

Food-Based Dietary Guidelines as a gamechanger in Ethiopia’s Food System Transformation Pathway

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Ethiopia still ranks among countries with the highest number of under-five stunted children in the world, despite progress made over the past two decades in reducing stunting from 58% in 2000 to 39% in 2022, after having achieved 37% in 2019 [1]. Overall, in 2022, 19% of women of reproductive age were underweight and 12% were overweight/obese. In addition, two out of three women were deficient in one or more micronutrients [2]. Poor diets are a major contributor to all forms of malnutrition as reflected by the recent national Food and Nutrition Strategy Baseline Survey. According to the survey, only 8% of the children under two years of age ate a diverse diet in 2022 by consuming at least five out of eight food groups; while 15% of this age group consumed unhealthy foods and 1 out of 3 drink sugar sweetened beverages, and 3 out of 4 did not consume any fruits or vegetables in a day. Women showed a comparable dietary pattern, with only 7% consuming the minimum recommended number food groups (at least 5 out of 10). To combat all forms of malnutrition towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the government of Ethiopia has pledged to improve the national food systems [3].

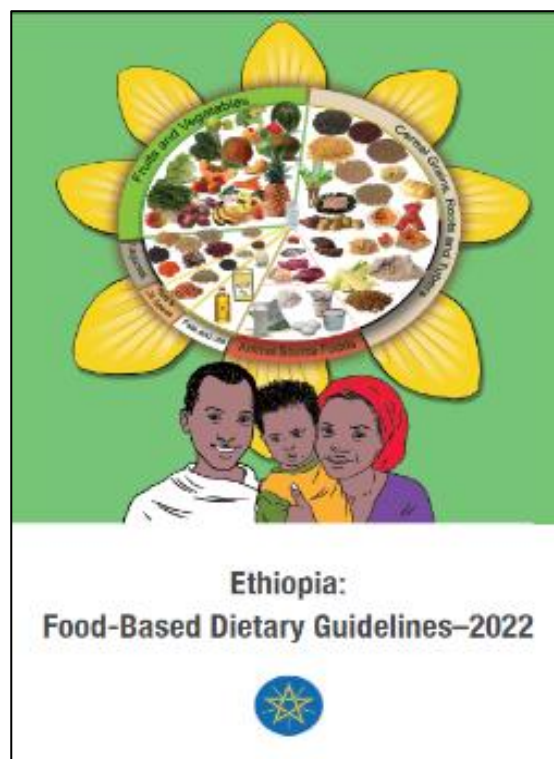


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The [Food Based Dietary Guidelines](#) (FBDGs), which were developed to fulfill this pledge and launched in 2022, have been recognized as a key gamechanger in the effort to improve the Ethiopia food systems [4]. In this brief, we reflect on the factors that contributed to FBDGs receiving high level recognition in key Ethiopian policy documents.

The Ethiopia Public Health Institute (EPHI) was given the mandate by the government to develop the FBDGs. EPHI's collaborative relations with the former CGIAR research program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) led by the International Food Policy research institute (IFPRI), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) support to develop FBDGs, and the technical backing of Wageningen University & Research (WUR), generated the right momentum for an the systematic FBDG development process. This process involved a Task Force attended by many local multi-stakeholders, with 30 participants from 22 organizations including government, academia, NGOs and religious leaders [5].

Key informants consulted for this brief, indicated there had been strong interest in the country to develop FBDGs for a while. The need for FBDGs was repeatedly expressed at multi-stakeholder nutrition coordination meetings, annual conferences of the Food and Nutrition Society of Ethiopia (FoNSE), and in different academic and government publications. In response to this demand, the FBDGs development process began in 2018 and focused on the population of 2 years and older. The main goal of the FBDGs is to reduce malnutrition and diet-related public health problems of the country by promoting healthy dietary patterns among various population groups [6]. For the given goal, the three sectoral ministries important to the implementation, ministry of health (MoH), ministry of agriculture (MoA) and ministry of education (MoE) provided preface statements on how they would integrate the FBDGs in the work of these sector ministries. The two objectives of the FBDGs were to:

- Provide dietary recommendations for the Ethiopian population two years and older for increased diet quality including diversity and food safety for optimal health.
- Promote broad food system actions supporting diet quality being sensitive to sustainability.

Some of the factors that lead to the high recognition of the FBDGs were:

1. The A4NH-supported consultation process and literature review that develop an Ethiopian food system profile agenda paper [Food-systems for healthier diets in Ethiopia: Toward a research agenda](#) involved multiple stakeholders from various ministries, academia, and NGOs. This paper emphasized the need for developing contextual FBDGs [7]. At the same time, the FBDGs appeared prominently in the National Food and Nutrition Strategy 2021-2031 [8]. As part of the UNFSS process Ethiopia developed a nutritious and healthy diets centered vision for its Food Systems Transformation Pathway (EFS-TP). For the EFS-TP, the FBDGs were identified as one of the game changing solutions [9].
2. The FBDG development process engaged a Task Force with multiple stakeholders was widely acknowledged on the national and international level. As the Task Force included representatives from many ministries, it was recognized as being government-owned and the project developing the FBDGs was adopted as a flagship program at the federal government parliament. This accelerated the development of FBDGs, and progress had to be regularly reported in Parliament. The preface from the three key ministries reflected the FBDGs' strong multisectoral support.
3. The involvement of A4NH in the Global UNFSS process ([Food Systems Summit | United Nations](#)) and at the country level presented an opportunity to align the Ethiopia process to the UNFSS quite strongly leveraging the second objective of the FBDGs – to promote broad food system actions supporting diet quality being sensitive to sustainability.
4. Efforts made to align other processes that took place in the country such as a joint policy dialogue of the government of Ethiopia and Global Panel on Agriculture, Food System, and Nutrition

(GLOPAN) that became the first of several food systems dialogues. This joint dialogue was informed by a background paper ([Position-Paper](#)) that was developed specifically to inform the development of the EFS-TP [10]. Follow-up food system dialogues were deliberately curated to identify game changing solutions for the EFS-TP ([Technical-Synthesis-Report](#)) based on challenges identified in the background paper.

The Ethiopian Public Health Institute submitted the FBDGs as a gamechanger in response to the request for recommendations for a game-changing solution for the EFS-TP. This nomination passed several evaluation processes and was supported by a diverse group of stakeholders involved in EFS-TP process as one of the final 22 gamechangers important to attaining the vision of promoting healthy, nutritious, and sustainable diets, being culturally sensitive. It is important to note that the second FBDGs objective specifically addresses the need for food systems actors to take actions that would make healthy diets sustainably accessible. The first step on the process was the development of the EFS-TP. The CGIAR pledged to identify entry points as a knowledge partner to the EFS-TP process, and many research activities with national partners would contribute knowledge to the food systems transformation process.

Being identified as a gamechanger, the question remains whether FBDG can actually alter the course of events and transform the food system towards sustainable healthy diets. The reflections on this from the key informants interviewed are summarized as:



Photo Credit: Yitagessu Mergia. Ethiopia food-based dietary guideline Launch (from left to right: Dr. Masresha Tessema, Dr. Getachew Tolera, Dr. Fikru Regassa, H.E. Dr. Lia Tadesse, Dr. Namukolo Covic, Professor Birhanu Nega and, H.E. Fatoum Seid).

Having the food-based dietary guideline for Ethiopia developed is a step in the right direction. When fully adopted, it can create demand for healthy foods and as such could catalyze change along the food value chains of the food system. Having endorsed FBDGs in the country can help limit the spread of wrong information about a healthy diet as presented by many actors. Hence, FBDGs is a potential game-changer, but this is still an unfinished agenda.

The guidelines were finalized and officially launched on March 15, 2022. Thus far, they have helped to raise awareness about the importance of healthy diets and nutrition in Ethiopia and provided a framework for promoting healthy eating habits and improving the health and well-being of the

Ethiopian population [11]. However, in addition to informing consumers on what they should eat, FBDGs should also be used to inform policies, public and private investments to support consumers to make the right food choices. While there is still much work to be done, the FBDGs represent an important step forward in Ethiopia's efforts to transform its food system.

Some of the specific activities underway to ensure implementation, and to monitor impact includes:

- **Healthy Diet Coalition (HDC) Initiative** - As a follow-up to the Coalitions for Healthy Diets from a Sustainable Food System that emerged from the UNFSS ([New coalitions announced at the UNFSS](#)), a special effort was made to form the Healthy Diet Coalition in Ethiopia. The coalition aspires to operate as a platform for bringing together stakeholders and existing knowledge to integrate efforts across food systems for broader effect. The Director of the Maternal and Child Health Directorate of the Ministry of Health serves as the coalition's chair; its co-chair is the Nutrition Coordination Office of the Ministry of Agriculture, while the Director of School Feeding Program Coordination Office of the Ministry of Education serves as secretariat. The FBDGs implementation is recognized as an important activity in the Coalition. A national technical committee is established composed of representatives from the academic community, civil society, international cooperation, public and private institutions to offer technical advice and for tracking Ethiopia's FBDGs at the national and regional levels and ensuring that each implementing sector and stakeholder includes the relevant indicators (short-, medium-, and long-term indicators). The platform plans quarterly meetings beginning in 2024 to determine action items and collaborate on programs, regulations, and proclamations contributing to a healthy diet.
- **Contextualization of the FBDGs to pastoralist settings:** preliminary work has already been done by EPHI in collaboration with A4NH, ILRI, IFPRI, WUR, and Haremaya University to contextualize the FBDGs to pastoralist settings of Ethiopia.
- **Analysis of Cost and Affordability of Healthy Diets (CoHD)** – the CoHD is the cost of the least expensive locally available foods to meet recommendations as formulated by the FBDGs, for a representative person per day consuming a diet providing 2330 kcal/day. The aim is to establish regular monitoring of the cost and affordability of healthy diets, with the support of the Food Prices for Nutrition team. A first workshop was organized in collaboration with EPHI and CSA from Jun 7-9, 2022, to measuring the cost and affordability of healthy diets as recommended by the Ethiopia's FBDG. The recent published scientific newsletter on Analysis of cost and affordability of healthy diets showed that the average Cost of a Healthy Diet increased more than twice as much throughout the 36 months studied (Jan. 2020-Dec. 2022) without considering general inflation indicating that consumers are finding healthy diet more and more difficult to afford [12].
- **Pilot implementation of the FBDGs** - An implementation plan has been prepared by EPHI and FAO Ethiopia. It will be executed by EPHI and MoA, with funding from FAO. Amhara, Oromia, and SNNPR are the three target regions, within each three woredas/districts are selected and within these three kebeles/villages are targeted, including 180 homes in total. Implementation will start soon.
- **Edible oil usage** – In collaboration with the MoH, EPHI conducted a study entitled "Edible oil usage related knowledge, attitude and practices in major cities of Ethiopia" to monitor whether the population follows the FBDG recommendations on the oil consumption. It found that main family cooks and restaurant/hotel chefs had different levels of understanding regarding the use of edible oil. They are aware of the negative health effects of excessive use of edible oil but are unaware of the FBDGs' suggested daily intake of edible oil [13]. The study confirms the need and implementation of FBDGs.

- **Policies/ Strategies Revision** – During revision of policies and strategies, the effort is taken to align the new revised version with the Ethiopian Food System Transformation Plan of Action, and with the gamechangers including the FBDGs. An example or a strategy that will be aligned with the EFST Plan of Action is the National Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture Strategy.

Overall, the Ethiopian FBDGs have been well received by all actors and have helped to raise awareness about the importance of healthy diets and nutrition in Ethiopia. While there is still much work to be done, the guideline provided a **framework for promoting healthy eating habits and improving the health and well-being of the Ethiopian population**. The second objective is also providing a policy entry point for the multiple food systems actors to identify their unique entry points to contribute to positive food systems transformation through a healthy nutritious diet centered lens. The FBDGs represent an important step forward in Ethiopia's efforts to transform its food system and improve nutrition outcomes for its citizens. However, it needs considerable backing to be successful and close monitoring to document whether and how this gamechanger is indeed capable of transforming food systems. Key players in the food system must still take part in the ongoing and planned initiatives to implement the guideline and monitor not only whether implementation supports adherence but especially whether and how it is used to formulate or adapt existing policies, strategies, public and private investments towards supporting food system transformation towards the consumption of healthy diets.

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