounded by mountains and with access to the sea. Nearly half the population (46%)³ live below the poverty line and incomes are largely dependent on farming, construction work, street vending and running sari-sari stores (small independent stall).

GAB  I am 9 years old and live in Catbalogan, a small, densely populated coastal city on Samar Island with a population of over 100,000 people.² Just over one quarter (27%)³ of families are classified as poor and the majority of the population is involved in fishing or selling fish.

ANA  I am 15 years old and live in Valenzuela, a densely populated industrial and commercial city to the north of Metro Manila. Valenzuela is land-locked, highly urbanised with a population of around 715,000 people.⁴ Less than 1% of the population is considered poor.⁵ Occupations commonly available in the area are in the industrial factories, food service, retail businesses, transportation service and in the informal sectors such as household helpers and vendors.

JON  I am 17 years old and live in Godod, a very small rural community of around 17,000² people in Zamboanga del Norte province. The town is in a mountainous area, difficult to access and the nearest town with shops is 1 ½ hours away along a rough road which is reached by habal-habal (motorbike taxi). Most (68%)³ families are classified as poor and dependent on farming.

⁺Census of Population (2020). “National Capital Region (NCR)”. Total Population by Province, City, Municipality and Barangay. PSA.
A day in the life of Bea

At home early in the morning

4:00 am
I wake my mom early and she gives me my first bottle of formula milk. She says the milk is helping me to grow stronger because the label says that it has all the nutrients that I need. Then I go back to sleep.

“Introduce this milk earlier this month because before I gave her [another] brand, but unfortunately its more expensive, and I believe it does not supply the nutrients my baby needs, and I decided to change the milk, hoping that it will help her grow stronger. So far, I can see that my baby likes it and it is cheaper than the other one... I give her mineral water to drink... if the budget permits.”
Mother of 9m girl, Gandara

At home later in the morning

6:00 am
When I wake up again, my older sisters have already gone to the communal pump to collect water. Mom says the water from the pump isn’t safe so she buys mineral water for me which costs a lot and means we cannot afford other things.

Ensure supply and access to safe drinking water to all communities

9:00 am
When I get hungry, my mom gives me bread or soft biscuits and sometimes vegetable soup leftover from the meal last night.

11:00 am
My mom then starts to prepare the food for lunch and dinner. She cooks all the food for the day in the morning to save on charcoal.

Consider subsidies for household fuel costs for poorer families

12:00 noon
Mom gives me rice porridge with a small amount of baloney (processed pork sausage) for my lunch. She worries that if I eat too much, I’ll get a sore tummy so she gives me another bottle of milk to fill up.
Bea who is 9 months old lives with her parents and two older sisters. The family live in a house constructed of wood and bamboo and get their water from the communal pump. They have electricity but it is very expensive, so they use charcoal to cook. Bea’s family is dependent on her father’s income as a pedicab driver. There are lots of sari-sari stores and ambulant vendors selling home-made food close to the house. There is a fresh food market downtown about 3.5 km away.

**2:00 pm**

I go with my mom to the fresh food market because it is cheaper than the local sari-sari stores. It costs 20 pesos to go by tricycle so mom only goes once a week. She buys rice and fresh vegetables that are grown locally. When she can afford it, she buys fish or chicken. She rarely buys meat like pork or beef as they are too expensive.

**At the fresh food market**

“If you buy pork meat, it’s almost three hundred pesos, compared to your 100 pesos you can already buy rice and vegetables... If we just have a limited budget, we just buy what we can.”

Mother of 9m girl, Gandara

**3:00 pm**

There is a sari-sari store next to the market so we pop in. There are lots of snacks and mom buys me a vanilla flavoured fudge bar (cake with cream filling) as a treat and because she likes the way it makes me smile.

**At home in the evening**

“My baby also eats what food is being served on our table... I separate the squash and mash it... I put it on the fish tinola, then I give it to her.”

Mother of 9m girl, Gandara

**6:00 pm**

I have the same fish tinola (a soup made with fish and flavoured with ginger, onions and fish sauce), as my family for dinner with squash, carrots and potato which my mom mashes so that it is easy for me to eat. I love it and mom says that it is very healthy. Sometimes there is a little meat but only if our family has money to buy it.

**8:00 pm**

After dinner, my mom gives me another bottle of milk and puts me to bed. I go to sleep almost straightaway.
A day in the life of Gab

At home in the morning

8:00 am

I'm hungry when I wake up and my grandfather prepares my breakfast as my mom is busy with my younger brother and sisters. Today there is no money to buy bread, so grandfather gives me left-over rice from last night's dinner.

"Sometimes they eat rice if we do not have money to buy bread."  
Mother of 9y boy, Catbalogan

In town collecting the 4Ps cash grant

10:00 am

Straight after breakfast, I go with my mom down-town to collect our 4Ps cash grant from the government-owned bank. We get the 4Ps grant every month and it helps to pay for my school supplies and some food. The grant is never quite enough, and my brother and sisters are not eligible.

"We buy dresses, slippers and we go out to take some snacks at the bakery, sometimes we eat fried chicken with [soft drinks at a local fast food restaurant]. Every time we claim our 4Ps cash grant we usually have our bonding moments."  
15y boy, Catbalogan

12:00 noon

When we get the grant my Mom treats me to fried chicken at the nearby fast food restaurant and a strawberry flavoured energy drink which is cheap. This is a special bonding time for me and my mom.

Introduce menu labelling in fast-food chains to indicate nutritional content of dishes

Revise the 4Ps benefit structure and regularly adjust the benefit level to inflation
Gab is 9 years old with three young siblings. His father is a seafood vendor and his mother stays at home to care for the children. Gab’s grandfather also lives with the family. The house is built of concrete with a corrugated iron roof and has a small garden where the family grows vegetables. The family fetch water from the communal tap. Though there is electricity, the family prefer to use a liquified petroleum gas (LPG) stove for cooking. There are lots of food vendors and sari-sari stores near to the house as well as a fresh food market. Gab’s family is a recipient of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) social protection programme. The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the family as Gab’s father is unable to sell as many fish as previously.

At the sari-sari store

2:00 pm

We have money to pay the 20 pesos for a tricycle to get home from town. We go straight to the sari-sari store where we have credit when we have no money. Today mom only buys eggs and no meat as the price is rising.

“It is also a challenge for me to budget all the items we need to buy due to the increasing price in the market... especially rice and meat like chicken and pork. That’s why we don’t usually buy those items. We usually buy fish, vegetables and egg because it is much cheaper.”

Mother of 9y boy, Catbalogan

At home in the evening

Food parcel received during pandemic] “1 sack of rice, 8 cans of mega sardines, 3 cans of corned beef, 6 packs of instant beef and chicken noodles”

Observation of 9y boy, Catbalogan

6:00 pm

For dinner, mom cooks noodles, beef loaf and a few vegetables from our garden. The corned beef and noodles were in the parcel that we received as a donation from the local authorities during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The food parcel also contained cans of sardines and lots of instant noodles.

Update the content and options for emergency Family Food Packs to provide nutritious alternatives

8:00 pm

After dinner, we all watch TV together as a family and I enjoy the food adverts, especially those with athletes as I want to be an athlete when I grow up.

Introduce mandatory legislation to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food to children
A day in the life of Ana

At home in the morning

6:30 am

For breakfast, my mom buys pandesal (typical Filipino bread) and chocolate drink which she buys from the bakery just a few minutes away from our house. My parents prefer buying food outside because it is cheaper, more convenient, and there are a lot of choices.

Engage and support carinderias and street vendors to sell healthier food

“Sometimes when my mom doesn’t have enough time to cook, she buys ready to eat dishes from a nearby eatery or carinderia.”
15y girl, Valenzuela City

7:00 am

After breakfast, I do a little house-work because mom has gone to work. I sweep the floor and wash the dishes. Then I start my on-line classes.

At the sari-sari store

10:00 am

I go to the sari-sari store next to our house to buy some biscuits as I have a little pocket money. I remember when we still had face-to-face classes, I usually ate morning snacks and drank palamig (flavoured sugary drink) with my classmates. It’s fun chit-chatting and eating our snacks together and there is not much else to do that we can afford. We play on our cell phones. There are lots of adverts for food around our school. The fast food chains provide their contact details in case customers want to order by phone. They make me want to eat the delicious looking food.

Introduce mandatory legislation to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food to children
Ana who is 15 years old lives with her mother, father and younger sister. They rent a house made of cement with a corrugated iron roof and access to electricity and water. Their utility bills are expensive because they are not on a meter system when costs are shared with other families. Cooking is done on an LPG stove. Ana’s mother works for long hours as a laundress and her father is a pedicab driver but neither earn much. There is a wide selection of retail stores, bakeries, eateries, grocery stores, supermarkets, fresh food markets, and fast food restaurants in the barangay where Ana lives. There are also lots of mobile vendors in the community that visit houses to sell food.

My parents are not yet home so I prepare lunch for myself. It takes less than 5 minutes to put the instant noodles into boiling water and add the flavour pack. The noodles are very tasty too. When I’m at school, I buy food from the canteen (tuck shop). There isn’t much choice and I usually have lumpiang tauge (deep fried spring roll made with mung bean sprouts), and rice.

“Sometimes my sister prepares our lunch when mom is not around. She usually cooks instant pancit canton (a type of noodles).”
11y girl, Valenzuela City

“I actually buy bananas more often because that’s the cheapest fruit.”
Mother of 8y girl, Valenzuela City

My mom cooks our dinner. We have fried fish and vegetables which is one of my favourites. My mom also buys fruit like bananas as they are cheaper than mangoes or melons and can be bought in small portions which don’t cost too much. I enjoy sitting down and eating the food my mom cooks. It is our bonding time.

After lunch, I continue with my on-line learning for the rest of the afternoon.

At home in the afternoon

At home in the evening

After supper, I play on my cell phone again until it is time to go to bed.

Improve roads in rural areas and establish supply chains for fresh foods
A day in the life of Jon

At home in the morning

I usually wake up early to help my mother clean the house. I haven’t been sleeping well during COVID-19 pandemic because I’m stressed about school. I miss it very much.

“For me, there are times I think of my financial needs, my studies so I sleep late because of that.”
18y boy, Godod

7:00 am

For breakfast we have fried fish from the fish vendor, with vegetables and corn rice from the night before. If we have money, we have milled rice instead. I would prefer fast foods or meat, but my mother told me it’s healthier to eat vegetables from our garden.

On the road to grandma’s

Each day I head to my Grandma’s house to help clean her home with my cousins. On the way I stop in a sari-sari store to buy chips and soda. I know they’re unhealthy, but they are tasty, affordable, and on my way.

8:00 am

“Support youth-led advocacy campaigns to improve food environments

“I see sari-sari stores who sell biscuits, junk food and soft drinks also. There are a lot sometimes when I pass by. I buy them if I have money.”
12y boy, Godod

10:30 am

After cleaning the house, my cousins and I watch some YouTube on our phones and eat our snacks. I then head to my auntie’s house to have lunch.

Sari-Sari

At Auntie’s house

My auntie prepares fried fish bought from the mobile vendor, with some vegetables from her farm for lunch. If auntie isn’t home, I just eat some canned sardines and instant noodles because they’re cheap and easy to prepare.

11:30 am

“I usually cook instant noodles and fried dried fish with rice.”
18y boy, Godod

Introduce mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling on packaged foods
Jon is 17 years old and lives on a small farm with his parents. He lives close to extended family and his home is made of wood and light materials, with galvanized iron for roofing. The family uses wood to cook their food, and while they have access to electricity, they experience frequent interruptions in supply, sometimes lasting 4 to 8 hours a day. Water is collected from the spring.

After lunch I try to do some studying. It’s hard to learn new things when COVID-19 keeps shutting our local school. I try my best, but it’s hard and I usually end up wanting to nap.

“At usually we take snacks around 3 pm like Juice and bread. I sometimes eat with my friends then after playing I go home and take a rest.”
18y boy, Godod

In the afternoons, my friends and I like to go to the local town plaza and play basketball. We don’t have good courts in our village.

My favourite part about town is we can get a juice drink from the sari-sari stores after our game. The sugary taste is nice after playing, and before I go home to help prepare dinner.

“In saw those products [for biscuits and milk] on TV shows, or sometimes in cell phones... or sometimes at the store.”
18y boy, Godod

In the evening, I help my mother make dried fish, vegetables, and corn rice with instant noodles for dinner. If we are lucky, there may be chicken adobo with the chickens from our farm. I would prefer to have more meat and nice fruit like papaya, but it’s too expensive and hard to find.

At home

“Improve roads in rural areas and establish supply chains for fresh food”

After dinner my mother lets me play games on her cellphone and watch TV until late. I see adverts for the same biscuits, chocolates, and chocolate milk that I see on signs in the grocery store. I wish I had money to buy more of these things.

“Introduce mandatory legislation to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food to children”
What can we learn from our children about what solutions will work?

Our children’s daily experience of food illustrates how the combination of their realities can be shaped by policy responses. These policy responses cut across the whole of government, have implications for multiple systems and involve multiple stakeholders.

1. Food System

**Strengthen and enforce the Milk Code to restrict the marketing of breast milk**

The experience of Bea’s mom shows why enforcing the Milk Code is so important. While she has plenty of knowledge, it is easy to get swayed by labels saying that breast milk substitutes will help Bea to grow stronger. Bea’s mom, like many others in the study, reported mixed feeding (breast, bottle, family food and commercial complementary foods) of young children. And just like Bea’s mom, poor families pay extra for milk formula, commercial baby foods and bottled water because they believe that this is better for their babies’ health and will help them to grow. Food & beverage companies exploit the natural instincts of families to provide the very best care for their growing children. They use sophisticated techniques and multiple channels to provide mixed messages, combining practical advice on caring for young children along with a ‘push’ for their products. Continuing to enforce the Milk Code is therefore essential to protect the nutrition of young children.

**Introduce mandatory legislation to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food to children**

Ana and Jon are bombarded by adverts for snacks and fast food on their phone and on TV while also passing billboards on a daily basis. Most of these adverts are for unhealthy products. Many products are associated in adverts with enjoyment, good taste, sports achievements and improved health and growth. Adverts are purposefully designed to appeal to children and often use celebrities and sports stars who are particularly attractive to younger children like Gab. Children are not necessarily aware that marketing is being directed at them and that the impact is to heighten the appeal for children of largely unhealthy food and snacks. Even if they cannot afford them, the adverts create a sense of aspiration for young people for unhealthy rather than healthy foods. Comprehensive legislation covering all marketing channels, including digital channels, is required to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food and drink.

**Introduce mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling on packaged foods**

Bea’s mother gives Bea baloney sausage for lunch, Gab has corned beef and instant noodles for dinner, Ana and Jon also have instant noodles during the day. These processed packaged foods are cheap, readily available and easy to prepare so are particularly attractive to poor families. However, many packaged foods contain high quantities of unhealthy fats, sugar and salt. Front-of-pack nutrition labels that warn of the excessive content of unhealthy ingredients can help children and their families to make healthier choices.

**Introduce menu labelling on fast-food chains to indicate nutritional content of dishes**

When Gab goes out with his mom, they go for a treat at the local fried chicken house. These moments help them bond as mother and son, and children describe how, when meals are eaten together with the family, food tastes better and appetites are good. They enjoy chatting with family members while they eat together as it gives them a good feeling. Going out for meals as a treat is an opportunity to spend time with family members
and relax. For poor families, this may mean waiting for the end of the month for the pay cheque or receipt of cash through a social protection scheme, and then going out together to enjoy a meal. The attraction of fast-food restaurants offering cheap food and drink often draws poor families who have limited cash. They may also have limited awareness of the healthiness of different dishes which they are being sold. Clear nutrition labelling on menus can help these families to make healthier food choices.

**Promote availability of locally produced food at affordable prices**

Bea’s mother goes to the fresh food market because it is cheaper and like Gab’s mother buys rice and vegetables rather than expensive meat. While a variety of fresh foods is generally readily available in the Philippines, price is a major limiting factor. It determines where families shop and what food they buy. Fresh food markets are generally cheaper than small sari-sari stores and sell a variety of locally grown produce. Ensuring that fresh food markets remain open and able to sell locally produced food at affordable prices means that poor families continue to be able to access an essential source of healthy food.

**Provide subsidies that support healthy snack alternatives that appeal to children**

Adolescents like Ana and Jon can just about afford the biscuits, sugary drinks and snacks sold at the sari-sari stores and street vendors. Eating these together with friends helps them to bond socially and benefits their wellbeing. Bea’s mom loves the way that sugary food puts a smile on her daughter’s face bringing happiness to both mother and daughter. Moments of shared enjoyment and bonding are important for parents, children and young people, but the snacks that are tasty, readily available and cheap are largely unhealthy. Most sugary and salty snacks sold in the Philippines are heavily processed and full of unhealthy fats, sugar and salt, which over time undermine good nutrition. Removing them without anything in their place, however, will remove the opportunity for social wellbeing. Thus, it is important to increase the quantity and choice of healthier snacks on the market which appeal and are affordable for children. A starting point is to provide subsidies for healthy snack alternatives to promote the manufacture, formulation and marketing of healthy snacks that are attractive for children. For example, ensuring that expensive fruit is subsidized so that it can be sold as a snack at lower prices.

**Engage and support carinderias and street vendors to sell healthier food**

For Ana, who lives in a large busy city, ready-cooked food is easily available and relatively cheap. It is particularly attractive to adolescents who are left to prepare their own meals and want something quick and easy. Even in smaller towns, carinderias and street vendors selling ready-made foods are common. Preparing food at home is labour-intensive, time-consuming and costly in terms of household fuel. In many poor households, family members are out at work for long hours or are busy with other household tasks, so have limited time to prepare and cook family food. As a consequence, families and adolescents frequently turn to cheap, convenient alternatives in the form of ready-cooked meals. Working through associations of street vendors or independent food shops can be a starting point for encouraging vendors to prepare and sell healthier ready-made foods which supports both vendors’ livelihoods and access to healthy food for poor families.

### 2. Social Protection System

**Revise the 4Ps benefit structure and regularly adjust the benefit level to inflation**

Gab is a recipient of the 4Ps cash benefit, but his younger brother and sister were not yet born when the National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction (Listahanan) was updated so are not eligible to receive the benefit. This means that although Gab’s family benefits with a bit of extra money for food and for school books, it is never enough to cover all their household costs. At the end of the month the family are unable to afford bread and depend on credit at the local sari-sari store where food is more expensive.
Increasing the scope of social protection systems, such as the 4Ps, regularly updating the beneficiary registry, as well as taking account of inflation and the cost of a nutritious diet, would provide an additional boost to family incomes and allow families to buy enough food and drink to cover their needs.

Update the content and options for emergency family food packs to provide nutritious alternatives

Gab’s household received a vital supply of additional food during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the form of a Family Food Pack. These packs are a critical source of food for many poor families during a time of unemployment and loss of income. These family food packs are usually pre-packed in readiness for immediate distribution when a crisis hits and so the contents need to be safe and have a long shelf-life. Processed foods, such as instant noodles, canned fish and meat, offer these benefits. Unfortunately, many of these types of processed foods are high in salt, sugar and unhealthy fats so not suitable for long-term consumption. In circumstances where markets are still operating, alternative options, such supplementing the food packs with fresh food and providing emergency cash assistance should be considered.

3. Built Infrastructure System

Ensure supply and access to safe drinking water to all communities

In Bea, Gab and Jon’s households, getting water is an everyday chore. This is typical of many poor families in both urban and rural areas of the Philippines who do not have a water tap in the house. Older children are frequently tasked with collecting water. This takes time out of their day, and children say that it is tiring, especially when they have to go very early in the morning to take advantage of the water flow. The safety of communal water supplies is often uncertain so many families, like Bea’s, buy mineral water for drinking, at an additional cost to stretched budgets. Lack of access to clean water in the house not only compromises hygiene but also carries both a time and financial cost. Access to clean water at affordable prices is essential.

Consider subsidies for household fuel costs for poorer families

Bea’s mom only cooks once a day to save on charcoal costs. That means storing cooked food for many hours during the day to be eaten at a later meal. Gab and his mom have to take a tricycle to go to town to withdraw the 4Ps cash, while Jon and his mom must travel 1 ½ hours to the nearest town with shops. The cost of fuel for cooking and for transportation is an additional burden for poor families. While electricity can be accessed in most areas, it is expensive and in some parts of the country, the power supply is erratic. Families have to turn to alternative forms of fuel for cooking such as charcoal, wood and LPG. Subsidizing the cost of fuel would help poor households to access and prepare food more efficiently.

Protect and develop safe areas where children can play and do sports

In Jon’s village, there are no decent sports grounds, so Jon and his friends have to go to the local town plaza to play basketball. Physical exercise is essential for children of all ages to support their growth, development, and a healthy weight. Safe play and sports areas for children should be available wherever they are living and made accessible to children of all ages.
Improve roads in rural areas and establish supply chains for fresh foods

Jon lives in a remote rural area where the nearest town with shops is 1 ½ hours away along a rough road. This limits access to fresh food markets and means that the family are dependent on what they can grow or small, local shops which are more expensive. By improving rural roads and supply chains, prices of fresh foods, in particular soft fruit, could be reduced making these foods affordable to poor families.

4. Education System

Enforce and monitor existing policies and standards to promote healthy school food environments

While Gab, Ana and Jon were not going to school because of the COVID-19 lockdown, Ana remembers how she would buy sugary and fatty snacks and food while she was at school. There was little choice from the school canteen. Children spend a considerable part of their day at school during the week. The types of food available to them in and around school are frequently limited to unhealthy types of food, such as deep-fried snacks, soft drinks, and processed products. Existing Department of Education policies and standards need to be fully implemented, enforced, and monitored to promote healthier school food environments for children.

5. Communication System

Support advocacy campaigns that celebrate traditional cuisine based on local produce

While all our children love the appealing taste of sugary, salty food, they also enjoy traditional dishes prepared from fresh foods. Bea loves the healthy soup with squash and carrots. Gab likes the vegetables that his mom grows in the garden. Ana loves fish from the nearby coastline. In the Philippines, it is still the case that nearly all families are cooking at home. The moms of Jon, Ana, Gab and Bea all cook with fresh ingredients at least once a day and the families eat together. Traditional cuisine based on local foods are favourites with children such as tinola (a soup made with chicken or fish and flavoured with ginger, onions and fish sauce), and chicken adobo (chicken simmered in a flavoured marinade). These dishes are frequently eaten with rice or noodles and a variety of vegetables. From an early age, children enjoy sitting with family members to share meals and enjoy fresh traditional food. Celebration of Filipino cuisine is thus an important way of keeping alive traditional dishes and habits that are good for children’s health, nutrition and sense of well-being.

Support youth-led advocacy campaigns to improve food environments

Adolescents like Ana and Jon are becoming more independent in their eating behaviours. They are starting to prepare food for themselves at home as well as buying snacks and food. They spend a lot of time on cell phones and are therefore highly exposed to food marketing of unhealthy food and drink. Many older children are well informed about which foods are healthy and which are unhealthy. They generally know that eating fruit and vegetables is important while high sugar, fat and salt foods are not healthy. Their understanding of how environments, and particularly the food and beverage industry, are influencing their food choices is less developed. Empowering children to recognise and advocate for improved food environments is a potentially powerful tool for change.
CONCLUSION

For the right solutions for children, we need look no further than children themselves. Understanding the realities of their lives enables us to see what they need to eat to be healthier now and into the future. This report on the daily lived experiences of Bea, Gab, Ana and Jon has revealed the many feasible policies and actions available to make real change to nourish the next generation of children in the Philippines.