



# **Evidence for Impact: Lessons from the PASHFARM Project to Strengthen Food and Nutrition Policy in Africa**

By

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**November 2025**

## **Abstract**

Malnutrition and unhealthy diets remain the major public health challenges across Africa, driven by limited access to affordable, safe, and nutritious foods. As Nutrition Research Fellow for the African Economic Research Consortium's PASHFARM project, I observed how locally generated evidence can inform policy and drive transformation towards equitable, resilient, and sustainable food systems. Conducted across 20 African countries, PASHFARM produced 35 research papers and 25 policy briefs to guide policymakers in advancing nutrition-sensitive food systems. Working with 20 multidisciplinary teams and 95 researchers, the initiative highlighted the value of collaboration, mentorship, and shared learning. Knowledge exchange and policy forums fostered cross-disciplinary dialogue, strengthened technical rigor, and supported capacity building. Key policy priorities include strengthening markets and supply chains, incentivizing healthier food production, ensuring nutritious food accessibility, affordability, and safety, promoting gender-inclusive food systems, and enhancing evidence-based policymaking. PASHFARM demonstrated that sustainable, equitable food systems are achievable through research-driven collaboration, and sustaining momentum requires continued investment in locally led research, capacity building, and multi-stakeholder engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Malnutrition and unhealthy diets remain the major public health challenges across Africa, despite the growth of food markets. Many communities face barriers to nutritious foods, including limited availability, low affordability, and poor accessibility, contributing to the triple burden of undernutrition alongside rising overweight and obesity. The insufficient evidence on how retail food environments influence nutrition, and health outcomes further limits effective policy action. With climate change intensifying pressures on food systems, and challenges such as urbanization, rising food prices, unsafe foods for consumption, supply chain vulnerabilities, and inequitable market access, promoting sustainable healthy diets, reducing food loss, improving access to nutritious foods, strengthening food system resilience, and supporting equitable and safe market participation is more urgent than ever. Recognizing the close link between healthy diets and sustainable food systems, research, policy, and investment must work in tandem to advance both goals.

As a Nutrition Research Fellow with the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) in the Policy Analysis for Sustainable and Healthy Foods in African Retail Markets (PASHFARM) project, supported by Gates Foundation (GF), I oversaw 20 projects across 20 African countries. This experience reinforced how locally generated evidence can inform policy and how strategic investment can catalyze healthier, more equitable food systems.

## 2. The PASHFARM Initiative

The PASHFARM initiative was anchored on the food environment framework proposed by Turner et al. (2018), which emphasizes how food availability, affordability, convenience, promotion, and quality interact to shape diets and nutrition outcomes. Guided by this framework, the project aimed to generate evidence on food markets to improve access to nutritious foods, develop policy options to expand the supply and affordability of nutritious foods for low-income communities and strengthen the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), market infrastructure, and consumer trust to enhance nutrition and health outcomes.

These objectives guided 20 projects across 20 African countries: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Sénégal, and Togo. The projects were implemented by 20 multidisciplinary teams comprising economists (within the field of agricultural, development and health economics), nutritionists, gender and other related disciplines. Conducting research across these diverse contexts generated context-specific insights while building continental knowledge on food environments and policy-relevant solutions.

### **3. Implementation, Impact and Learning**

Over the course of the project, multi-disciplinary country teams conducted empirical studies and engaged stakeholders to understand how retail food environments can improve access to safe, nutritious, and healthy diets; the role of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in supplying affordable and nutritious foods; the influence of food prices, market dynamics, and policy levers on nutrition and health; consumer preferences, behaviors, and consumption patterns; and gender dynamics affecting equitable access to nutritious foods, while promoting affordability, safety, market infrastructure, and inclusive food systems. We employed a mixed-methods approach, combining panel data analysis, econometric analysis, discrete choice experiments, household, market and consumer surveys, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, observations, gender, intersectional, and policy analysis.

Serving as the nutrition expert for the project was both an honor and an invaluable learning experience. From my perspective, several key milestones underscore the depth, relevance, and impact of the work. These include:

- Conducted policy-relevant research that generated 35 research papers (pre-printed, working papers and published), providing robust evidence to inform food systems and nutrition policy across Africa.
- Developed 25 policy briefs offering actionable, context-specific recommendations that equip policymakers and stakeholders to advance inclusive, nutrition-sensitive food systems.
- Strengthened the capacity of 95 senior and early-career researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to apply evidence-based approaches in food systems policymaking, supporting Africa's transition towards more sustainable, equitable, and nutritious food systems.
- Hosted knowledge exchange forums for researchers, resource persons, and project steering committee members, which proved instrumental in fostering collaborative learning, integrating multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, and enhancing technical rigor. These forums also served as platforms for mentorship and capacity building, supporting the professional growth of researchers across diverse fields, including agricultural, development, health, environmental, and resource economics, food science and nutrition, agribusiness, gender, and development, with a balanced gender representation (51.5% women and 49.5% men).
- Convened regional and national policy forums that informed policy decisions and fostered collaborative strategies to strengthen retail food environments, ultimately advancing better nutrition and health outcomes across the continent.

Throughout the project, we convened research review workshops and project steering committee (PSC) meetings which provided invaluable opportunities for learning, reflection, and quality enhancement. Serving as a Nutrition Expert and a PSC member was both challenging and rewarding. I realized how critical strategic oversight is in shaping high-quality, policy-relevant research. I found it especially rewarding to review the researcher's work in progress, provide feedback on their methodologies and policy recommendations, and ensure that they incorporated comments to improve the quality of the papers and policy briefs. While selecting appropriate nutrition metrics and tools and integrating gender analysis was initially challenging, continuous consultations enabled researchers to apply them effectively in their research work.

It was inspiring to witness their ideas evolve into outputs that could influence the availability, accessibility, affordability, safety, and consumption of nutritious foods, ultimately improving nutrition and health outcomes in Africa. This experience reinforced for me the importance of collaboration, structured review, and iterative learning in producing research that has a meaningful impact. In many ways, it felt like tending a garden, nurturing ideas, pruning them where necessary, and watching them grow into strong, impactful contributions that can shape healthier food systems across the continent.

PASHFARM was a unique, multidisciplinary project, and gaining a shared understanding across diverse fields was both challenging and fascinating. Reflecting on my involvement in the training workshops organized at the beginning of the project, I realized that capacity building, ongoing technical support, and backstopping researchers, alongside fostering teamwork and structured collaboration, were critical to ensuring the quality, coherence, and impact of the project across its diverse country contexts. The Impact Evaluation Retooling Workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, provided faculty members and researchers with essential tools for impact evaluation, supporting both individual research and the teaching of research methods, econometrics, quantitative methods, and project analysis at the graduate level. Similarly, the Gender and Nutrition Mainstreaming and Demand Analysis Workshop in South Africa equipped PASHFARM researchers with principles for integrating gender into their research, understanding nutrition metrics and methods, and applying tools for demand and policy simulation analysis. It was particularly satisfying to see economists and gender researchers apply these nutrition metrics, tools, and methods in their work. This experience reinforced the value of mentorship and continuous learning in producing research that upholds high methodological standards while addressing real-world nutrition and policy challenges across Africa.

A notable highlight was convening and hosting two learning labs at the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Health Academy Week under the thematic area “Metrics, Tools, and Methods.”

The learning lab “Integrating Nutrition and Gender in Food Environment Research Projects” ([ANH Academy Week 2024](#)) and “Gender Analysis in Food Environment Research” ([ANH Academy Week 2025](#)) equipped researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to better integrate gender considerations into their research and nutrition programming, reinforcing the project’s commitment to inclusive and equitable approaches in food systems research. Reflecting on this experience, it was remarkably meaningful as it was my first time designing and leading such labs, with invaluable guidance from the ANH team and technical support from PASHFARM team. It was also the first time AERC hosted learning labs, which made the process a pioneering effort. The experience strengthened my skills in proposal development, stakeholder engagement, and facilitation, and it underscored the importance of mentorship, collaboration, and innovation in creating platforms that translate research into practical learning for diverse audience. Seeing the participants’ curiosity spark and grow was deeply fulfilling for me, it reminded me why I am passionate about fostering learning and translating research into meaningful actions.

The PASHFARM project offered profound insights into the dynamics of conducting large-scale, multidisciplinary research across diverse African contexts. In my view, the project has been instrumental in strengthening food and nutrition policy across Africa by demonstrating the value of locally generated, rigorous evidence. This evidence not only produced rich data and insights but also fostered stronger relationships among researchers, research institutions, the AERC, policymakers, stakeholders and Gates Foundation (GF). Bi-monthly meetings with the GF project officer to provide updates on project progress helped maintain rigorous standards and reinforced quality assurance, ensuring accountability, tracking progress, and aligning implementation with maximum impact. This collaborative approach ensured that research findings could meaningfully inform policy reforms, paving the way for healthier, more equitable, and sustainable food systems across the continent.

Through this experience, I learned that generating evidence is only the first step towards impact: the real transformation happens when evidence is co-created, communicated effectively, and embedded within trusted relationships and responsive policy processes.

The engagement between researchers, policymakers, academia, development partners, food system, nutrition and gender practitioners, and other stakeholders in regional policy forums further demonstrated how sustained dialogue and consultation can bridge the gap between research and actionable policy. These interactions felt like building bridges, connecting knowledge, insights, and perspectives across disciplines to create pathways for evidence-informed decision-making.

On a personal level, this experience allowed me to expand my knowledge and skills in food environment research, integrate nutrition into economic analysis, and incorporate gender perspectives, while deepening my understanding of nutrition-sensitive policies across diverse African settings. Serving as the food systems and nutrition consultant for a Pan-African initiative spanning multiple countries, contexts, and stakeholders strengthened my project coordination skills, enhanced my ability to navigate complex logistical and cultural challenges, and highlighted the value of working in a multidisciplinary environment. One of the key challenges was fostering effective collaboration among multidisciplinary teams to achieve shared goals, which taught me the importance of communication, flexibility, and understanding different perspectives. The experience highlighted the importance of mentorship and capacity-building in nurturing the next generation of researchers. It reinforced the transformative impact of teamwork, consultation, and sustained technical support in achieving meaningful outcomes. Much like a single candle illuminating a dark room, each effort has the power to light another, gradually amplifying the impact of every connection.

Critically evaluating research proposals, papers, and policy briefs taught me to identify knowledge, policy, and practice gaps and to provide constructive feedback. This process enhanced my skills in providing technical guidance to refine research work and ensure rigor, clarity, and relevance, while strengthening my analytical thinking, attention to detail, and ability to mentor others in producing high-quality, impactful research outputs. Organizing regional policy engagement workshops strengthened my leadership, communication, and strategic planning skills, enhanced my ability to coordinate diverse stakeholders and translate research into actionable policy, and provided valuable insight into stakeholder perspectives.

Collaborating closely with the Executive Director, Prof. Victor Murinde, the Director of Research, Dr. Abbi Kedir, Project Manager, Dr. Mark Korir, Gender Expert, Dr. Lanoi Maloiy, Lead Programme Administrator, Ms. Evar Kiambuthi, Knowledge Management Administrator, Mr. Daniel Njiru, Programme Assistants, Ms. Bertha Chedeye, Ms. Pamela Muhoro and Ms. Natalie Chponda, Chief Communications and Policy Outreach Officer, Mr. Senvy Maistry, Communications and Publications Assistant, Ms. Lancer Wao, Information Technology Assistant, Mr. Gerald Riziki, and colleagues at AERC reinforced the value of multidisciplinary collaboration in advancing Africa's food systems. It felt like we were all in a pool, with researchers, resource persons and PSC members, where each ripple we created together spread outward, amplifying the impact of our collective efforts to transform African food systems. Overall, this experience demonstrated that diverse expertise, coordinated effort, and sustained engagement are essential for maintaining research quality, ensuring relevance, and maximizing impact in shaping inclusive, evidence-based food and nutrition policies. Building on these collaborations and lessons learned, I aim to advance my skills in policy analysis, nutrition advocacy, and lobbying while supporting rigorous, policy-relevant research to promote inclusive strategies that improve Africa's food systems, nutrition and health outcomes.

#### **4. Call to Action: Translating Evidence into Policy Action**

The PASHFARM project provides compelling evidence of impact, demonstrating how rigorous, locally generated research can inform policies that strengthen retail market food environment and improve nutrition and health in Africa. Government policymakers, private sector, food industry actors, academic and research institutions, civil society organizations and NGOs, community leaders, multilateral organizations, donor organizations, philanthropic groups, and other stakeholders now have a pivotal opportunity to act on these insights by investing in research, capacity-building, and knowledge translation initiatives. Immediate and coordinated efforts are essential to transform retail food environments, making nutritious foods more accessible, safe, and affordable, increasing their availability, and advancing healthier diets for all populations. Building on the insights from PASHFARM's research projects, key priorities for future action include:

***Strengthening retail markets and supply chains:*** Strengthen food and nutrition security across Africa through resilient, inclusive food systems. Expanding access to safe, conveniently located, and gender-inclusive retail markets in Kenya can improve the availability and affordability of fruits and vegetables. Policymakers should also enhance adoption of biofortified, iron-rich beans by improving distribution and promoting traits preferred by consumers alongside their nutritional benefits. Recognizing and integrating weekly food markets (WFM) into urban planning, along with investing in essential infrastructure such as sanitation, shading, waste management, and security, can improve access to fresh and nutritious foods in Tanzania. Additional investments in rural and urban market infrastructure, transport, and storage including women-friendly stalls and cold storage can help ensure consistent access to safe and nutritious foods. Senegal should strengthen supply chain resilience by investing in local production, infrastructure, trade policies, and export diversification to reduce vulnerability to international food price volatility. Establishing an early warning system and monitoring market trends can further enhance food price stability and help households respond effectively to fluctuations. Stabilizing food prices in Ghana through resilient supply chains and targeted agricultural investments can ensure reliable access to staple and nutritious foods. In Zimbabwe, strengthening urban street food systems by providing safe, well-located infrastructure and reducing regulatory burdens can support formalization and more efficient market operations.

***Incentivizing healthier food production by Small, Medium Enterprises (SMEs):*** In South Africa, strengthen women-led informal food SMEs to boost profitability and improve food and nutrition security in low-income communities. Kenya should implement policies that support SMEs to produce and market biofortified iron rich beans, enabling them to benefit from consumers willing to pay extra for nutritious beans as well as small and medium-scale producers and vendors to supply diverse, safe, and nutritious fruits and vegetables (F&Vs) to urban and underserved markets. In Tanzania, support WFM vendors and small-scale producers to supply diverse, safe, and nutritious foods to urban peripheries, and provide women farmers and small-scale producers with land rights, credit, inputs, and extension services to boost production of nutrient-dense foods.

Empower women food vendors in Uganda through gender-sensitive governance, better infrastructure, and coordinated action to make Kampala's markets safer, more inclusive, and economically productive.

***Promoting accessibility, affordability, safety and consumption of nutritious foods:*** Evidence from Ethiopia calls for the need to implement policies to stabilize prices of nutritious foods, subsidize and support diverse local crops, provide social protection, and promote nutrition-sensitive agriculture. To increase consumption of iron rich beans in Kenya, there is a need to conduct public awareness campaigns highlighting nutrition and health benefits, and consumer-valued traits while targeting urban consumers and women who are more responsive to health-focused messaging. Similarly, invest in consumer awareness, targeted nutrition education, and behavior change interventions to encourage adequate consumption of fruits and vegetables. Leverage weekly food markets to provide affordable, fresh, and nutritious foods to underserved households in Tanzania and implement targeted interventions to address food cost sensitivity, particularly in rural areas, while emphasizing the role of gender and agricultural practices in shaping dietary patterns. In Ghana, adopt gender-sensitive policies to protect female-headed households from food price volatility. Policymakers in Senegal should implement targeted social protection and support measures to help vulnerable populations, particularly, women-headed, low-income, and rural households maintain nutritious and diverse diets amid food price volatility.

***Promoting gender-inclusive food systems:*** Promote gender-inclusive food systems in Zambia by empowering women and supporting rural livestock and agricultural investments to improve nutrition. Strengthening livelihoods in Zimbabwe through targeted training and support for women street food vendors, improvements in food safety practices, and promotion of equitable participation in food markets can create more inclusive and resilient food systems. Policymakers in Nigeria should strengthen women-led food SMEs through gender-sensitive policies that enhance leadership, access to resources, and household nutrition. In WAEMU countries, targeted measures such as cash transfers, food vouchers, or price subsidies can improve low-income urban households' access to nutritious foods and support healthier diets. Kenya should prioritize women as a key consumer group in promotion

strategies for biofortified, iron-rich beans, recognizing their central role in household nutrition and purchasing decisions. Kenya and Malawi should also strengthen gender-responsive policies and support market initiatives that create equitable retail environments and address gender disparities in purchasing patterns. Moreover, market designs and vendor programs should be gender-sensitive, enabling equitable participation and access for women. Improving food safety in Nairobi's informal settlements requires gender-responsive investments in infrastructure, sanitation, training, and financial access to empower women vendors and protect public health. In Tanzania, women's control over productive resources should be expanded, and joint household decision-making promoted through gender-responsive nutrition education and community engagement. In Kenya and Uganda, investing in gender-responsive market infrastructure such as sanitation, lighting, safe loading zones, and childcare facilities can reduce women traders' time burdens, improve safety and productivity, and promote equitable participation in market economies. Finally, in Rwanda, providing nutrition education, strengthening gender-transformative policies, and improving economic access can boost consumption of biofortified foods and promote equitable, healthy diets.

***Capacity development for evidence-based policy Across Africa:*** Strengthen the capacity to collect, analyze, and utilize multi-dimensional data on food environments, trade and infrastructure, consumer behavior and purchasing decisions, dietary intake and nutritional status, equity and gender inclusion, policy and regulatory frameworks, institutional and governance contexts, monitoring and evaluation indicators, and environmental sustainability. This data should be disaggregated by gender, age, location, and income. Establishing such an integrated evidence base will enable the design of targeted interventions that foster inclusive and efficient retail market systems and promote the consumption of nutritious, healthy diets.

***Improving policy coherence and cross-sector collaboration:*** Strengthen coordination across the agriculture, health, education, environment, water and sanitation, social protection, trade, urban planning, technology, data and innovation, and finance and economic development sectors to implement integrated strategies that increase access to safe, affordable, and nutritious foods.

Develop and enforce regulatory frameworks for retail market governance that align urban planning, health, and food safety objectives. These multi-sectoral efforts provide a roadmap for stakeholders to advance healthier, more equitable, and sustainable food systems across Africa.

PASHFARM underscores a critical lesson: evidence alone is not sufficient; its impact depends on effective translation into policy and practice.

## **5. Looking Ahead: Sustaining Momentum for Healthier Food Systems**

The PASHFARM project has provided a rich evidence base and valuable lessons for strengthening food and nutrition policy across Africa, offering a solid foundation for continued action and research. Sustaining momentum will require ongoing investment in locally led research, capacity building, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Maintaining a vibrant research community through learning labs, multidisciplinary networks, and capacity-building initiatives will preserve analytical expertise and foster collaboration. Efforts should expand the application of evidence-based policies across diverse contexts, strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems, and support innovative approaches that make nutritious foods accessible, affordable, and culturally appropriate. Policymakers and stakeholders can use this evidence to guide policy, allocate resources, and foster partnerships for healthier, more equitable food systems.

Future initiatives should continue embedding nutrition and gender perspectives into economic analysis, prioritize gender-sensitive and equity-focused nutrition and retail market interventions, foster multidisciplinary collaboration, and strengthen the capacity of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to translate evidence into actionable policies and programs. Additionally, future research should focus on increasing demand for nutritious foods, reducing food loss and waste, advancing gender-responsive and sustainable retail practices, leveraging digital technologies, and strengthening policy and regulatory frameworks to build resilient, inclusive, and nutrition-sensitive food systems. By nurturing these partnerships and maintaining a focus on actionable research, stakeholders can build on PASHFARM's achievements to create food systems that benefit populations across the continent.

Reflecting on this journey, I have learned that policy change is as much about partnership, dialogue, and capacity as it is about data quality. Generating evidence is critical, but lasting impact emerges when it is co-created, communicated effectively, and embedded within strong, trust-based relationships. These lessons highlight the importance of combining rigorous research with collaborative, context-sensitive approaches to advance healthier and more equitable food systems across Africa.

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