

POPULATION THAT CANNOT AFFORD A HEALTHY DIET IN ROMANIA COMPARATIVE WITH THE NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

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***Abstract:** The main objective of this paper is to assess the problem of the unaffordability of a healthy diet in Romania comparative with Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria and Moldova between 2017 to 2022. For the most part, people around the world still cannot afford diets that include a variety of safe and nutritious foods, particularly in South Asia and Africa. The least expensive combination of readily accessible local products that satisfy a food-based dietary guideline is considered the cost of a healthy diet. According to this relatively new statistic, 2–3 billion people do not have access to a healthy diet. Poor dietary quality can result in several types of malnutrition, encompassing undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, in addition to overweight and obesity.*

***Key words:** food security, healthy diet, products, cost.*

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations defines food security as the consistent physical, social and economic access to healthy, safe and nutritious food that satisfies individual dietary preferences and requirements for an active and healthy lifestyle [12]. Providing food security will be extremely difficult because, by 2050, 9.3 billion people will need to be fed worldwide [3]. Also, food prices are anticipated to increase as a result of the expanding global population and climate change. Urbanization will progress rapidly, with almost 70 percent of the global population expected to reside in urban areas, up from 49 percent currently [11]. Improving infrastructure, encouraging more effective production methods and minimizing food waste are important strategies to increase food security in this future period [10, 14].

At present, parts of the world are significantly off course to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 2 objective of ending hunger [1]. Presently, 42 percent of the global population, equivalent to around 3.1 billion individuals, lacks the financial means to secure a healthy diet and the expense of such a diet has increased by 6.7 percent in comparison with the period before the pandemic from 2019 [2]. But what does a healthy diet entail in more concrete terms? A healthy diet comprises a wide variety of unprocessed or little processed foods, evenly distributed among food groups, while limiting the intake of highly processed food and beverage products; it encompasses whole grains, legumes, nuts, an abundance of fruits and vegetables and may include moderate quantities of eggs, dairy, poultry, and fish, along with a small quantity of red meat [9]. But the increased cost of healthier food categories frequently drives individuals in poverty to consume cheaper products or face hunger. Therefore, individuals are able to buy highly processed foods rich in added sugars, excessive sodium, damaging fats and various substances and additives that enhance their shelf life, taste and texture [7, 15]. These dishes are economical due to the low cost and global tradeability of their ingredients and should be avoided at all costs. Maintaining a healthy diet across all stages of life is essential for preventing malnutrition, including childhood stunting and wasting, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight or obesity [4].

Countries can enable universal access to a healthy diet by generating higher-wage employment opportunities and by improving social protections for low-income individuals. In addition to increasing income and providing safety nets for the impoverished, food prices can be reduced for all through public investment in innovative technologies and infrastructure that boost food production and distribution [5, 8]. Innovations in agriculture and investments in food markets can preserve lives and stimulate economic growth, if that new technology and modifications are appropriately adjusted to local circumstances [13].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper presents a research based on external data, pertaining to the price of a healthy diet, which is the least expensive assortment of items that fulfills government and public health organizations' dietary criteria. A diet is considered unaffordable when its expenses, in conjunction with essential non-food requirements such as accommodation and transportation, surpass daily income.

The main purpose of the study is to identify the level of the population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania comparative with the neighbouring countries from 2017 to 2022. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as a specialized United Nations organization dedicated to combating hunger along with the World Bank were the primary data sources, supplemented by other pertinent agencies.

RESEARCH RESULTS

As presented below, the population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania comparative with the one in Hungary, is at a big difference in level. Starting from the year 2017, there has already been a significant difference between the two countries regarding the population that cannot afford a healthy meal, amounting to 20%. In Romania, the recorded value was 52.4%, while in Hungary it stood at 32%. Up until the year 2021, the difference between the two continued to grow, while the population in question from Hungary managed to reduce its value each year, reaching a value of 10.5% in 2022 (with 21.5% lower than in 2017). The population in Romania that cannot afford a healthy diet has struggled to establish a balance, experiencing both increases and decreases, only from 2020 to 2022 it faced continuous declines.

In conclusion, for a clear comparison between the two countries, in 2017 the difference between them was 20%, in 2018 it was 41.8%, in 2019 it was 37.3%, in 2020 it was 45.6%, in 2021 it was 47%, and in the last year it was 45.4% (Figure 1).

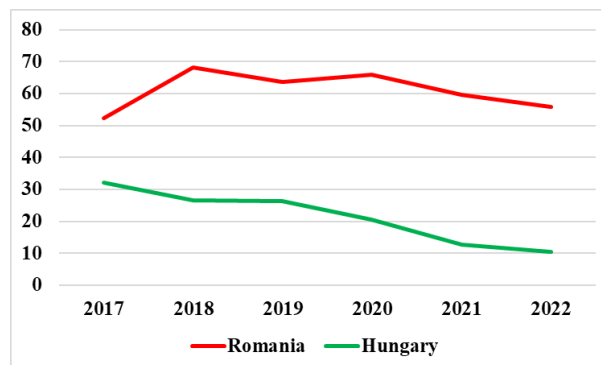


Figure 1. Population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania comparative with Hungary from 2017 to 2022

Source: Authors own adaptation by [6]

The population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania compared to Serbia is once again at a significant difference.

The population in question in Serbia had a value of 24.2% in the first year analyzed, managing to decrease to a recorded value of 8.1% by the year 2022. Knowing that the values of the population in Romania who cannot afford a healthy diet have not decreased in the analyzed years, also the differences between the two countries have remained just as significant.

Thus, the difference in the population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania compared to Serbia was 28.2% in 2017, more than doubling in 2018 when it reached 58.1%. In 2019, the difference between the two countries was 50.6%, in 2020 it was 54.4%, in 2021 it was 51%, and in the last year presented, it was 47.8% (Figure 2).

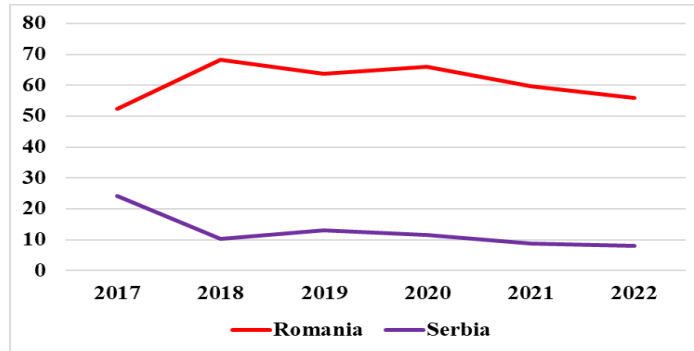


Figure 2. Population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania comparative with Serbia from 2017 to 2022

Source: Authors own adaptation by [6]

The population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania compared to Bulgaria shows a significant difference from the very first year, and this gap widens even more by the last year analyzed.

Bulgaria's progress regarding the population that cannot afford a healthy diet has been positive, with this population decreasing year by year, except for 2021 when there was an increase. However, in the last analyzed year, 2022, it declined again. Thus, Bulgaria has reached a value of 10.2% in the first year and 5.8% in the last year.

With Romania's high values and Bulgaria's low values, which have also experienced declines during the analyzed period, the differences between the two countries regarding the population that cannot afford a healthy diet are extremely significant. Thus, in the year 2017, the difference between the two countries regarding the affected population was 42.2%, in 2018 it was 59.9%, in 2019 it was 55.9%, in 2020 it was 60.7%, in 2021 it was 53.6% and in the last year, 2022, it was 50.1% (Figure 3).

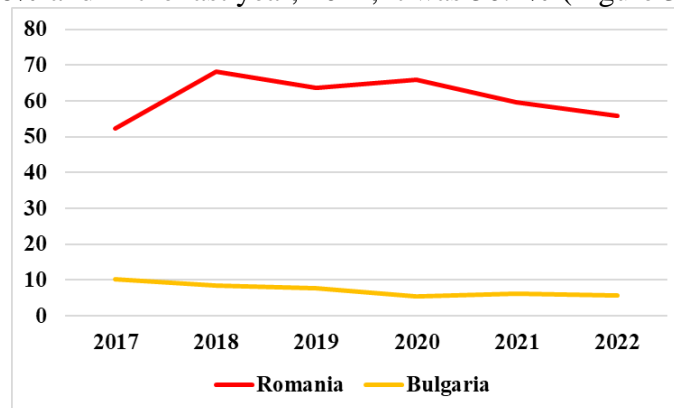


Figure 3. Population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania comparative with Bulgaria from 2017 to 2022

Source: Authors own adaptation by [6]

The population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Moldova compared to that in Romania shows a significant difference, with Romania, as in the previously presented cases, being the country with the highest values in each of the analyzed years.

Even if the population in question in Bulgaria experienced growth in 2020, recording a 14.3% increase, in the following years, 2021 and 2022, there was a regression, and it decreased again, reaching 11.9% in the last year, 2022.

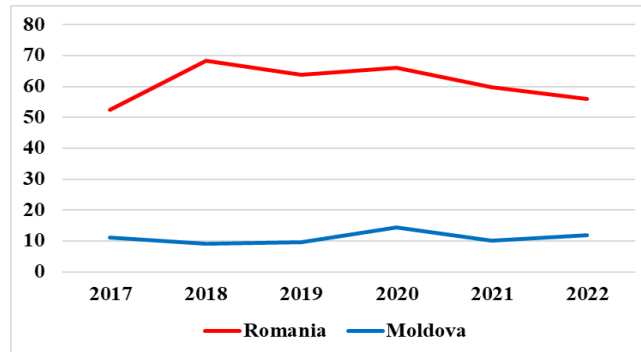


Figure 4. Population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania comparative with Moldova from 2017 to 2022

Source: Authors own adaptation by [6]

Thus, the differences between the two countries regarding the population that cannot afford a healthy diet are almost as significant as those between Bulgaria and Romania. In the year 2017, the difference between the two countries was 41,%, in 2018 it was 59,3%, in 2019 54,2%, in 2020 51,7%, in 2021 49,5 and in the end in 2022 it was 44% (Figure 4).

CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen, Romania's situation regarding the population that can afford a healthy diet is distinctly unfavorable than that of neighboring countries and the values registered in Romania are alarming. Bulgaria is the country that has the most favorable situation regarding the population in question, with its values compared to those of Romania being in the case of the year 2018 nearly 8 times lower. Moldova and Serbia are the next countries in the ranking, followed by Hungary. Thus, Romania's efforts appear less successful when compared to Bulgaria, which has successfully adopted social programs focused at aiding low-income households. Additionally, because of focused government initiatives and foreign aid initiatives, Moldova and Serbia have maintained a comparatively better state of affairs despite confronting economic difficulties. (Figure 5)

In conclusion, Romania must give priority to changes that will improve income distribution, stabilize food prices, and increase the availability of affordable, healthful food for all citizens in order to close the gap with neighboring nations. In terms of food security and general well-being, Romania runs the risk of falling even further behind its neighbors unless substantial policy changes and investments in public health are made. [9]

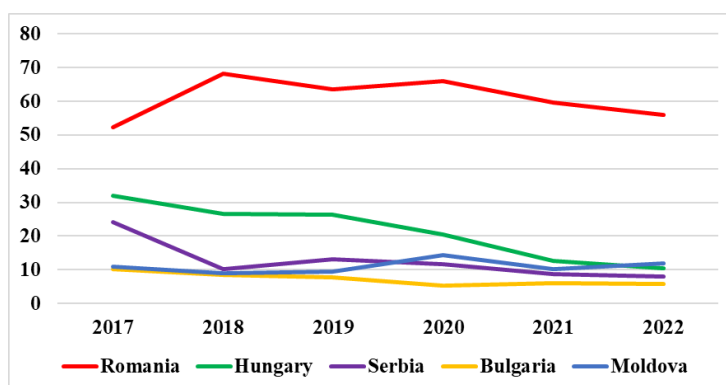


Figure 5. Population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania comparative with the neighbouring countries from 2017 to 2022

Source: Authors own adaptation by [6]

In an analysis like this, it is important to also consider the situation of that country on a global scale. For a clearer perspective and an overview, the population in Romania that cannot afford a healthy diet was compared with the global population that cannot afford a healthy diet. As can be seen, Romania, also in comparison to the global level, is in an unfavorable situation.

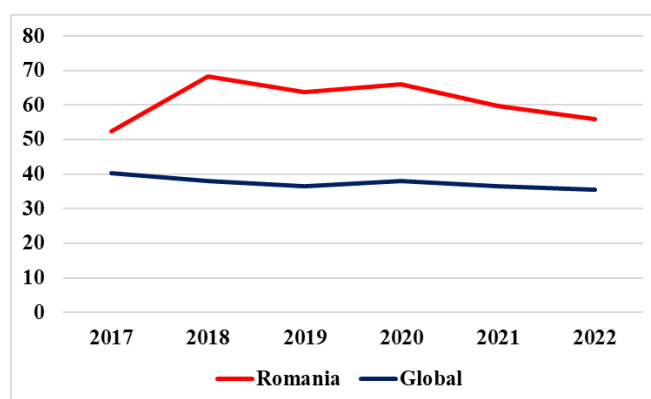


Figure 6. Population that cannot afford a healthy diet in Romania comparative with the global population that cannot afford a healthy diet from 2017 to 2022

Source: Authors own adaptation by [6]

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