

The Price of a Nutritious Diet: A Cost of Diet Analysis in Sri Lanka

Keshini Soza^{1*}, Dilka Rashmi Peiris¹; Sachini Pinnagoda¹, Shehan Fernando¹; B.H.T. Chandrathilake¹; N. P. G. Samantha²; P. A. J. Champika²; U. D. R. Udari²; Aravinda Wickramasinghe³; Amila Liyanage³; W. S. P. Abeysinghe³, M. M. G. D. Manamperi⁴; T. Perera⁵; D. Hemachandra⁶, Hashan Amarathunga⁷, Heshan Randika Manikgama Arachchi⁷.

¹The United Nations World Food Programme, Sri Lanka; ² Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute, Sri Lanka; ³ Nutrition Division, Ministry of Health and Mass Media, Sri Lanka; ⁴ Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka; ⁵ Wayamba University of Sri Lanka; ⁶ The University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka; ⁷ Medical Research Institute, Ministry of Health and Mass Media, Sri Lanka.

BACKGROUND

- Despite partial macroeconomic stabilization in 2024, food inflation and price volatility remained elevated, constraining household access to nutrient-rich and diverse diets.
- As a result, many families reduced dietary diversity, substituting animal-source foods with cheaper, calorie-dense alternatives.
- Examining the cost of a nutritious diet over this period reveals persistent vulnerabilities and highlights the need for evidence-based, multi-sectoral interventions to improve nutritional outcomes in Sri Lanka.

METHODS

- This modelling study was conducted using the Cost of Diet (CotD) tool, that identifies hypothetical diets that enable households to meet nutritional needs based on the cost, availability, and the nutritional composition of local foods.
- Weekly retail price data from the Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute (HARTI) were analyzed for all 25 districts in Sri Lanka.
- A typical four-member Household (HH) comprised of a school-going child (6-7 years), an adolescent girl (14 years), an adult woman, and an adult man.

RESULTS

- Lowest-costing diet meeting only energy requirements (1-3 energy-dense food groups). 2024: LKR 454/HH/day (USD 1.5). 2023: LKR 421/HH/day (USD 1.3). Lowest-costing nutrient-dense diet from ~10 food groups, providing starch, protein, fats, and micronutrients. 2024: LKR 905/HH/day (USD 3.0), 2023: LKR 915/HH/day (USD 2.8).
- Protein-rich foods (legumes, meat, dairy, fish) drove the highest expenditure (42.8% in 2023; 41.4% in 2024) for a HH, comprising of a notable portion of a nutritious diet (31.8% and 32.9%). Grains and grain-based products accounted for the second highest cost (37.4% in 2023; 38.6% in 2024) and formed the largest portion of the diet (43.5% in 2023; 45.5%).
- The share of animal-source proteins declined from 10% in 2022 to 4.7% in 2023 and 4.6% in 2024, reflecting a shift toward plant-based substitutes and a consequential reduction in overall dietary nutrient quality.

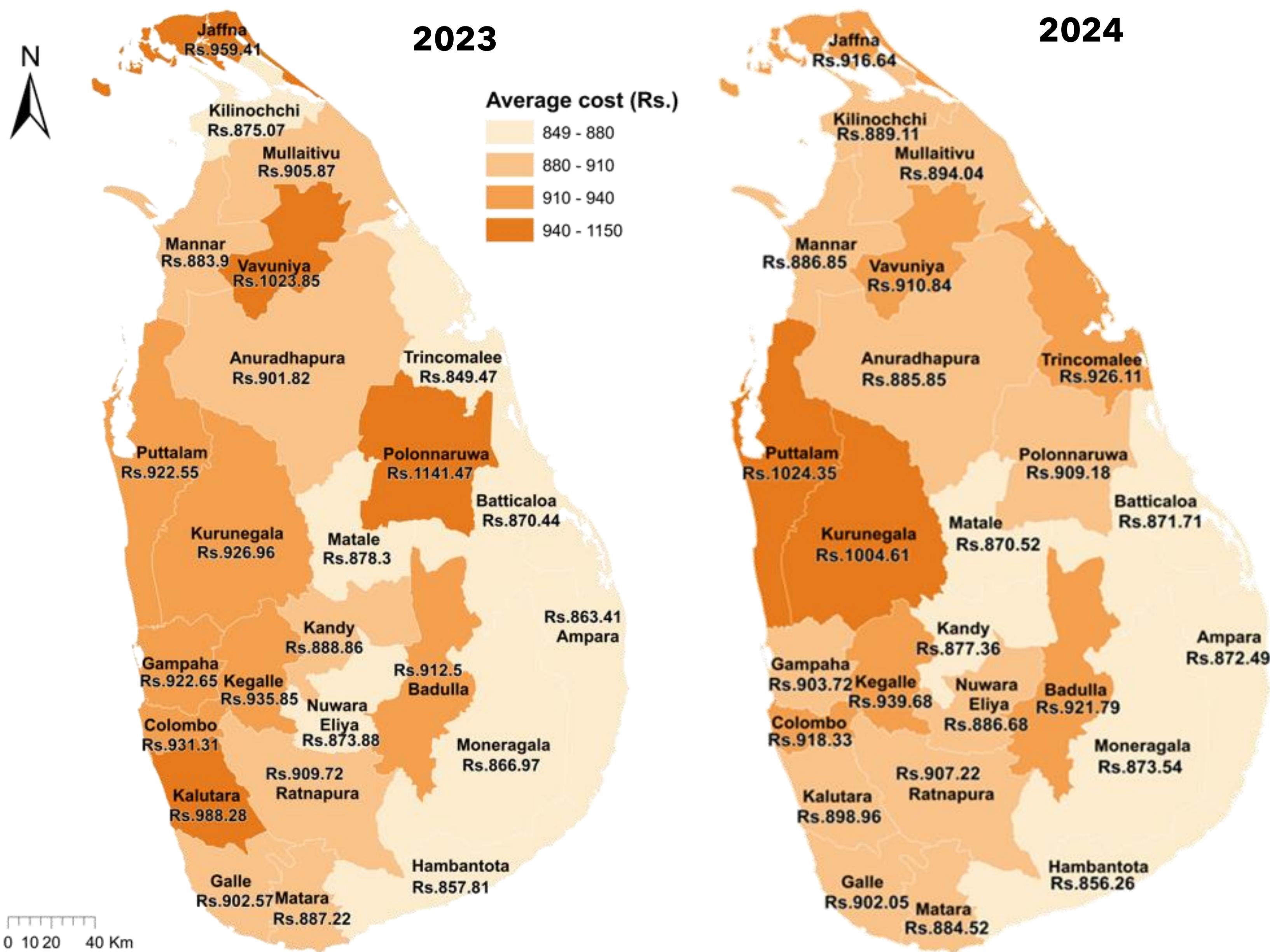


Figure 1: Cost of nutritious diet (LKR/HH/Day)

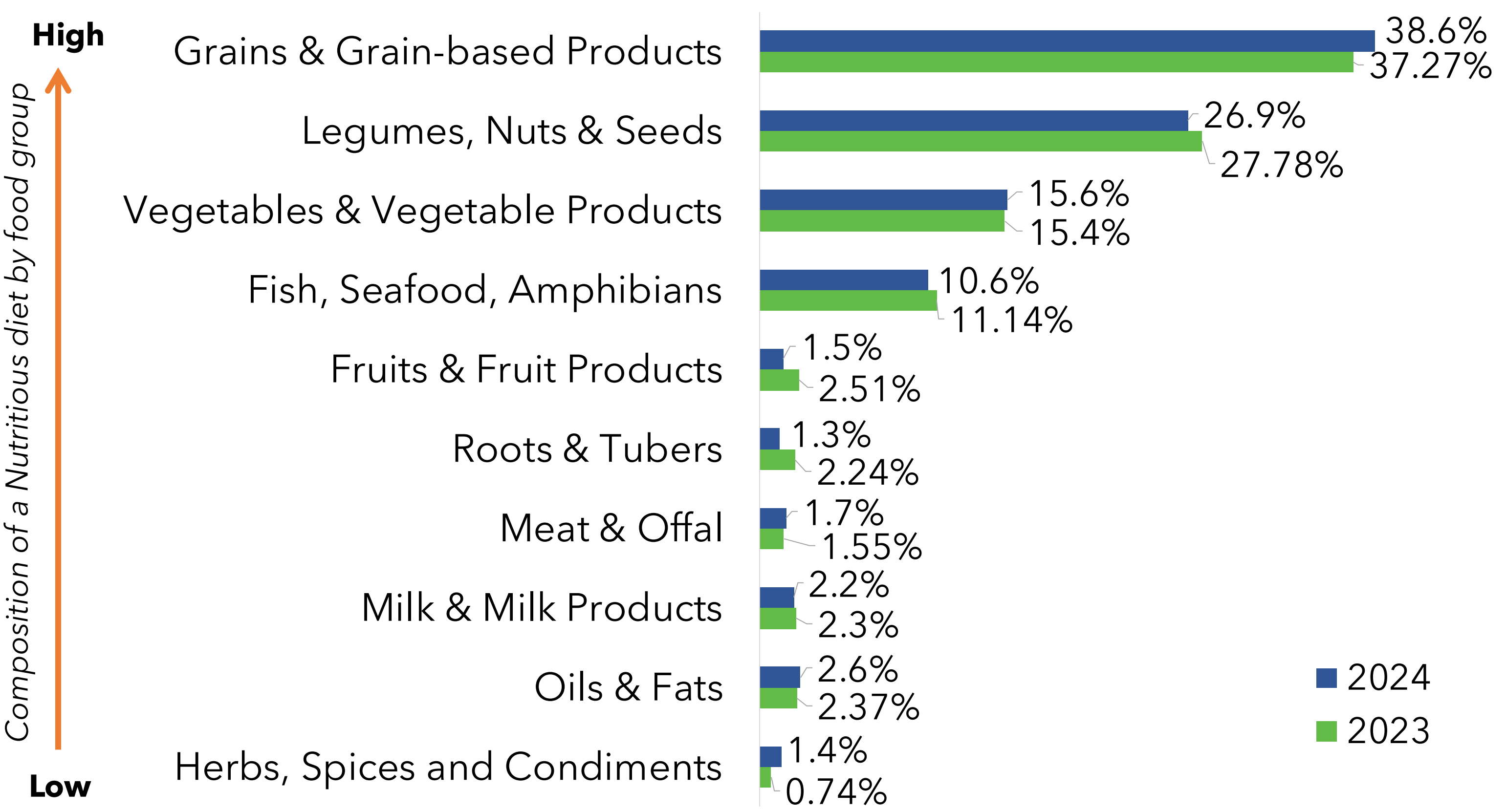


Figure 2: Cost of nutritious diet by food Group (%)

CONCLUSION

- The Energy-Only Diet, which meets basic energy needs, remains substantially cheaper than the Nutritious Diet, underscoring gaps in access to nutrient-dense diets.
- Integrating nutrition sensitivity to existing social protection programs, and scaling up nutrition initiatives such as the school meals, Poshana Malla, and fortification to reduce nutritious diet costs.
- Cost-effective strategies that leverage underutilized local foods can improve dietary quality and nutrition outcomes.
- Strong policy framework and multisectoral engagement between the government, UN agencies, academia, civil society, and private sector.