

Unhealthy dietary patterns drive \$8 trillion in annual hidden costs of global agrifood systems

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A refined study by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) involving 156 countries confirms that hidden costs within global agrifood systems amount to approximately \$12 trillion annually. Of this figure, around 70 per cent (\$8.1 trillion) arise from unhealthy dietary patterns and are linked to alarming non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, far exceeding the costs related to environmental degradation and social inequalities.

The State of Food and Agriculture 2024 (SOFA), builds on the 2023 edition to provide an even more in-depth analysis, utilising true cost accounting to expose the full range of costs and benefits associated with food production, distribution, and consumption, including those that are not reflected in market prices – the so-called “hidden costs and benefits”. The report updates those cost estimates, divides them by agrifood system types, and charts a course for transformative change in our agrifood systems.

The study details how global hidden costs are largely driven by health hidden costs, followed by environmental hidden costs, in more industrialised agri-food systems in upper-middle- and high-income countries.

In examining health impacts, the report identifies 13 dietary risk factors. These include insufficient intake of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables; excessive sodium consumption; and high intake of red and processed meats, with notable differences across various agrifood systems.