GLOBAL DAIRY PLATFORM

Perspective Paper

Healthy Diets Require Integrated Investment in Affordable Nutrition

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KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **Affordability is one of the defining barriers to healthy diets.** The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) 2026 Report from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations shows that while progress has been made in reducing global hunger and food insecurity, nearly one in three people still cannot afford a healthy diet.

- **Dairy contributes to affordable, nutritious diets.** Research demonstrates that dairy is consistently included in least-cost nutritionally adequate diets, and dairy sector development improves consumer access to nutrient-rich foods while strengthening livelihoods.

- **The future lies in integrated dairy development.** Nutrition, affordability, resilience, and rural development are complementary objectives that can be advanced together through investments across sustainable dairy value chains.

Each year, FAO releases a flagship publication, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI)*, the global benchmark for measuring progress toward ending hunger and improving nutrition. The 2026 report, **Understanding and Addressing the High Cost of a Healthy Diet,** offers some encouraging news: global hunger has continued its gradual decline since the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic; moderate and severe food insecurity have eased; and fewer people are unable to afford a healthy diet than just a few years ago.[1]

Despite these gains, moderate or severe food insecurity is still above pre-pandemic levels and the pace of progress remains too slow to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. Whereas investments in agriculture, economic development and social protection are making a difference, they must be accelerated.

SOFI 2026 reveals that the cost of a healthy diet is prohibitive for 2.69 billion people around the world. Vulnerable populations that represent our future are most affected; nearly 40% of women of reproductive age and 70% of children aged 6-23 months do not consume a diet that meets minimum dietary diversity.[1] Minimum dietary diversity is a measure that captures both diversity and adequacy, two of the four core principles of a **healthy diet**, as defined by FAO and the World Health Organization:[2]

- Diversity is defined as including a wide variety of nutritious foods within and across food groups to favor nutrient adequacy and consumption of other health promoting substances.
- Adequacy is defined as providing enough essential nutrients to prevent deficiencies and promote health, without excess.[2]

These figures remind us that producing sufficient food is not enough. We must ensure that people everywhere can access and afford a variety of nutrient-rich foods that are necessary to lead healthy and productive lives.

A New Conversation About Food Security

Healthy diets require affordable nutrition. That simple observation has profound implications for agriculture, nutrition policy and food systems development. For decades, the global food community focused on producing enough food to feed a growing population. Those efforts delivered remarkable progress. Now, the next phase of progress will be less about producing calories and more about improving access to nutrient-rich foods.

The SOFI 2026 report emphasizes the importance of investments that increase productivity, strengthen value chains, improve processing, expand cold chain infrastructure, reduce food loss and improve market efficiency so healthy diets become more affordable. For the dairy sector, this presents an opportunity to demonstrate how investments in dairy systems can simultaneously improve nutrition, livelihoods and resilience.

At first glance, dairy appears to present a paradox. Dairy foods are often among the more expensive components of healthy diets. Yet, research demonstrates that milk and other animal-source foods such as eggs, fish, and seafood are part of **least-cost nutritionally adequate diets** to meet the energy and nutrient requirements of healthy adults across diverse settings.[3]

The explanation is straightforward: Dairy delivers a unique combination of high-quality protein, calcium and multiple other essential nutrients that are difficult, and often more expensive, to replace using other foods. Dairy provides disproportionately high nutritional value relative to its cost. SOFI 2026 recognizes dairy and other animal-source foods as important contributors to dietary diversity because they provide nutrients that staple foods alone cannot readily supply.

Therefore, it is not a question of whether dairy belongs in healthy diets. It is a challenge to ensure that nutritious dairy foods are affordable enough to be accessible to everyone who would benefit from having them.

Hunger Has No Borders, But Progress Does

Hidden hunger, the inadequate intake of essential vitamins and minerals despite sufficient calories, is not confined to low-income countries; it affects populations in every region of the world.[4] In high-income countries, inadequate intakes of calcium, iodine and other nutrients remain common despite abundant food supplies, while in many low- and middle-income countries nutrient deficiencies continue to coexist with undernutrition and rising rates of overweight and obesity.[4] Hidden hunger is therefore a global challenge.

Yet while hidden hunger has no borders, progress toward eliminating it is far from evenly distributed.

The SOFI 2026 report paints a striking picture of diverging regional trajectories. Asia and Latin America have continued to reduce hunger and food insecurity, but Africa now carries the world's largest burden of hunger. In 2025, an estimated 309 million people experiencing hunger lived in Africa, surpassing Asia for the first time. Although encouraging signs of improvement are emerging, current projections indicate that more than half of all people facing hunger in 2030 will live in Africa, making the continent central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger.[1]

The same pattern is evident in affordability. Whereas globally, the number of people unable to afford a healthy diet has fallen, Africa remains the region where affordability has deteriorated most. In 2025, 66.6 percent of Africans were unable to afford a healthy diet, more than double the prevalence observed in Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. This is why the authors of the SOFI 2026 report conclude that reducing the cost of healthy diets will require sustained investment in agricultural productivity, value chains, infrastructure, cold chains and market efficiency, particularly in regions where nutritious foods remain prohibitively expensive.

This regional imbalance matters because the future of global nutrition will increasingly be determined by the future of Africa. United Nations population projections indicate that virtually all population growth over coming decades will occur in Africa and Asia, with Africa accounting for the largest share of that growth through 2050 and beyond. Investments that improve the affordability of nutritious diets in these rapidly growing regions are therefore essential not only for addressing today's nutrition challenges but also for feeding the world's future population.

Building Systems That Deliver

Fortunately, the evidence increasingly points toward solutions. Over the past decade, dairy development has emerged as more than an agricultural intervention; it has become a nutrition and development strategy. The report **Dairy and Socio-economic Development: What Evidence Does the Data Hold?,** developed through collaboration among the Global Agenda for Sustainable Livestock (GASL), FAO, Global Dairy Platform, International Farm Comparison Network (IFCN) and partners, examined evidence from 187 countries and found consistent associations between dairy sector development, higher farmer incomes, lower poverty, improved labor productivity and structural transformation of rural economies.[5]

These findings have since been reinforced through peer-reviewed research that demonstrated **dairy sector development increases milk availability, improves affordability of dairy foods and strengthens rural livelihoods simultaneously.**[6] This growing body of evidence aligns closely with the recommendations emerging from SOFI 2026. These are precisely the investments needed to lower the cost of nutrient-rich foods while stimulating rural economic growth.

For Africa, these investments are particularly significant. They not only address today's affordability challenges but also build resilient food systems capable of nourishing one of the world's fastest-growing populations. Investing in dairy development is therefore an investment in affordable nutrition, resilient livelihoods and long-term food security – all at the same time.

From Evidence to Investment

The question is no longer whether integrated dairy development works. The challenge is scaling investments capable of delivering those benefits where they are needed most.

One of the first large-scale demonstrations of this investment philosophy is the **Dairy Interventions for Mitigation and Adaptation (DaIMA) program,** approved by the Green Climate Fund in 2025 as the Fund's first dedicated livestock program.

Operating across Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, DaIMA reflects a significant shift in how the international development community views livestock systems. Rather than treating dairy solely as an agricultural subsector, the program recognizes dairy value chains as a platform for simultaneously **delivering multiple development outcomes** , including improved nutrition, climate adaptation, emissions reduction, economic growth and resilient rural livelihoods. Importantly, DaIMA was not conceived primarily as a dairy program: it was designed as a climate investment that uses dairy systems as the delivery platform.

The program adopts a whole-of-system approach. Investments extend beyond on-farm productivity to strengthen policy and institutional capacity, animal health, genetics, feed systems, extension services, cooperatives, processing, market access and access to finance through a Green Dairy Financing Facility. By addressing constraints across the value chain, DaIMA seeks to improve the affordability and availability of nutrient-rich foods while increasing farmer incomes and strengthening resilience to climate change.

DaIMA exemplifies the kind of coordinated investment across the food system that SOFI 2026 identifies as essential to making healthy diets affordable. In doing so, it signals that dairy is no longer simply part of agriculture policy, but also part of nutrition, climate and development policy - precisely the type of integrated investment increasingly needed in Africa, where the world's greatest nutrition challenges and fastest population growth now intersect.

DAIRY LEADERSHIP: A CALL TO ACTION

Healthy diets require integrated investment in affordable nutrition where the need and opportunity are greatest. The future of global food security will be determined in Africa and other rapidly growing regions of the Global South.

The evidence is clear: strengthening dairy value chains simultaneously improves nutrition, livelihoods, resilience and economic development. The challenge is whether society is prepared to invest at the scale required to ensure that healthy diets are within reach for the billions of people who will shape the world's future.

The dairy sector should continue investing in partnerships that strengthen local dairy systems, improve market efficiency and reduce the cost of delivering nutritious foods to consumers. By working collaboratively with governments, development institutions, researchers and civil society, the industry can help ensure that healthy diets are accessible for billions of families around the world.

For more information on the Global Dairy Platform's Perspective Papers, please reach out to Dr. Beth Bradley at beth.bradley@globaldairyplatform.com.

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