

Cost of the Diet

A tool for Programme Design and Advocacy



The Cost of the Diet is an innovative method and software developed by Save the Children UK to better understand the extent to which poverty affects nutritional status. The aim of the Cost of the Diet tool is to estimate the amount, combination and cost of local foods that are needed to provide individuals or families with their average needs for energy and their recommended intakes of protein, fat and micronutrients.

A list of all foods available in a livelihood zone* is compiled and data on the prices and seasonal availability of all foods are collected through market surveys and interviews with local traders. Interviews and focus group discussions with local women are held to understand typical dietary habits.

As the software can calculate the cost of a nutritious diet for up to six seasons in one year, it can offer a unique perspective on the effect of seasonal changes on the price and availability of foods, identifying periods when households may be vulnerable to high food prices which affect their ability to afford a nutritious diet. This offers an insight for programme developers to assess when nutrition and food security interventions may have the greatest impact.

The foods selected by the software can also help to understand which nutrients are the hardest to obtain from locally available foods. The software can identify the foods that are the least expensive sources of energy and nutrients. This information could be used to design nutrition and food security interventions aimed at improving the nutrient quality of the diet, promoting the least expensive sources of nutrients, or increasing the availability of the currently expensive food groups which, in turn, could reduce their market price.

When the results from the Cost of the Diet are compared with income and expenditure data generated by a Household Economy Analysis from the same livelihood zone, the affordability of a nutritious diet for each of the wealth groups can be estimated. This information can then be used to assess if poverty prevents poor households obtaining a varied, nutritious diet. The information on the affordability of the diet can be used to estimate the size of cash transfers for social protection programmes intending to have an impact on nutrition through the diet.

One of the most innovative aspects of the Cost of the Diet software is that potential interventions can be modelled to estimate their impact on improving the quality and the affordability of the diet. These results can be used to inform and influence policies and programmes for both nutrition and food security and can contribute to both advocacy and debates at local, national and global levels.

Regular Cost of the Diet assessments in an area could also be used to help understand changes in food and nutrition security in a particular context and therefore act as an indicator within food security and nutrition early warning systems.

A Cost of the Diet analysis is most useful when chronic undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies have been identified as nutritional problems and when the availability or affordability of nutritious foods are likely to be among the underlying causes of malnutrition.

The Cost of the Diet guidelines and software are available on request. For more information please email cotd@savethechildren.org.uk

* An area within which people share broadly the same pattern of livelihood, including options for obtaining food and income and market opportunities.

