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Save the Children

## **Hungry for change – an eight step, costed package to tackle global child hunger**

### **Policy brief**

**More than 35% of preventable deaths among children under five every year are still associated with undernutrition.<sup>1</sup> An estimated 195 million children are stunted and left with irreversible physical and mental impairments. Yet with a comprehensive package of interventions, strong political leadership and increased and sustainable funding, global child hunger can be effectively tackled and millions of lives saved.**

Today, there is a much better understanding of what approaches can drastically reduce undernutrition. But political leadership is missing. Between 1990 and 2006, the prevalence of underweight among children under five went down by just five percentage points from 32% to 27%.<sup>2</sup> More than 90% of stunted children, and the highest prevalences of underweight children, are found in Asia and Africa. Just 24 countries account for 80% of the 195 million stunted children, and just ten countries for 60% of the number of wasted children.<sup>3</sup>

We also know there is a critical window of opportunity – from conception through to a child's second birthday – when irreversible physical and mental impairments can be prevented and children's prospects for survival, growth and development improved. That is just 1,000 days to act.

### **What works and what doesn't**

There is now a broad consensus as to what can significantly reduce undernutrition – both acute and chronic. Prevention is critical and must encompass a wide range of measures that move beyond a single health-focused approach. The global 2007-08 food crisis was a cruel reminder that undernutrition also results from economic causes, which have been widely disregarded by many governments and agencies. Finally, relying solely on calorie intake as a measure of undernutrition does not guarantee effective diets. People need much more than calories – they need protein, fat, vitamins and minerals – and young children need these in disproportionate

quantities because they are growing and developing.

A comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach should be at the cornerstone of global and national strategies to reduce undernutrition. Each approach should tackle both its immediate, underlying and root causes. It should incorporate means to overcome economic barriers to nutritious food, alongside a strong focus on building poor households' resilience to cope with recurrent as well as isolated crises.

### **Our child hunger package**

Save the Children has designed a concrete action plan to tackle child hunger and undernutrition.<sup>4</sup> It includes eight costed interventions that are critical to improving the diets of pregnant women and young children. Based on recent evidence and findings from our own research and programmatic work, it reflects the need for a comprehensive and integrated response to undernutrition. The eight immediate and long-term interventions are:

1. **Exclusive breastfeeding support and promotion** through direct support and a wider encouraging environment
2. **Micronutrient supplementation and deworming:** 10% of deaths in children under five years are attributable to micronutrient deficiencies, particularly vitamin A and zinc
3. **Nutrition-friendly agriculture and livestock policies** designed to increase the availability and reduce the cost of nutritious food. They must be gender sensitive and take specific account of the fact that most small-scale farmers are women, who are often balancing childcare responsibilities and farming
4. **Safety nets and social cash transfers** to allow poor families to buy nutritious food and build up their assets. Transfers should target children early in life, and be big enough to have an impact on their nutritional status. They should also be regular and linked to the price of an appropriate basket of food
5. **Fortified foods** to ensure that women and children consume a wider range of nutrients on a longer-term basis
6. **Nutrition education and hygiene practices**, particularly effective among food secure populations or as part of a holistic package. The information must be simple, targeted and context based, and multiple channels used, specifically healthcare providers whenever possible
7. **Early warning systems and response** through information systems that make it possible to conduct vulnerability analysis, map the risks that different communities are exposed to, predict when crises will occur, and trigger appropriate responses
8. **Community-based management of severe acute malnutrition (SAM)** through integrating treatment of SAM into basic packages of health services, and standardisation of protocols.

We estimate the cost of the package to be US\$8.8 billion per year – the equivalent to the annual budget of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and

25 pence a day for the first two years of a child's life – for eight of the countries with high rates of stunting.

## Political leadership and coordination

National political leadership and cross-ministry coordination are paramount to the effective implementation of the proposed multi-sectoral package. Political leadership must come from the highest offices of government, ideally the offices of president or prime minister. This leadership must ensure effective progress, coordination and accountability across line ministries through an overarching structure, with adequate links and ownership at district and local levels.

But leadership and coordination are also urgently needed internationally. The UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) – the UN body for nutrition – has failed to galvanise united and concerted action against malnutrition, in contrast with other UN partnerships on other issues, such as UNAIDS.

There are positive signs that those working around nutrition are looking to bring their efforts, expertise and resources together. The UN Secretary General's appointment of a Special Representative on Food Security and Nutrition sends a strong message that undernutrition is a genuine priority for the UN. But without greater political leadership to tackle undernutrition – and particularly child hunger – from donors and governments in high-burden countries, the lives of millions of children will continue to be cut short and seriously damaged by a preventable and treatable condition.

## What we are calling for

- **An institutional leader on nutrition and greater coordination at global level.** The current reform process of the SCN must lead to a united, coordinated and effective partnership that includes all constituencies, not least those countries most affected. Other reform initiatives focused on food security architecture such as the reform of the Committee on World Food Security and the World Bank-administered Global Programme for Agriculture and Food Security (World Bank Trust Fund) must also explicitly and meaningfully include nutrition in their structure (ie, UN bodies and agencies, representatives from civil society organisations and NGOs working on nutrition in relevant groups) and frameworks for action.
- **Greater political leadership through the creation of a Global Council on Child Hunger** which focuses on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal on malnutrition reduction in children (part of MDG 1).
- **Leadership at the national level, particularly in high-burden countries.** Governments of the 36 countries with the highest levels of undernutrition must seize the broad hunger and child survival agenda, assign top political leaders to oversee it, and ensure that a coordinated effort across line ministries is achieved.

- **A comprehensive approach to undernutrition reduction that addresses both its immediate and underlying causes with an integrated child hunger package**
- **An increase in and better-targeted funding by donor governments.** Bilateral and multilateral donors must prioritise and scale up funding to the countries with the highest burden of undernutrition and prioritise actions that target the critical 33-month period. They must work together to ensure that nutrition becomes an international political priority. They should ensure that no credible government plan to reduce undernutrition fails through lack of funds. They should also invest in mechanisms to further expand the evidence base on strategies to tackle stunting.
- **Greater accountability** by governments against commitments made. In particular, *all* governments must measure their progress on MDG 1 against both the poverty and hunger target – the latter being measured by the prevalence of underweight children under five years of age.
- **Investment in systems to collect and analyse nutrition information.** Country and global statistics on hunger and undernutrition are out of date and often estimates, so policy and programme decisions are rarely based on who is undernourished and why. Data on nutritional status at national level is collected too infrequently. More investment in integrating nutrition information into national surveillance systems is needed so that timely data can be used to drive decision-making and speed up efforts to reduce undernutrition.

## References

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1 There are three measures of child malnutrition: chronically malnourished or stunted children are too short for their age; acutely malnourished or wasted children are too thin – their weight is too low for their height, and an underweight child has a low weight for their age and could be chronically and/or acutely malnourished

2 UNICEF (2007) *Progress for children: A world fit for children – Statistical review*, No 6

3 UNICEF (2009) *Tracking progress on child and maternal nutrition*

4 Save the Children UK (2009) *Hungry for Change: An eight-step, costed plan of action to tackle global child hunger*