

The Healthy Food Basket for Romania. National Results of a Comparative Research Carried out within the European Reference Budgets Network (2014-2015)

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Abstract: The present paper aims to present and discuss the national results for Romania of the comparative research on healthy food baskets, carried out within the European Reference Budgets Network (2014-2015), a project financed by the European Commission at the initiative of the European Parliament. While food baskets have been for long computed in Romania, they have no longer served as policy tools since 2004. Acknowledging the crucial importance of modelling reference budgets for decisions over the minimum wage, social benefits and subsidies for public services, this study embraces a methodology designed by Goedeme, Storms and van den Bosch (2015), in order to construct an updated reference budget for nutritious food and sports activities in 2015 Romania. Among its main conclusions, our study reveals that the values of means-tested social assistance benefits fall far below the monetary value of the healthy food basket. Moreover, dual-earner families employed for the minimum wage and raising two children can hardly afford the daily costs of a balanced nutrition that also fulfils the social and cultural functions of food.

Keywords: *food baskets; reference budgets; minimum income policies; Romania.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *coșul minim; bugete de referință; politici de garantare a venitului minim; România.*

Introduction¹

Healthy food baskets have served for a long time as social policy tools for poverty assessment and as standards for minimum wages, social benefits and subsidies for public services. The United Nations employs food baskets in order to draw poverty thresholds for global comparisons of multiple deprivation (United Nations, 2005) and to channel international support

for the most impoverished regions. Trade unions periodically commission the construction of reference budgets that can be subsequently used for tripartite negotiations over minimum wages, tax credits, pensions and unemployment benefits, to name just a few. Non-governmental organizations and lobby-groups often justify their claims for the upgrading and the expansion of social benefits and subsidized services by pointing at the costs of living for families with children, persons with disabilities, or other vul-

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nerable categories. Although with different political and policy utilizations, and varying definitions of human needs, reference budgets became widespread tools throughout the European Union (Storms et al., 2014).

The present paper presents and discusses the national results for Romania of a comparative research on healthy food baskets carried out within the European Reference Budgets Network (2014-2015), a project financed by the European Commission at the initiative of the European Parliament. In the first part, it offers a brief historical overview on the construction of food baskets in Romania after the 1989 change of the political regime, pointing out that, since 2004, the subsequent Romanian governments have no longer employed reference budgets for decisions over minimum wages and social benefits. However, various non-governmental and research institutions, most notably the Romanian Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV), have continued to model minimum or decent baskets of goods and services, based on similar methodological considerations as those that guided the European Reference Budgets Network. The second part of the article presents the construction of the healthy food basket for Romania, following the methodology developed by Goedeme, Storms and van den Bosch (2015), and discusses the main results in terms of affordability and socio-cultural acceptability.

History of food baskets in Romania after 1989

The Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV) Bucharest has been computing since 1991 the *minimum decent consumption basket* and the *subsistence basket* (first baskets computed for August 1991) (Barbu, 1992, 259), under the name of “*minimum standard of living*” and “*subsistence thresh-*

old”. Initially, researchers also computed an “*adjusted minimum standard of living*” that took into account “*the economic realities of Romania*”, and set a lower monetary value for the minimum living standards, assuming the scarcity of goods and services in post-socialist Romania. All three indicators (minimum, adjusted minimum, and subsistence threshold) were computed based on a normative approach, separately for urban and rural areas, for families with different number of members (ranging from 1 to 6), and also with different occupational statuses (wage-earners or pensioners) (Barbu, 1992, 259-260).

Between 1991-1999 the team of ICCV researchers involved in this task was led by Gheorghe Barbu, and since 1999 until now, by Adina Mihăilescu (Mihăilescu, 2002; Stanciu and Mihăilescu, 2013). The methodology has not changed significantly, keeping its normative approach, based on experts’ opinion on nutritional needs, hygiene, clothing, costs of housing and public services, unexpected expenses and savings (10% of household budget, introduced in 2005, in order to cover unexpected or special-occasion expenses for weddings, baptisms etc.). The subsistence basket is also still used, and it refers basically to nutritional and hygiene necessities, excluding the costs of social services and participation (Mihăilescu, 2012). In rural areas, consumption from households’ domestic production was included, thus the monetary values of baskets were lower. The minimum baskets based on this methodology had been updated based on experts’ evaluation: not automatically on the evolution of Consumer Price Index, but rather taking into account the evolution of market-prices of goods and services. The last update was published in 2012, reporting data for March 2010 (Mihăilescu, 2012).

In 2000, following negotiations between the major social partners, the Government approved (Emergency Ordinance no. 217/24.11.2000) the Monthly Minimum

Consumption Basket (RO-MMCB-2001). A National Commission for the Establishment and Indexation of the Monthly Minimum Consumption Basket was created shortly after, but eventually the basket has little been used for policy purposes. Instead, it served for poverty assessment for reports such as those issued in collaboration with the World Bank. Researchers re-evaluated the value of the RO-MMCB-2001 and its methodology of construction, emphasizing the need to adjust the Minimum Wage, the Minimum Income Guarantee and the Minimum Pension to the RO-MMCB-2001. At that time of its implementation, it was quarterly updated and indexed according to the Consumer Price Index. However, RO-MMCB-2001 displays several shortcomings: it has not been designed for multiple families/ households types, a great share of its total value consisted of household utilities and basic nutritional needs (calories intake approach), while costs related to social participation or life-long learning remained excluded. The administrative use of reference budgets was abrogated by Emergency Ordinance no. 11/23.03.2004 regarding Reorganisation Measures of the Central Public Administration, and it has not been reintroduced since then.

However, in 2012 The National Council of the Elderly requested data from the National Institute of Statistics regarding the average value of the monthly consumption basket for a single elderly person and for an elderly couple, separately for rural and urban areas. Based on further data provided by the ICCV (with regard to the decent minimum and the subsistence minimum in these cases), the National Council of the Elderly continued their investigation in what concerns the real minimum expenses of elderly persons and elaborated their own methodology and a reference budget model for single elderly persons living in urban areas: The Minimum Monthly Consumption Basket for the Elderly – MMCBE (CNPV, 2012). Until the moment of writing, this reference budget

has never been employed for establishing the value of the pension point or other benefits and services that elderly persons are entitled to receive.

Most recently, on the 16th of March 2015, the Institute for the Protection of Mother and Child “Alfred Ruşescu” from Bucharest, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Global Centre for Nutrition and Health from Copenhagen, launched the report on the “Daily Basket of Healthy Food” in Romania². The report was based on the inquiry of expert opinion on healthy food, and on market research upon the prices of these goods in February-March 2014. The daily basket did not regard the social and cultural functions of food, and excluded the costs of kitchen equipment and paid sports activities, although the authors recommended them. As discussed in the following sections, we assess that this latest food basket significantly underestimates the cost of a healthy diet in Romania.

The construction of a healthy food basket for 2015 Romania, within the European Reference Budgets Network

The construction of a healthy food basket for Romania took place within the European Reference Budgets Network project (2014-2015), and followed a common normative methodology applied in all 26 participating countries, as developed by Goedeme, Storms and van den Bosch (2015). The methodology also embraced a relative approach, taking into account national specificities for each country. Consequently, our design implied research on the eating habits of the population that reflect culinary preferences, and also the cultural and social functions of food. Documentation was undertaken on the nutritional standards recommended by relevant national authorities, and we collaborat-

ed with an expert nutritionist in the design of a weekly menu for an adult person with no special dietary requirements for medical reasons. The reference budget included, in addition, the costs of sport activities. The content of the basket was then expressed in current prices for the capital city, following common assumptions for all 26 participating EU countries about the purchasing patterns of food items, beverages, kitchen equipment and sport activities, which ensured the comparability of results. Upon the completion of the reference budget for healthy nutrition and sports, we tested the social and cultural acceptability of its content with the help of three focus groups organized in Bucharest, using, again, common methodological guidelines designed by the lead researchers of the Reference Budgets project. The guidelines were translated into Romanian by our local research team and piloted in an *a priori* focus group organized in Cluj-Napoca, the second largest city after the capital. Finally, we revised the healthy food basket based on the feedback of focus-group participants and presented it at the concluding conference of the project that took place in May 2015 in Brussels³. The following sections discuss each phase of this process.

Country-specific factors that influence the content of the healthy food basket: climate, social norms and cultural practices

The construction of a healthy food basket within the European Reference Budgets Network (ERBN) embraced a normative approach, laying emphasis on the advice of nutritionists with expertise on the dietary needs of a population living in a particular geographic area, with a specific climate, and in urban areas. However, the methodology of the project implied that the medical standards of a healthy diet should be compared with prevalent social norms and cultural practices concerning eating. The present sec-

tion discusses these contextual factors that played an important role in the construction of a normative food basket relative to the particularities of Romania.

Romania's specific continental-climate, with cold winters and warm summers, implies significant seasonal variation in dietary requirements. Nonetheless, cultural factors also shape dietary practices throughout the year. Winter meals, in particular around season's holidays, traditionally contain large shares of meat and animal fat. The long fast of the Orthodox Easter imposes strict vegan diet (with the prohibition of meat, eggs, milk and dairy products), compensating somewhat for the excessive animal-fat intake during the winter. However, nowadays only a limited segment of the population respects the strict rules of fasting, while the cultural norms of rich, fatty meals to be consumed together in the extended family at religious or family celebrations still prevail. The availability of a large range of processed food and import products boosted consumption without fundamentally altering culinary preferences (National Institute of Statistics, 2015), but triggering the replacement of home-cooked food with market products. The spread of cosmopolitan ideas and alternative lifestyles resulted, for a minority of the population, in the adoption of more restrictive dietary practices (vegetarian, vegan, raw, etc.). Nonetheless, existing studies, such as those summarized below, suggest that mainstream society, in particular in rural areas, still favours home-cooked dishes rich in fat (animal fat, but also sunflower oil) and meat.

The annual *National Household Budget Survey* of the Romanian National Institute of Statistics reports on average consumption patterns for various occupational categories, with details for the main types of food and beverages. In the construction of a healthy food basket, we took into account these consumption patterns as of 2013 (the latest available at the time of constructing

the healthy food basket within the European Reference Budgets Network). While none of the occupational categories appear to follow a healthy diet as recommended by the Ministry of Health and nutritionists (see Table 1), it can be noticed that, on average, employees eat healthier than self-employed and retired persons (Table A2 in the Appendix).

The 2010 report of the Romanian Ministry of Health, based on national representative sample of the adult population (1,071 persons, 57.8 % women), revealed an alarming rate of 60% overweight or obese persons. Seemingly in contradiction, the results pointed out that the average calorie intake was lower than the recommended standard, while the levels of animal protein and lipid intake were higher. In addition, fibre consumption remained much below the recommended amount, while salt consumption almost double than it was advised. Romanians consumed 23% of their total food intake in the form of meat products (especially pork and beef, and seldom fish). Dairy and eggs also figured among the favourites, with high rates of daily or every-second-day consumption. Although the study revealed fairly regular intake of fruits and vegetables, their amounts and share in the total diet fall below medical recommendations. The report concluded that Romanians' diet was inappropriate and contained health hazards such as high intake of fats and salt, insufficient carbohydrates and fibres, calcium, magnesium and selenium. The Ministry of Health repeated its study in 2011, with similar results. Fat and animal protein (especially pork) consumption remained high, whereas vegetable protein and fibre intake remained low.

Another relevant survey was conducted in 2013 by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES). Interestingly, the subjective evaluation of eating habits corresponds to the previously presented expert evaluations: 91% of re-

spondents considered that Romanians' eating habits were unhealthy as a rule, while the majority of them admitted that older people living at the countryside and better-off, more educated urbanites consume healthier food. A healthy diet was considered difficult, as better quality products were either unavailable or unaffordable on the Romanian market. Over 70% considered that a healthy diet was still somewhat accessible in the form of home-cooked meals. The highest percentage of respondents ranked vegetables as the healthiest food (39%), followed by dairy products (21%) and fruit and meat (11%). Conversely, at another question concerning the most preferred aliment, only 1% indicated fruits. Meat dishes still rule the menus, followed by vegetable stews and soups. Half of the respondents considered that they and their families pay attention to their diet, in order to protect their health. Indeed, 60% of all respondents cook daily.

National expert guidelines for healthy nutrition and their role for the construction of the healthy food basket for 2015 Romania

As mentioned before, our approach followed the normative guidelines of nutritionists with expertise on the dietary needs of the population in Romania, and in particular, for urban residents. In this section, we synthesize, first, the medical advice on a healthy diet issued by the Romanian Ministry of Health, and then we present the content of a weekly healthy diet as designed by the expert nutritionist consulted within the project.

In 2008, the Ministry of Health appointed a National Commission for Food and Nutrition⁴, who elaborated a *National Food and Nutrition Strategy* and a *National Action Plan regarding Food and Nutrition*, drawing on quantitative data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, the National Institute for Economic Studies and the

Research Institute for Quality of Life. Their purpose was to improve the health status of the Romanian population, with focus on vulnerable groups, by preventing and decreasing the incidence of diseases caused by inadequate nutrition. In the same year, the Commission formulated a series of nutritional recommendations that grounded new regulations, targeting children and youth in educational settings⁵.

Most recently, the Ministry of Health elaborated a *National Health Strategy for the period 2014-2020*⁶, building on the previous strategy and action plan, as well as on European guidelines. The *Strategy* regards nutrition as a priority concern in the cases of pregnant women and small children. For these categories, nutritional objectives include breastfeeding, the supplementation of essential micronutrients, the prevention of malnutrition of underweight new-born children and the promotion of healthy nutrition for preventing child obesity.

The Romanian Society for Nutrition (Societatea de Nutriție din România) elaborated a *Guide for a Healthy Nutrition and Nutritional Recommendations* that can be freely accessed on the web page of the Ministry of Health⁷. These publications include an illustrative food pyramid, which intuitively indicates the daily food portions that provide the necessary nutrients. The authors stress that one of the main objectives of the food pyramid is to ensure that people will extract energy from carbohydrates, and fat intake will be reduced. The pyramid consists of five food groups: (1 - on the bottom, highest share) bread, cereals and pasta; (2) vegetables and green products; (3) fruit; (4) milk and dairy; (5 - on the top, lowest share) meat, fish and eggs. Specific guidelines and a list of recommended products correspond to each category of food. In the case of farinaceous foods, unrefined products, based on brown flour and brown rice, are considered healthier. For meat and fish, white meat

should be preferred to red and lean meat. Fish is highlighted as a healthier alternative. In the category of milk and dairy, attention is drawn to the fact that skimmed milk has a similar content of carbohydrates, minerals and vitamins as whole fat milk. Choosing skimmed milk is advised when attempting to reduce the lipids intake, but it is not recommended for children under the age of five. Special attention is given to limiting the saturated fats intake. In this respect, the proposed alternatives are to consume vegetable oil, choosing 2-3 portions of fish, chicken or nuts per week, and to introduce beans, peas and lentil in the diet. The vegetables and fruits provide the main sources of vitamins and minerals. Furthermore, the guidelines make specific reference to the daily recommended quantity of nutrients: 50%-55% carbohydrates in the daily energy intake, 25%-35% fibres, a maximum of 30% fats and 10%-15% proteins, out of which half should be vegetal proteins and half animal proteins.

In our project, the initial version of the Romanian healthy food basket was built based on the recommendations of the Ministry of Health, the Romanian Society for Nutrition and an independent nutritional expert who constructed a weekly menu that should be affordable for the mainstream society, and also socially and culturally acceptable. The pyramid of healthy nutrition has been followed, but we also gave some room for the occasional consumption of alcoholic beverages, soft drinks and sugary products, given their social functions and cultural embeddedness. In line with the joint methodology of the Reference Budgets project, the envisaged food basket should be healthy, but also in accordance with societal preferences and cultural practices. The corresponding portions for each category of food are described in Table 1 below, while the weekly menu designed together with the nutritionist is described in Table A1 from the Appendix.

Table 1: Guidelines for a healthy food basket based on the recommendations of the Romanian Society for Nutrition

Food Category	Examples
Grain, cereals, (6-11 portions/day)	Bread, cereals, rice, pasta, etc.
Vegetables(3-4 portions/day)	Tomatoes, onions, dill, parsley, capsicum, cucumber, beans, garlic, green beans, cabbage, cauliflower, etc.
Fruit (2-4 portions/day)	Orange, grapefruit, grapes, melon, plums, apple, pears, etc.
Meat, fish, eggs (2-3 portions/day)	Charcuterie, chicken, turkey, salmon, tuna, beef, pork.
Dairy (2-3 portions/day)	Milk, yogurt, Cottage cheese, mature cheese, etc.
Sugar & Fat (once a week)	Sweets, butter
Alcohol (once a week)	Wine, beer

Source: Romanian Society for Nutrition, 2013.

We have chosen for the food basket vegetables that are a good source of fatty acids and vitamins, but at the same time are accessible and affordable, as they grow in our country: potatoes, cabbage, peas, beans, tomatoes, cauliflower. Some are suitable for raw consumption, while others are regularly used in soups, stews, etc. We included corn polenta in the menu, a traditional food and a healthy substitute for bread (fewer calories and useful in colon-cleansing diets). Similarly, we opted for local fruits which are affordable and easy to find in food markets, such as apples, berries, grapes, melon, plums, pears, apricot, etc. We assumed that local fruits are better assimilated by the populations of certain geographical regions, as they have consumed it for generations, and their body has adapted to that particular nutrient intake. Moreover, local fresh fruits have better quality, as their nutritional value is not damaged by overseas transportation. We also assumed that tap water can be used safely in most of the Romanian households, and as such we did not include in the reference budget the cost of drinkable water.

Besides food, the reference budget also included kitchen equipment and sport activities, both seen as crucial for a healthy life. We included a list of conventional kitchen equipment that fulfils the main functional necessities, disregarding items that could

be considered “luxurious” for an average Romanian household (such as a dishwasher machine). For the sport activities, we included both free of charge activities (such as jogging or riding the bike) and, following the comparative methodology for the 26 EU member states, sport activities that require payment (such as aerobic, swimming, football or tennis on a rented arena).

The input from the focus groups in the design of the healthy food basket

The social and cultural adequacy of the expert-designed healthy food basket, as well as that of the list of kitchen items and sport activities, has been tested with the help of three focus groups conducted in Bucharest, following the methodology developed by Goedeme, Storms and van den Bosch (2015). In this section, we describe the main findings of these focus groups with regard to the affordability of the healthy food basket for an average Romanian family with two adults and two dependent children, as well as their social and cultural acceptability, i.e. whether they can not only fulfil basic dietary needs, but also the social and cultural functions of eating.

It should be mentioned that, prior to the planned focus groups, a pilot was organised in the second largest city of the country,

Cluj-Napoca, in January 2015. We recruited participants with average or lower incomes, but with varying educational qualifications. The pilot allowed us to evaluate the quality of research instruments (interview guidelines, handouts used, etc.) and their validity for the Romanian context, and also to better estimate the time requirements for each part of the conversation. Only minor adjustments of instruments proved out to be necessary. In terms of time, the estimated two hour length appeared to be accurate.

Consequently, one week later, three focus group discussions were conducted in Bucharest, gathering participants from various socio-economic strata (see Tables A3, A4 and A5 for a synthetic description of participants' profiles). We chose a neutral and easy to reach venue: the premises of the Faculty of Geography, University of Bucharest, situated in one of the main squares of the first district. As a rule, participants engaged actively in discussions. Less assertive participants were individually encouraged to share their opinions, and eventually they participated in each part of the discussion.

The content of the expert-designed food basket was considered healthy and tasty, but hardly affordable, and problematic in terms of its suitability to mainstream social and cultural practices. Some participants⁸ tended to evaluate the food basket according to their own budget and eating preferences, therefore it was necessary to clarify several times that we had in mind a reference family and a healthy diet.

"From the point of view of health, yes, it is alright, but financially it is not. (...) The food products, I think they are ok. I mean it looks like a healthy menu. But I've told you, there is the financial problem. (...)" (P2.2)

"You will need to spend 70% of your salary to eat this way, healthy, including this type of food products." (P2.8)

In general, participants considered that not enough traditional Romanian food had been included in the basket (e.g. pork meat). Although they admitted that this food might be unhealthy, they emphasized that it would be difficult for Romanians to exclude traditional pork dishes. Participants with higher educational credentials compared Romanian traditional food and eating habits with those in other European countries.

"I admit, Romanian traditional food is not healthy at all, this is true... [...] The menu is made for a healthy person, but Romanians eat a lot of sarmale (stuffed cabbage rolls) and mici (minced meat rolls)." (P1.6)

Other reactions pointed at the fact that the menus do not comply with the needed daily calorie intake for physically active adult men, and that they contain an unrealistically low amount of bread, bakery and cakes. Participants seemed to be less accustomed to eating seeds and dried fruits as dessert. In their view, a dessert should be defined as home-made cookies and cakes. Male participants insisted on the importance of meat in their daily diet, especially when performing physical work.

"If you put me on this diet, I think I am going to starve..." (P2.1)

"If it is a physically challenging work, one needs a lot of meat to survive. I know this because I have worked in all fields..." (P1.6)

After several rounds of discussions, participants agreed on the revised content of the healthy food basket that included only minimal changes to the expert-proposed one. However, they insisted that the majority of Romanian families could hardly afford it.

In the next part of the focus group, respondents were invited to identify the main non-dietary functions of food consumption and expand the content of the basket so as to fulfil these multiple functions. They spoke

about the social, emotional, gastronomic and cultural significances of eating. Cooking and serving meals at home, within the family, were often mentioned as sources of domestic harmony. However, they regarded eating-out as preferable at times, for example a romantic dinner once in a while, or eating at a restaurant when travelling, or going out for leisure activities with one's family.

"If you go skiing with your children on a Saturday and Sunday, and you stay on the skiing coast all day long, you must take them to eat something in a fast food there, for example." (P1.1)

Eating together received high emphasis, as participants saw it as a way to enhance business meetings, to help socialize with others, to boost the enjoyment of the flavours and thus to increase appetite. For the gastronomic function of food, respondents said that sweets were important. They regarded home-baked cakes and fruit compotes as healthier alternatives for children's desserts, as they do not contain additives. Home-cooked meals were preferred by most participants for serving guests, following the norms of hospitality. Others seemed to disagree, saying that their visitors hardly come to eat and usually they only offer them coffee and snacks. However, all participants acknowledged food as a cultural and national signifier, asserting that Romanian cuisine typically includes polenta (*mămăligă*), stuffed cabbage rolls with meat and rice (*sarmale*), white cottage cheese (*brânză dulce*), minced meat rolls (*mici*), thick plums marmalade, pickles (*murături*), and strong plum brandy (*țuică*). Pork meat provided an important ingredient for traditional meals, while lamb gained religious symbolism for the celebration of Easter.

"Tradition, identity is important to me, it gives us satisfaction to eat a certain kind of food, like sarmale (stuffed cabbage)." (P1.8)

However, experimenting foreign cuisine and eating out at pizzerias or Chinese restaurants were regarded as normal multicultural practices, which change in time.

"There is also a cultural function, I might say, because the concepts and gastronomical trends exist like clothing trends. If there is a Mediterranean trend, we will try Mediterranean food. If there is a trend towards Chinese food, we will try that. I must admit I follow these trends quite closely." (P2.8)

Respondents considered that everybody should be able to afford consuming traditional Romanian dishes for the main feasts of the year. Holiday meals were implicitly conceived as meals for the extended family and friends.

With regard to eating out, respondents did not really quantify how often one should go to the restaurant or invite relatives and friends at home. Their answers nonetheless suggest that once a month should be the minimum, but more frequently would be better. Conversely, respondents disagreed on how frequently people in Bucharest actually go to restaurants and to what extent it is socially acceptable and healthy to buy pre-cooked meals or catering. One respondent (P3.7) insisted that in the case of families where both partners were working over-time there was no time left for cooking meals at home, and they would have to rely on catering services. Other respondents vehemently rejected this idea, asserting that, in the case of families with children, parents would probably do their best to ensure healthier home-made meals. These responses should be interpreted in the particular context of the capital city, which might be typical for other large cities in Romania as well, but less so for smaller towns and rural areas (comprising cca. 45% of the population, according to the 2011 Census). The national-representative survey conducted by IRES in 2013 reveals that only 1% of the population used to

eat out on a daily basis, 4% several times a week, 6% only in the weekends, 10% several times a month, 23% very seldom, 23% only on special occasions and 32% never (IRES, 2013, 49). Therefore, it was difficult to set what could be a socially accepted minimum for eating out. We estimated that at six times a year, based on existing social patterns and FG participants' opinions.

The input of focus group participants enabled us to revise the initial, expert-designed healthy food basket, and adjust it to what is considered affordable and socio-culturally acceptable by residents of the capital city.

The description of the healthy food basket for 2015 Romania designed within the European Reference Budget Network and its comparison with other Romanian food baskets

Following nutritionist expert guidelines and input from three focus groups carried out in the capital city of Bucharest, we computed separately the costs of the social functions of food, and that of the healthy food basket as such. The costs were initially counted in Romanian lei, and then translated into Euro, using the conversion rate of the European Central Bank⁹ for March 2015. Table 2 presents these results.

We estimated a monthly amount of 286 Euro per month for the healthy food basket, kitchen items and sport activities in the case of a couple, reaching up to 302 Euro when including the social-cultural functions of food. In the case of a family formed of two adults and two children, this reference budget costs 549 Euro per month, but it would cost 579 Euro if the social-cultural functions of food were included. The share of the costs of paid physical activity is relatively high: 9% of the reference budget for

a couple with two children. While the result may be surprising at first sight, it actually reflects the degree of economic inequality in Romania and the still prevalent urban – rural divide. Paid sport activities such as fitness, swimming, etc. target the emerging Romanian urban middle-class and the prices are affordable for this category, but almost prohibitive for the lower-waged working class¹⁰.

We compared these results with the total average expenditures on food and beverages per person in Romanian households, as reported by the National Institute of Statistics (INS) based on the *Household Budget Survey* for 2015. As presented in Table 3 below, Romanian households spent, on average, 200 lei/person/month on food and beverages. Spending was highest for retired persons living in urban areas (253 lei/person/month), followed by employees residing in urban areas (247 lei/person/month). Lowest spending on food and beverages was registered, as expected, for farmers and agricultural workers living in rural areas (113 lei/person/month), who can compensate market goods with their own production. The cost of the healthy food basket (without the costs of sport and the extra-costs for fulfilling the social and cultural functions of eating), as reported by Table 2, is cca. 140 Euro/month for an adult man, corresponding to cca. 588 lei/person/month. Consequently, the healthy food basket would cost twice as much as the value of average expenditures for employees in urban areas, as reported by INS for 2015.

Furthermore, as compared to the Monthly Minimum Consumption Basket (RO-MMCB-2001) introduced in Romania in 2001 but no longer in use, the healthy food basket we developed includes more diverse, and, at the same time, more precisely defined goods and services, which take into account the multiple functions of food. While acknowledging the policy importance of RO-MMCB-2001, we should keep in mind that it only referred to the minimum

Table 2: The content of the Romanian healthy food basket in Euro, designed following the Reference Budgets Network methodology

	Woman	Man	Couple	Single Woman + 2 Children (boy 10y-old & girl 14y-old)	Single Man + 2 Children (boy 10y-old & girl 14y-old)	Couple + 2 Children (boy 10y-old & girl 14y-old)
All amounts are expressed in Euro/month						
Healthy food basket						
Liquids	4.07	5.05	9.12	4.77	5.75	9.82
Grain	12.27	17.01	29.28	43.10	47.85	60.11
Vegetables	13.40	17.85	31.25	44.65	49.10	62.50
Fruit	15.03	21.18	36.21	49.93	56.09	71.11
Diary	22.17	31.42	53.60	83.11	92.36	114.54
Meat, fish & eggs	23.49	36.58	60.07	72.18	85.27	108.76
Fatt	8.91	9.04	17.95	26.54	26.67	35.58
Rest	2.18	2.18	4.37	23.64	23.64	25.83
Total healthy food	101.52	140.32	241.84	347.93	386.73	488.26
Kitchen equipment	7.03	7.03	7.85	8.92	8.92	9.62
Physical activity (if applicable)	18.16	18.16	36.31	33.86	33.86	52.01
Total healthy food basket	126.71	165.51	286.00	390.71	429.51	549.89
Other functions of food						
Invite people at home	5.19	5.19	5.21	5.19	5.19	5.21
Extra budget for take away per month	0.80	0.48	1.29	1.71	1.39	2.20
Extra budget for eating out per month	1.76	1.44	3.21	3.80	3.48	5.25
Extra budget holiday and day trips	0.62	0.69	2.02	3.16	3.18	3.87
Extra budget celebrations	1.67	2.31	4.64	7.63	8.48	12.04
Total budget other functions of food	10.05	10.12	16.36	21.49	21.72	28.56
Total food budget	136.75	175.62	302.37	412.20	451.23	578.46

Note: The European Central Bank conversion rate for March 2015 was 1 Romanian lei (Ron) = 0.2258458 Euro (1 Euro = 4.4278 lei). http://ec.europa.eu/budget/contracts_grants/info_contracts/infoforeuro_en.cfm. This is higher than the exchange rate reported by the Romanian National Bank, i.e. 1 Romanian lei (Ron) = 0.22518 Euro (1 Euro = 4.4409 lei). <http://www.curs-valutar-bnr.ro/curs-valutar-31-martie-2015> (last accessed: 15.05.2015).

for physical subsistence, and not necessary the healthiest dietary options. The social and cultural functions of food had also more limited importance for the construction of RO-MMCB-2001. Consequently, while both food baskets were designed in a normative and relative approach, our 2015 healthy food basket laid more emphasis on the normative standards of a healthy diet, with qualitative-

ly superior food intake, and regarded also the social and cultural functions of eating together certain types of dishes on special occasions, missing from RO-MMCB-2001. Furthermore, the latter food basket was designed for a medium sized household, i.e. a family formed of 2.804 members, which makes the results less intuitive for public discussions with various stakeholders.

Table 3: Average expenditures on food and beverages per person per month in 2015 (based on the National Household Budget Survey of the Romanian National Institute of Statistics)

Expenditures per person per month in national currency (Romanian Lei – RON)	Urban	Rural	Total population
Total population	240.47	154.05	200.58
Employees	247.23	172.00	223.24
Self-employed	196.66	139.09	161.40
Farmers and agricultural workers	118.52	113.42	113.83
Unemployed	159.65	123.23	144.19
Retired	253.53	167.07	210.07

Source: Romanian National Institute for Statistics, Tempo on-line database, 2015.

For comparing the two food baskets we used our model for a family with two children and contrasted it with the RO-MMCB-2001 model for 2.804 family members. In terms of food products and quantities, there is a wide range of differences between the two baskets. RO-MMCB-2001 remained more sensitive to national eating habits, and it therefore included higher quantities of meat, bread, animal fat and margarine. In contrast, our food basket contained higher quantities of fruit and vegetables: for example, it required 38.11kg of fresh fruit/month, as compared to only 3.64 kg/month in the case of RO-MMCB-2001. With regard to vegetables, the latter basket introduced a limited range of fresh vegetables (carrots, parsley, beans and parsnip) and again a lower quantity (3.78 kg/month) as compared to more diverse (e.g., tomatoes, cabbage, cucumbers, mushrooms, salad) and a higher quantity (42.12 kg/month) in our case. RO-MMCB-2001 indicated 31.96 kg/month for

bread (without specifying the type of bread), whereas our basket uses only 18.19 kg of wholegrain bread/ month. Another important difference regarded fresh fish: 6.93 kg/month in our basket, as compared to only 0.84 kg/month in the RO-MMCB-2001. In contrast, we included less meat products (1.82 kg/month), while RO-MMCB-2001 proposed 2.524 kg/month.

It is also important to mention that the content of the two food baskets differ, given that RO-MMCB-2001 followed mainly the actually existing eating habits of the population (as deriving from the Household Budget Surveys of the National Institute for Statistics), while our 2015 basket followed the recommendations of a nutritionist, with some adjustments indicated by focus groups participants in the capital city. Thus, RO-MMCB-2001 had been closer to a descriptive approach towards food consumption, whereas other healthy food basket followed more strictly the normative, medical per-

spective. For example, pickles are not included as healthy food in our food basket, but in the RO-MMCB-2001, sauerkraut and other pickles account for 3.084 kg/month. Other food products included in the RO-MMCB-2001 but not in the current healthy food basket are bakery products (0.50 kg/month) and non-alcoholic drinks (2.38 l/month). In comparison, some food products were included solely in our food basket and not in the RO-MMCB-2001: dried fruit, olive oil, nuts, seeds, honey and spices. The nutritionist consulted in our project explicitly opposed to the introduction of pickles, bakery, pastry and soft drinks (other than natural fruit juice) in the minimum healthy food basket, despite their popularity for everyday Romanian eating habits. Thus, we may assess that the RO-MMFB-2001 was less strict from the point of view of a healthy nutrition, as compared to our food basket.

Apart from the difference in the emphasis on the healthiness of certain food products, another major difference consists of the variety of the food basket, again, more diverse in our case. A possible explanation might be that in 2001 living standards in Romania were much below the European standards, the range of available food products and shopping opportunities were more limited, and concerns for subsistence needs (under the conditions of high rates of long-term unemployment, poverty and inflation) overshadowed preoccupations for a healthier diet. In addition, it is important to highlight that the RO-MMCB-2001 included the cost of household utilities, which actually covered a great share of the total budget. Although it did not include costs for social participation, it did contain a limited amount of non-food products such as clothing, shoes, school supplies, medicines and hygiene products. Consequently, RO-MMCB-2001 provided a benchmark for the overall costs of living for an average Romanian household, and its food basket was only one component among others, without particular emphasis on its

healthiness or the social-cultural functions of food. It served as a political tool for tripartite negotiations over the national minimum wage, public pensions, unemployment and other social benefits.

The healthy food basket designed in 2015 by the Institute for the Protection of Mother and Child “Alfred Ruşescu”, following WHO guidelines, contains only the minimum necessary food for a somewhat balanced calories intake, but it also disregards the social and cultural functions of food. Although the authors recommended 150 hours of physical activity per month for adults and 1 hour/day for children, the costs of sport activities were not included in their reference budget. The food basket consisted of wholegrain flour, cabbage, pork liver, fish (macron), cheese, onions, carrots, potatoes, beetroot and corn flour and its cost was estimated at 19.41 lei/day for a family of four persons, two adults and two children. The study mentioned that the content of the food basket could be expanded with apples, rice, other edible animal organs and a larger variety of fish, the cost reaching up to 20-26 lei/day in this way. Based on our literature review, the opinions of focus group participants and the nutritionist consulted for the present study, we consider that the above-described basket might provide a minimum necessary amount of nutrients, but it underestimates the necessary quantity of fresh fruits and vegetables and it disregards the social and cultural dimensions of food. The food basket developed in the present study better reflects the requirements of healthy nourishment and the social function of eating, and it exhibits, correspondingly, greater variety and higher costs.

Discussion and conclusions

The healthy food basket developed on the basis of common methodological guidelines for 26 EU member states within the

European Reference Budgets Network between 2014 and 2015 follows a normative approach, but it also embraces a relativist perspective, taking into account climatic, social and cultural differences between European nations. The healthy food basket issued for 2015 Romania within this project for a family of two adults and two dependent children, assuming that none of them has special dietary restrictions, would cost 488 Euro/month. In case that we include the cost of sport activities and also the social and cultural functions of eating, the budget increases at 570 Euro/month. In national currency, the monetary value of the healthy food basket for a family of two adults with two dependent children was estimated at 2,037 lei/month.

Consequently, the costs of a healthy food basket, and in particular of a basket that fulfils also social and cultural functions, and includes the costs of healthy physical exercise, it is hardly affordable for those living in poverty and receiving social assistance benefits, but also for those earning only minimum wages. Currently, jobless families with children, who receive means-tested social assistance benefits ought to make ends meet only with 606 lei/month (442 lei the Minimum Income Guarantee, and 164 lei support allowance for needy families with children). This amount is far below the monetary value of the healthy food basket, estimated at 2,037 lei/month. Moreover,

given the low level of minimum wages and universal family allowances in Romania, a large segment of working families cannot afford the healthy food basket either. By the end of 2016, the net minimum wage for an employee with one dependent child was 941 lei/month, and the universal child allowance 84 lei/month. Consequently, a couple with two children, both working for the minimum wage, gained a monthly income of 2,050 lei/month (tax deductions and child allowances included). This is just slightly above the cost of the healthy food basket (2,037 lei/month). For the same period, the average net wage was around 1,900 lei/month, i.e. a couple with two children had an income of cca 3,968 lei/month. Consequently, the healthy food budget corresponds to 51% of total household income for a dual-earner family, gaining average wages and raising two children.

Concerns for the discrepancy between the cost of the healthy food basket and the earnings of the majority of Romanians appeared recurrently during the focus group discussions. Participants insisted they could hardly imagine that a usual Romanian family could regularly afford the healthy food basket. Finally, when discussing the multiple functions of food, participants emphasized that more than the “necessary minimum” is needed in order to live a decent life.

Notes

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²The press release was published on the web page of the Institute for the Protection of Mother and Child “Alfred Rușescu” from Bucharest: <http://iomc.ro/articol/Cosul-zilnic-de-alimente-sanatoase/36> (accessed: March 2015).

³For the presentation at the concluding seminar, see http://www.referencebudgets.eu/budgets/images/Conference2015/rat_ro_20150602.pdf (accessed: December 2016).

⁴Order of Ministry of Health from 2008, according to Law 95/ 14.04.2006 regarding the Health Reform and Government Decision 862/28.06.2006 regarding the Organisation and Functioning of the Public Health Ministry.

⁵Law no. 123/27.05. 2008 regarding a Healthy Nutrition in Preuniversity Educational Institutions; Order of Ministry of Public Health no. 1563/12.09. 2008 regarding the Approval of the List of Recommended Food for Pre-school and School Age Children and the Principles at the Basis of a Healthy Nutrition for Children and Youth

⁶Government Decision SNS_964_1906 regarding the Approval of the National Health Strategy for the period 2014-2020 and the Approval of the 2014-20120 Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Strategy

⁷See <http://www.ms.ro/?pag=185> and http://www.ms.ro/documente/Ghid1_8318_6022.pdf (accessed: December 2014).

⁸Quotations from the focus group discussions indicate in between brackets the number of the focus group and the number of the person, as presented in Annex 2. No names had been used, in order to safeguard privacy.

⁹http://ec.europa.eu/budget/contracts_grants/info_contracts/infoeuro/infoeuro_en.cfm (accessed: March 2015).

¹⁰For indoor sport activities the cheapest options are around 80 lei for a monthly pass for adults, while children benefit for a rather small discount of 10%. Swimming pool tickets are usually twice more expensive. Renting an outdoor football terrain by a larger group is cheaper (5 lei/hour for 20 persons, i.e. 4x2 hours=40 lei/month) but it needs a constant, larger group of people who agree to do participate for a longer time. Consequently, we included the costs of cheaper options for paid physical activity, but we are aware that families with low earnings might hardly afford them.

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Appendix

Table A1: The weekly healthy menu recommended by the nutritionist

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Breakfast	Skimmed milk with Oatmeal and a banana (coffee)	2 slices of toast bread with charcuterie and a tomato or cucumber (coffee +1 glass of fruit juice)	Skimmed milk with cereals and nuts (Coffee)	2 slices of wholegrain bread with butter and charcuterie (coffee +1 glass of fruit juice)	2 slices of toast bread with cheese, salad leaves and tomato (Coffee +1 glass of fruit juice)	Fruit salad with seeds and nuts 1 slice of toast with jam/honey (Coffee)	Eggplant/Beet salad with fresh sweet pepper and tomatoes (Coffee)
Lunch	Tomato soup Grilled chicken breast with cooked potatoes and carrots	Vegetable soup Beans with pork or sausage	Potato soup Cooked fish with broccoli and rice (A glass of wine)	Roasted chicken breast with steamed vegetables	Beans soup Polenta with beef stew	Baked eggs with potatoes and cottage cheese	Chicken soup Chicken thighs with rice and mushrooms
Diner	Baked mushrooms with kneaded cheese	Polenta with cottage cheese	Brown rice with carrots, beans and corn	Potato salad with grilled stake	Pasta: macaroni and cheese (A glass of wine)	Salmon/Tuna salad with wholegrain bread	Green beans with garlic
Healthy snack 1	Yoghurt drank	1 grated apple with nuts	Yoghurt with seeds and dried fruit	1 Orange	½ cup of cherries	1 medium slice of melon	Grapes
Healthy snack 2	Chocolate milk	Yoghurt with nuts	Fruit juice with pulp	Sliced tomatoes with cottage cheese	Peanuts and dried cranberries	Pumpkin seeds	Wholegrain cookies with 1 glass of milk
(Healthy snack 3)	1 Grapefruit	Pears	Plums/peaches	Yoghurt drink	1 glass of milk	Chocolate milk	1 sandwich with toast bread and charcuterie

Table A2: Average consumption of food and beverages in the case of adults in 2013 Romania (based on the National Household Budget Survey of the Romanian National Institute of Statistics)

Food and beverages	Employment status	Amounts	Adult person per day
Bread	Employees	g	270.45
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	280.08
	Agricultural workers	g	276.76
	Unemployed	g	278.47
	Retired	g	289.55
Pasta	Employees	g	9.80
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	10.22
	Agricultural workers	g	9.11
	Unemployed	g	8.22
	Retired	g	10.69
Rice	Employees	g	13.12
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	13.84
	Agricultural workers	g	13.51
	Unemployed	g	12.49
	Retired	g	15.39
Fresh meat - Total	Employees	g	108.66
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	98.63
	Agricultural workers	g	98.63
	Unemployed	g	98.63
	Retired	g	108.50
Charcuterie	Employees	g	36.20
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	31.92
	Agricultural workers	g	29.46
	Unemployed	g	27.22
	Retired	g	33.96
Fish (fresh and preserved)	Employees	g	21.44
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	17.59
	Agricultural workers	g	17.36
	Unemployed	g	17.52
	Retired	g	22.98

Food and beverages	Employment status	Amounts	Adult person per day
Milk	Employees	ml	186.35
	Self-employed in services and industry	ml	170.83
	Agricultural workers	ml	213.44
	Unemployed	ml	146.01
	Retired	ml	203.91
Cottage cheese and savory cream (total)	Employees	g	44.32
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	37.58
	Agricultural workers	g	45.01
	Unemployed	g	34.65
	Retired	g	47.08
Eggs (pieces)	Employees	pieces	0.43
	Self-employed in services and industry	pieces	0.43
	Agricultural workers	pieces	0.44
	Unemployed	pieces	0.40
	Retired	pieces	0.48
Sunflower oil, corn oil, soya or olive oil	Employees	g	28.34
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	26.80
	Agricultural workers	g	25.32
	Unemployed	g	24.95
	Retired	g	31.10
Fresh fruits – total	Employees	g	127.76
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	92.85
	Agricultural workers	g	80.71
	Unemployed	g	84.73
	Retired	g	114.58
Beans and green peas	Employees	g	9.30
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	10.59
	Agricultural workers	g	13.28
	Unemployed	g	11.01
	Retired	g	12.53

Food and beverages	Employment status	Amounts	Adult person per day
Potatoes	Employees	g	102.94
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	112.31
	Agricultural workers	g	112.64
	Unemployed	g	111.19
	Retired	g	113.59
Vegetables (fresh, frozen and preserves)	Employees	g	244.58
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	217.16
	Agricultural workers	g	235.21
	Unemployed	g	208.90
	Retired	g	273.31
Sugar	Employees	g	24.30
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	23.21
	Agricultural workers	g	21.76
	Unemployed	g	20.84
	Retired	g	26.37
Jam, fruit jelly, fruit compote	Employees	g	9.44
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	11.15
	Agricultural workers	g	11.41
	Unemployed	g	8.78
	Retired	g	10.32
Chocolate, sweets	Employees	g	8.48
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	7.69
	Agricultural workers	g	5.79
	Unemployed	g	5.46
	Retired	g	6.87
Honey	Employees	g	2.33
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	1.41
	Agricultural workers	g	1.15
	Unemployed	g	1.15
	Retired	g	2.07

Food and beverages	Employment status	Amounts	Adult person per day
Coffee, tea, cocoa	Employees	g	7.40
	Self-employed in services and industry	g	5.89
	Agricultural workers	g	4.41
	Unemployed	g	5.03
	Retired	g	6.35
Mineral water and other non-alcoholic beverages	Employees	ml	193.22
	Self-employed in services and industry	ml	110.60
	Agricultural workers	ml	61.42
	Unemployed	ml	93.50
	Retired	ml	136.57
Alcoholic beverages, total	Employees	ml	73.88
	Self-employed in services and industry	ml	69.70
	Agricultural workers	ml	93.01
	Unemployed	ml	54.91
	Retired	ml	78.74

Source: Romanian National Institute for Statistics, Tempo on-line database, 2015. Authors' calculations based on the 2013 average per adult per month. Months were converted into days (division by 30.416 average days/month), kilograms in mg and litres in ml.

Table A3: The participants in the first focus group, 26th of January 2016, 18.30 pm

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Family situation	Employment status
P1.1	Female	45	Secondary	Living alone (she has two children, aged 24 and 25 years old)	Student
P1.2	Male	35	Secondary	Married, with a 4 years old child	Full-time employed
P1.3	Female	45	University	Married, one 19 years old child	Full-time employed
P1.4	Female	38	University	Living alone	Full-time employed
P1.5	Female	36	Secondary	Married, with an 5 years old child	Full-time employed
P1.6	Male	48	Secondary	Married, with a 25 years old child	Full-time employed
P1.7	Male	37	Secondary	Married with a 5 years old child	Partl-time employed
P1.8	Male	32	University	Living alone	Student

Table A4: The participants in the second focus group, 27th of January 2015, 10 am

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Family situation	Employment status
P2.1	Female	37	University	Married, no children	Full-time employed
P2.2	Female	36	University	Married, with a 10 years old child	Full-time employed
P2.3	Female	30	University	Married, no children	Full-time employed
P2.4	Female	52	Secondary	Married, with a 14 years old child	Full-time employed
P2.5	Male	49	Secondary	Married, with 21 and 23 years old children	Full-time employed
P2.6	Female	49	Secondary	Married, with a 29 years old child	Pensioner
P2.7	Female	49	Secondary	Married, with 22 and 26 years old children	Pensioner
P2.8	Female	35	University	Married, no children	Full-time employed
P2.9	Female	42	University	Living with her 18 years old child	Part-time employed
P2.10	Female	49	University	Living alone	Part-time employed

Table A5: The participants in the third focus group, 27th of January 2015, 18:30 pm

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Family situation	Employment status
P3.1	Male	42	Secondary	Living alone (he has a 19 year old son)	Full-time employed
P3.2	Male	30	University	Cohabitation, no children	Full-time employed
P3.3	Male	38	Secondary	Married, one child	Full-time employed
P3.4	Female	38	Secondary	Lone mother with a 17 years old daughter	Full-time employed
P3.5	Female	43	Secondary	Married, with an 11 years old child	Full-time employed
P3.6	Male	38	Secondary	Married, no children	Full-time employed
P3.7	Female	36	University	Married with a 7 years old child	Full-time employed
P3.8	Male	49	University	Married with one child	Retired
P3.9	Female	33	University	Married, no children	Full-time employed
P3.10	Female	54	University	Living alone, having a 27 years old daughter living independently	Full-time employed