



United Against
Malnutrition & Hunger

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Malnutrition 101

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An Alliance for Global Action

Introduction

Malnutrition is a condition where an individual doesn't receive the appropriate quantity or quality of nutrients required for physical and intellectual growth, development, and repair. In the context of development, malnutrition is often used synonymously with undernutrition. Similarly, although hunger is defined as a desire to eat and feeling uncomfortable or weak due to a lack of food, in the development context it refers to a lack of access to food. All hunger, if not addressed, will lead to malnutrition.

The World Health Organization categorises undernutrition into four categories:

Wasting

Low weight for height - often referred to as acute undernutrition as it can indicate recent and severe weight loss. This is the deadliest form of malnutrition and leads to high rates of child deaths.

Stunting

Low height for age - often referred to as chronic undernutrition. Consequences of this far exceed shorter stature to devastating impacts for multiple generations on physical and mental development.

Underweight

Low weight for age - this can present with or without wasting and/or stunting.

Micronutrient deficiencies

Low in key vitamins and minerals, with or without sufficient food (calories) - these deficiencies can lead to specific health issues. Common examples include iron-deficiency leading to anaemia and vitamin A deficiency leading to vision impairments. These are particularly harmful to pregnant women and young children.

Impact of malnutrition

Malnutrition affects millions of people and alongside high mortality rates can result in stunted growth, delayed brain development, reduced vaccine effectiveness, increased risk and severity of infections, and weakened immune systems. It can also increase the risk of obesity, cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Malnutrition also has far-reaching economic and social impact. Impaired brain development can affect a child's educational attainment and future earning potential. The burden of illnesses and premature deaths also places a strain on healthcare systems and reduces productivity in affected communities. Extreme hunger is also connected to exacerbated instability and violence.

Good nutrition on the other hand, has wide ranging positive impacts. When mothers have the right nutrients this positively impacts the health of infants. This is particularly important for the critical phases of development (i.e. first 1000 days of life since conception) as malnutrition can result in irreversible consequences and even death. Good nutrition leads to healthy populations, strengthened health systems, better educational outcomes for children, and fosters peace and stability.

Causes of Malnutrition

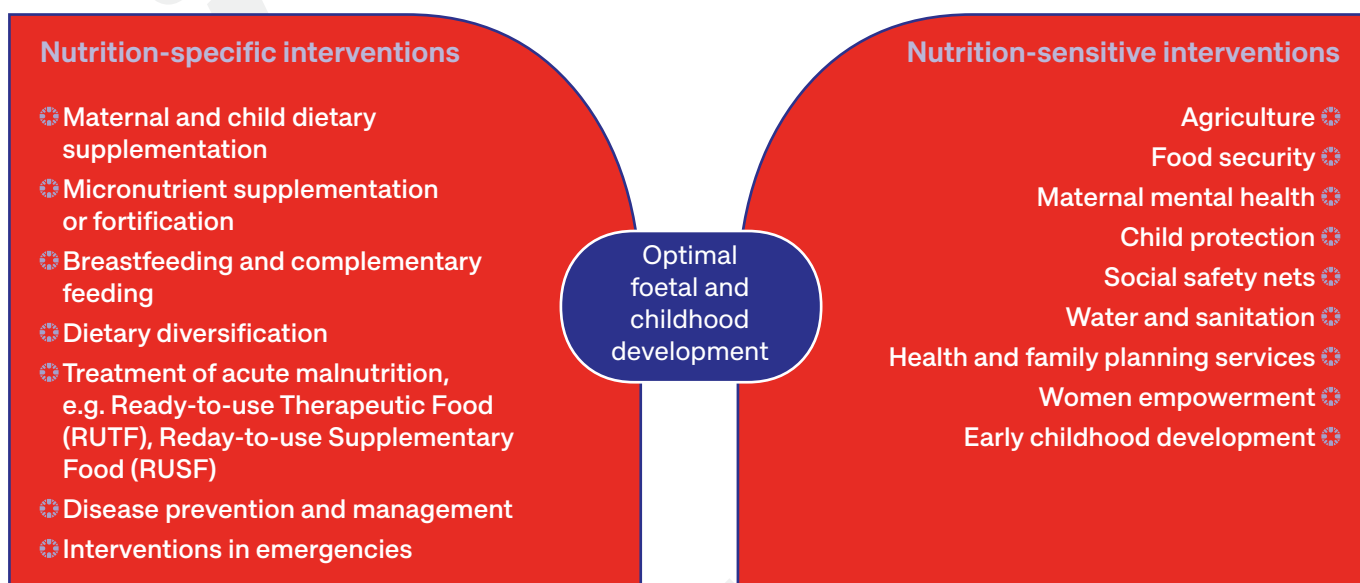
Malnutrition is widely associated with poverty, food insecurity, and underlying illnesses. It is perpetuated by delayed and reduced access to healthcare services, often seen in emergency and humanitarian settings. Young children, pregnant women, and the elderly are most vulnerable to malnutrition. Food crises hit women and girls the hardest - they often eat last and least. Pregnant and breastfeeding women and infants have specific nutritional needs that can be overlooked and underserved.

Socioeconomic factors play a significant role in malnutrition causes. Poverty, lack of access to education, and limited employment opportunities contribute to food insecurity and hinder access to a diverse and nutritious diet. Food insecurity strongly increases risk of malnutrition. In many regions, seasonal variations in food production and distribution, conflict, and the climate crisis worsen the issue, leaving vulnerable populations at higher risk. These situations disrupt food systems, lead to displacement of populations, and reduce access to food, clean water, and healthcare.

Tackling Malnutrition

Good nutrition is foundational for individual and global development. In 2015 the world committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, including Goal 2 of “Zero Hunger”: achieving food security and improving nutrition while promoting sustainable agriculture. However, slow progress and challenges such as COVID-19, conflict, and climate change has meant that the world is tragically off track to meet these. The UK is the only G7 member to have cut Official Development Assistance (ODA) since the pandemic, and has also used nearly a third of its ODA budget to support refugees in the UK. This has led to a cut in nutrition funding of over 60%. The UK has committed to spending £1.5 billion between 2022-30 to tackle malnutrition and hunger as its Nutrition for Growth pledge. Unlike previous commitments, it has not specified how this will be allocated between nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive projects.

There are two main types of nutrition programmes: nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive. Nutrition-specific interventions involve direct actions to reduce malnutrition by providing immediate care and supplies to save lives. Nutrition-sensitive interventions aim to address the underlying causes of malnutrition, such as poverty and lack of education. The examples below are not exhaustive and it is important to note that while both categories are critical, the world needs to renew its political and financial commitment to nutrition-specific interventions to ensure immediate action on malnutrition and save millions of lives.

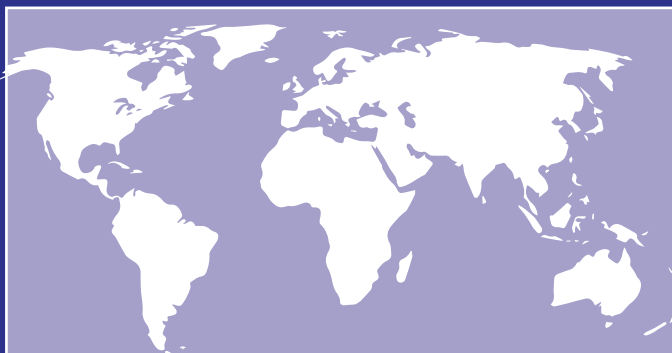


UAMH recommendations to improve nutrition and food security

- **Increasing financing** for nutrition programmes, with an emphasis on long term, predictable and **multi-year funding** which builds resilience.
- Ensuring that nutrition interventions **reach the most vulnerable populations**, including women and children, through nutrition-specific programmes.
- **Integrating nutrition services** within national health systems as part of a wider package of essential services and supporting health system strengthening efforts, including **support for community health workers** - 70% of whom are women.
- **Tackling root causes of malnutrition** such as worsening climate crises and food insecurity by addressing poverty, improving agricultural practices, and strengthening local food systems.
- Greater investments in **research and development** for improved treatment, early detection and prevention of malnutrition.
- Greater investment in **sustainable, climate-resilient food systems**, including investment in **research and development into affordable, nutritious, and climate-resilient crops**, helping to enhance food security and address the root causes of malnutrition.

Key statistics

Malnutrition is the cause of **45% of deaths of children under 5**, claiming the lives of over 2 million each year. Yet it continues to **receive less than 1% of ODA**.



More than **3 billion people (42% of the global population)** can't afford a healthy diet.

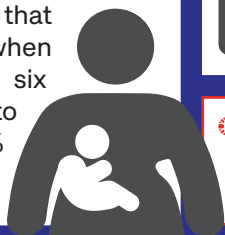
A severely malnourished child is **11 times more likely to die** from infectious diseases such as pneumonia than a well-nourished one.

More than **1 billion adolescent girls and women worldwide** suffer from undernutrition and there are 150 million more women and girls who are hungrier than men and boys.



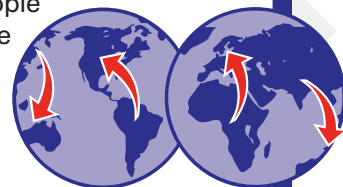
Over **40% of pregnant women globally suffer from anaemia** and 66% of non-pregnant women of reproductive age worldwide have micronutrient deficiencies.

Despite wide acknowledgement that children get the best start in life when they are exclusively breastfed until six months of age and continue to breastfeed until at least two, only 41% of babies around the world are exclusively breastfed.



According to the World Food Programme, over a **quarter of a billion people** across 58 countries and territories faced acute food insecurity at crisis or worse levels in 2022 - up from 193 million people in 53 countries and territories in 2021.

For every **1% increase in food insecurity, there is a 2% increase in migration**. Without an increase in efforts, nearly 600 million people are still expected to face hunger in 2030, which would signify almost no progress in the current decade towards the SDGs.



SDG two included a commitment to reduce 'wasting' to less than 3%. However, with wasting levels still at 7%, the world is dangerously off track.

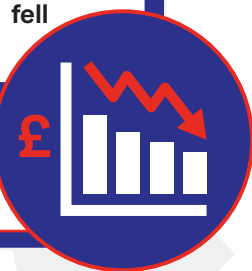
According to the Power of Nutrition, to achieve the SDGs, particularly the crucial Goal 2, the world needs an additional \$US39 – 50bn per year.

According to research compiled by the French Government, **reducing malnutrition can raise gross domestic product (GDP) per capita by up to 11%**.

The Global Investment Framework for Nutrition called for an average annual increase of over \$US2bn to meet the World Health Assembly targets on nutrition; however, in 2021, **FCDO's bilateral ODA spending on nutrition fell by more than 60%**.



FCDO's spending on nutrition-specific programmes has **decreased by 57.3%, the lowest amount since 2011**.



Further reading

- 1 Closing the gender gap: A global framework of actions to improve women and girls rights, advance gender equality, and improve their nutrition.
- 2 Sustainable Development Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
- 3 Power of Nutrition: Maximising Resources for Nutrition (due to be published shortly).
- 4 UNICEF's 2023 flagship report: **Undernourished and Overlooked: A Global Nutrition Crisis in Adolescent Girls and Women**.
- 5 The Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Network's response to the UN Food Systems Summit 2.
- 6 Hunger to Health: A UK Action Plan to Turn the Tide on Malnutrition and Hunger (due to be published shortly).



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