

# Costing a Sustainable, Basic 7-Day Menu: A Tool for Policymakers and Educators to Help Ensure Adequacy in Dietary Intake

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**SNEB Competency:** Describe the role of NGOs in developing health promoting and food security activities

## ABSTRACT

**Background & Objectives:** A study was conducted by Caritas Malta in 2019-20 to establish A Minimum Essential Budget for a Decent Living (MEBDL), covering basic necessities, including food. Key objectives included to calculate the Euro amount required for food for three family types, to offer evidence for food security policy development, and to produce tools for counselling on food budgeting and meal planning.

**Study Design & Method:** Three 7-day menus were created, comprising three meals and two snacks daily and meeting the nutritional needs of three configurations of low-income households. Feedback on the menus was obtained from representatives of these target households during one-to-one or focus group interviews. The menus were then costed in a supermarket having moderate prices. Finally, the cost of national food aid packages distributed to low-income households was deducted from each of the three menu totals.

**Results:** The monthly cost of the three menus were €593.45, €430.65 and €281.24 for households made up of 2 adults and 2 children, 1 adult and 2 children, and 2 elderly persons, respectively. This cost corresponded to 41% to 51% of the total MEBDL. Adding eating out once a month increased the cost by €10 per person.

**Conclusions:** In low-income Maltese households, a sustainable, healthy diet would account for a high share of total expenses. Nutrition educators have a key role in guiding policymakers and low-income households on maximising nutrient intake based on income.

## BACKGROUND



Caritas Malta is a not-for-profit, non-governmental organisation which **strives to eradicate poverty and promote a decent quality of life for the most vulnerable.**

**Ensuring an accessible, appropriate, nutritious diet is one of its activities.**

In 2019-2020, Caritas Malta conducted a study to establish a **Minimum Essential Budget for a Decent Living\*\* (MEBDL)**, covering basic necessities such as **food**, and with a focus on **low-income households**.



## OBJECTIVES

**Key MEBDL goals included:**

- To calculate the **monthly Euro amount required for food for three family configurations**
- To offer **evidence** for food security policy development
- To **produce tools** for counselling on sustainable, healthy, low-cost meal planning.



Target family configurations

**Three 7-day menus were created, one for each family configuration, based on the following criteria :**

- Include three meals and two snacks daily
- Adhere to the Maltese national dietary guidelines
- Ensure appropriate servings and portion sizes to meet the nutritional needs of children, adults and the elderly
- Include traditional foods and dishes
- Sensitive to contemporary lifestyles

## STUDY DESIGN & METHOD

**Feedback on the menus was sought from representatives of the 3 family types**

- 4 one-to-one interviews (partnered parent and lone parents)
- 2 focus group interviews (elderly individuals and lone parents)

**The three menus were costed in a popular supermarket having moderate prices.** Preference was given to foods which were local, fresh and had a 'healthy' dietary/nutrition profile keeping in mind value for money.

**The cost of food aid packages distributed by the state to low-income households as part of national food security programmes was also computed.** This cost was **deducted from each of the shop-costed totals to achieve the final cost of the three menus.**

2 Adults & 2 Children	Breakfast	Mid-Morning Snack	Lunch	Mid-Afternoon Snack	Evening Meal
Monday - Adult	2 x 40g wholegrain cereal with 2 x 125ml skimmed milk, 2 x 1 banana, 2 x cup of tea/coffee with 35ml skimmed milk	2 x 4 small wholegrain galletti, 1/4 gbejna niexfa, 2 x 1 apple, 2 x cup of tea/coffee with 35ml skimmed milk	2 x 2 large slices maltese bread with 2 x 1 tomato, 2 x 1 small tin tuna in oil, 2 x 2 lettuce leaves, 2 x 6 cucumber sticks (approx 1/2 med. cucumber or 80g), 2 x 1 light yoghurt, 2 x 1/2 small bottle water	2 x 1 qaghqa tal-hmira, 2 x cup of tea/coffee with 35ml skimmed milk	2 x 4 home-made chicken nuggets (2 x 80g chicken breasts, 2 x 50g homemade breadcrumbs, 2 x 1/2 egg), 2 x 1 cup (80g) broccoli, 2 x 1 cup (80g) carrots, 2 x med. baked potato, 2 x 2 tsp olive oil, 2 x 1 slice wholemeal bread, 2 x fruit in season, 2 x filtered tap water with 2 x 1/2 lemon sliced
Monday - Children	2 x 40g wholegrain cereal with 2 x 125ml skimmed milk, 2 x 1/2 banana, 2 x 1 freshly squeezed orange	2 x 1 large slice maltese bread with 2 x 1/2 tomato, 2 x 1/2 small tin tuna in oil, 2 x 1 lettuce leaf, 2 x 1 apple, 2 x 1/2 small bottle water	2 x 1 large slice maltese bread with 2 x 1/2 tomato, 2 x 1/2 small tin tuna in oil, 2 x 1 lettuce leaf, 2 x 3 cucumber sticks (approx 1/4 med. cucumber or 40g), 2 x 1 small tub yoghurt, 2 x 1/2 small bottle water	2 x 1 med. slice pizza with mushroom, tomato and cheese (1/4 dinner plate size bought or home-made thick pizza base with 1/2 tomato, 40g mushroom, 20g skimmed mozzarella cheese), 2 x 250ml milk	2 x 4 home-made chicken nuggets (2 x 80g chicken breasts, 2 x 50g homemade breadcrumbs, 2 x 1/2 egg), 2 x 1/2 cup (40g) broccoli, 2 x 1/2 cup (40g) carrots, 2 x 1/2 med. baked potato, 2 x 2 tsp olive oil, 2 x fruit in season, 2 x filtered tap water with 2 x 1/2 lemon sliced

Specimen day menu for 2 adults and 2 children

## RESULTS

Monthly cost of 7-day menu	2 adults & 2 children	Lone parent & 2 children	Elderly couple
Basic	€593.45	€430.65	€281.24
Basic menu + Eating out (simple snack or meal)	€633.45	€460.65	€301.24

\*\*Link to full MEBDL study: <https://www.caritasmalta.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Caritas-MEBDL.pdf>

Cost of food amounted to **41-51%** of the Basic MEBDL

## CONCLUSIONS

Similar to many countries, in Malta a sustainable, healthy diet would account for a high share of the total expenses for basic necessities of low-income households.

Nutrition educators have a key role in providing guidance to policymakers, and advice to households, on maximising nutrient density in dietary intake based on income.

A selection of healthy, low cost, weekly menus, such as those designed for the MEBDL, could be useful educational tools for those working with low-income families.