

WHY WE WORK ON FOOD, NUTRITION AND DEVELOPMENT: TWO PERSPECTIVES

Hear from a professional
at the start of her career in
food systems transformation,
and one near the end with
decades of experience



KEY MESSAGES

- We choose to work in food systems because food is, at its core, a way to drive a fairer and safer future for the world. Food is not just fuel. It carries our culture, our traditions, our dignity, and our sense of belonging. To fix food is to unlock society's potential. Over 3 billion people globally can't afford to eat healthily right now. This widens inequities and keeps the vulnerable trapped in cycles of poor health.
- Food systems transformation touches every aspect of our lives and cannot be achieved in isolation. It spans agriculture, health, trade, finance, education, environment, and social protection, and it relies on people all along the supply chain, from farmers and traders to processors, retailers, policymakers, and consumers. Few other areas of work demand such breadth. That is why transforming food systems requires collaboration across sectors directly and indirectly linked to food, and why it offers opportunities for people with different skills, perspectives, and passions to contribute.
- The 2025 World Food Day theme calls for greater collaboration across sectors and silos to transform agrifood systems for people and planet. This is a huge part of the work that must be done, and we remain hopeful that solidarity and compassion will win over more selfish politics. At GAIN we work hard to bring disparate voices across the food system together, for real transformation.

What made us choose food?

Rosalia:

“ I entered the development world gradually, beginning with work in the WASH sector that focused on improving health in underserved communities through better access to sanitation and hygiene, and later in digital skills training, where I supported young people to build their competencies. In 2023, I joined GAIN's policy team, bringing these experiences together. I want to work in food systems because food is more than sustenance, it is culture and tradition. Growing up in Makueni County in Eastern Kenya, I remember the scenes that characterized my childhood during times of poor harvests and droughts. The strength and resilience I saw in those times deeply resonated with me and ignited a drive to serve others. I came to better understand the role of community, the meaning of shared meals, and the resilience that traditional agriculture carries. These experiences shaped my conviction that food is about more than survival, it is about connection, dignity, and opportunity. For me, working in food systems is about ensuring access and inclusion so that everyone can benefit. ”

Steve:

“ Not as a calling, I have been involved in international development over five decades, starting at Oxfam, a UK NGO. I subsequently worked supporting movements involved in national political change, especially in southern Africa. I worked closely with the government of Nelson Mandela as a representative of the Commonwealth, and also in various parts of the Canadian government. I later ran my own company consulting mainly for the development institutions of the UK, EU and UN. Food, well that was accidental; I moved to GAIN because a job came up. It's a point worth making for everyone early in their career, that few people can plot their career at 25. Sometimes the most interesting things you will do come about by chance! ”

Reflections on World Food Day's 2025 theme

The theme of World Food Day this year is: *Hand in Hand for Better Foods and a Better Future*. It calls for global collaboration in creating a peaceful, sustainable, prosperous, and food-secure future.

Rosalia:

“ I've seen firsthand how bridging divides between different actors, sectors, and stakeholders can bring people together to shape inclusive, practical pathways forward. The GAIN team in Kenya has been actively supporting food systems transformation since before I joined. During a recent food systems convening, I witnessed government officials, civil society leaders, and private sector voices sitting side by side to elaborate Kenya's plans for food systems improvement, a recognition that no single actor holds the solution.

At GAIN we have been supporting counties to better understand their own financing flows and reimagine their budgets to drive nutrition, resilience, and livelihoods. Similarly, Kenya's Nutrition for Growth (N4G) commitments, which GAIN helped to support and track, are providing accountability for promises made on nutrition. And with tools like the GAIN-supported Food Systems Dashboard, policymakers and partners can see whether those commitments translate into measurable progress, making it possible to act quickly when gaps appear.

Food systems touch every aspect of our lives. You may not always feel part of them, yet every day you make food choices, what to buy, where to buy it, and at what quality. Those choices might seem personal, but the system that shapes them is public. For example, the price of vegetables at the market, the quality of a school meals, the safety of street food, or even the availability of fortified flour in local shops: all of these are shaped by how food systems are governed. That's why we bridge divides, because when the system works, we all thrive. ”

Steve:

“ Food is the Jekyll and Hyde of development. Why do I say that? On the one hand we see big trends in the food and agriculture sector which are harmful. Soil is depleted, biodiversity and land are sacrificed for production, certain trends mean that the consumption of unhealthy foods is rampant everywhere. Every country has growing levels of obesity and overweight, and rising ill health associated with this – cancer rates, diabetes, and so on. The pace of change is astonishing; just ask your parents or grandparents what they ate at your age. But at the same time, global food is amazingly dynamic, as are 99.9% of its farmers, entrepreneurs and companies. Look at what is available in most supermarkets every day. Those facing hunger as a proportion of the world population has fallen markedly over the last five decades. And many of those going hungry do so mainly because of conflict. The problem is not the capacity and efficiency of the global food system, is it that lots of it is facing the wrong way. If we could incentivise and reward the production and consumption of healthier diets, business can play a big part in fixing these challenges. That is a task where governments have been slow and reluctant to act. ”

Learning from the past and looking forward with optimism

Rosalia:

“ We are all products of the past, but we’re also makers of the future. The state of food poverty and diet affordability reflects deep inequalities in income, as well as variation in local food prices shaped by production and transport costs, differences in regional access to markets, and uneven public investment in nutrition and food systems. What worries me is how these inequalities persist across counties and between rural and urban populations, trapping the poorest households. In countries like Kenya, Mozambique, and Nigeria, healthy diets can be unaffordable for as much as 80% of the people. These countries sit in the most worrying quadrant of the global picture (**Figure 1**) with high diet costs and extreme unaffordability. Even within the same income category, outcomes differ though. In Bangladesh and Mozambique, food is much more affordable compared to in Nigeria. Country income level alone does not explain outcomes: policy choices and food systems investments matter just as much.

Zooming into Kenya, the distribution of county-level food poverty headcount rates (**Figure 2**) shows that around a quarter to a third of the population of most counties live in food poverty. While the national average is around 32%, in five counties (Turkana, Samburu, Garissa, Mandera and Marsabit) more than half the population live in food poverty. These cases remind us that national averages can mask suffering at the margins, and that millions of the poorest, most remote communities bear the heaviest burden.

Still, I feel reasons for optimism. The very fact that we now have reliable data on cost of diets and poverty distributions means we are better equipped than ever before to act and to use this knowledge to drive more equitable food futures. We are shaped by the past, but not prisoners of it. By learning from what works, targeting resources where the need is greatest, and addressing the fragmentation of our agri-food systems, we can make the future one where healthy diets are not a privilege but a guarantee, achieved through collaboration across governments, civil society, the private sector, and communities.”

Figure 1: Cost of Healthy Diets and Prevalence of Unaffordability in 12 Countries, 2024

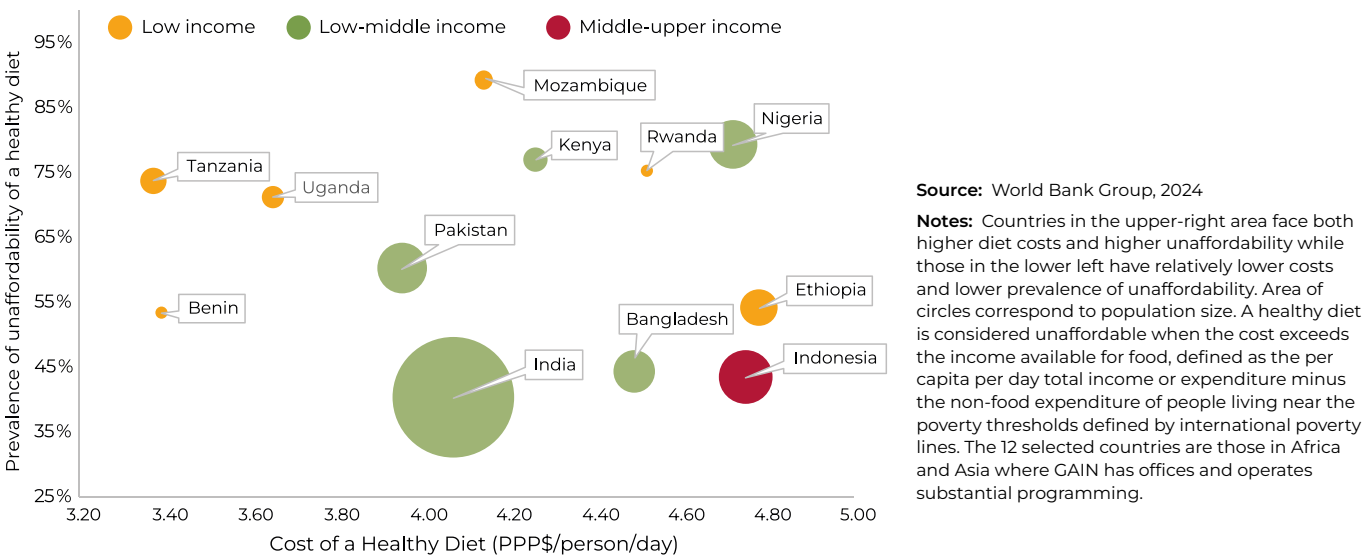
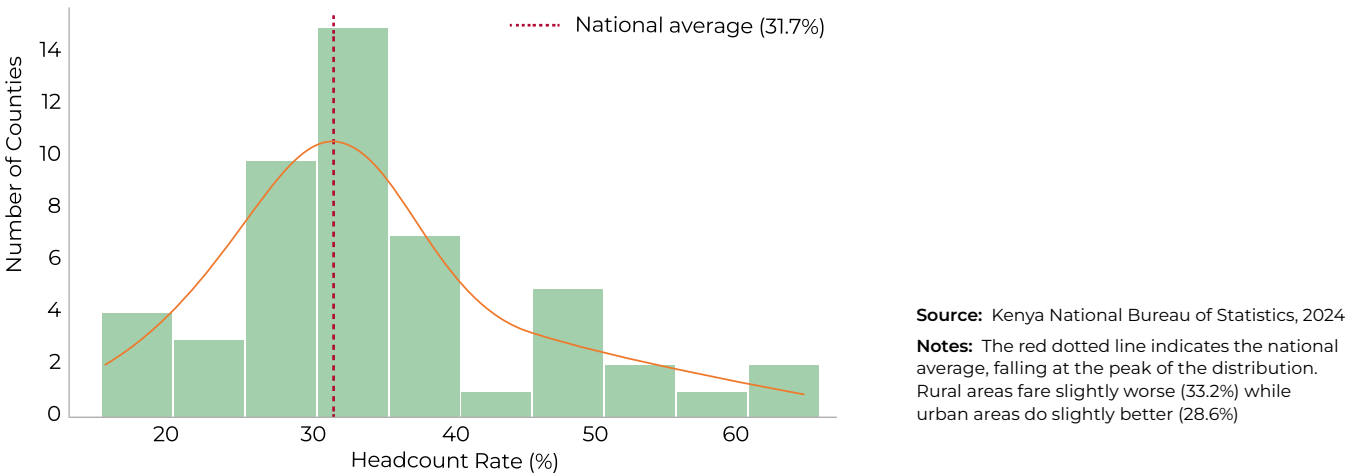


Figure 2: Distribution of Food Poverty Headcount Rates in Kenya, 2024



Steve:

“International cooperation and solidarity with those less fortunate is under pressure in ways that are new. Aid is being cut, conflicts, wars and aggressive forms of nationalism can be seen in every continent. I began my career working for international development organisations and then cycled through working with government, international organisations, and with businesses. What we see today is more complex challenges and a pace of change that is completely new. What has not changed is what I saw at the beginning of my career: that most people are decent, and care or worry about the health of the planet and their fellow human beings. Compassion and solidarity is an enduring feature of humanity, and the selfish politics we are going through is just that, a phase. It is therefore more important than ever to stand up for values of a shared humanity, and make sure that we continue to find solutions and advance ideas for a fairer and safer future for the world. Food is at the core of that. Poor diets and hunger are a recipe for poor health, underdevelopment and war. Stay optimistic: apathy and resignation are luxuries we cannot afford.”

And so we remain hopeful for the future

We have hope. But hope alone is not enough, it must be matched with action. Transforming food systems and ensuring healthy diets for all cannot rest on the shoulders of a few specialists, including NGOs. It is the work of nations, of societies, and of people everywhere. Everyone has a role to play, and everyone must join the movement for positive change.

History shows us what is possible. Over decades, major shifts have been forged when people came together around a shared cause. The next generation now carries the torch, facing new challenges such as climate change, but also bringing deep resolve and fresh ideas to overcome them. What is at stake could not be higher, the health of our children, the resilience of our communities, and the sustainability of our planet.

It requires connecting global commitments, from climate to nutrition to trade, with subnational realities. Policy coherence is essential. Agriculture, health, education, and trade policies must align to avoid working at cross-purposes. Developing countries must also have greater space in global decision-making, from trade negotiations to food standards, so that policies reflect their realities. Only through coherence, inclusivity, and collaboration across sectors can agri-food systems be transformed into engines of equity and resilience, strengthening livelihoods, changing lives, and shaping our shared future.

About The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)

GAIN operates with a vision of healthier diets for all people, especially the most vulnerable, from more sustainable food systems. Our mission is to improve the consumption of healthier diets by improving the availability, affordability, desirability, and sustainability of nutritious and safe foods, and reducing the consumption of unhealthy and unsafe foods.




Healthier Diets. For all.

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