



United Against  
Malnutrition & Hunger



Global Panel  
on Agriculture  
and Food Systems  
for Nutrition



# Why nutrition is foundational to development

## About United Against Malnutrition & Hunger

United Against Malnutrition & Hunger ([uamh.uk](http://uamh.uk)) is an alliance for global action on malnutrition and hunger. UAMH brings together leaders from scientific, business, finance, military, diplomatic, faith, philanthropic, and civil society backgrounds, who want to see a world in which everyone has access to the good nutrition they need to thrive and contribute to prosperous and stable communities. UAMH presses the UK Government and politicians of all parties to restore the UK to the heart of global efforts to end malnutrition.

## About the Global Panel

The Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition ([www.glopan.org](http://www.glopan.org)) works with international stakeholders and governments in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to develop evidence-based policies that will deliver high-quality diets that are safe and secure, affordable, and sustainable. Universal access to such diets is an essential foundation for the future development of all LMICs, and the delivery of virtually all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It was formally established in August 2013 at the Nutrition for Growth Summit in London and was funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) up until April 2021.

## Introduction

Access to good nutrition should be a basic human right. Currently, it is only implied as a key factor in the right of every human to food and health. But making nutrition's role more explicit would help nations understand its importance in the security, prosperity, and economic development of all people.

Without universal access to diets that are healthy, affordable and sustainable, people living in poverty, and particularly the most vulnerable, will continue to suffer entrenched and inter-generational inequalities. Malnourished children risk being disadvantaged throughout their lives. Hunger and malnutrition, and its accompanying poverty, will continue to fuel social unrest and conflict, and, in some cases, drive outward migration.

Yet today, 783 million people suffer from hunger. Most live in developing countries where food insecurity is exacerbated by conflict, climate change, and economic pressures. However, malnutrition is far more widespread. Today, about three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet at today's local prices.

Between 1990 and 2015, the UK working with international partners contributed to a decline of almost 50% in the proportion of undernourished people in the world. But recently these hard-won gains have reversed. At the same time, malnutrition receives less than 1% of Official Development Assistance (ODA). In 2021, funding for nutrition in the UK foreign aid budget was cut by more than 60%.

This brief sets out the case for rethinking and rebalancing the UK's developmental priorities in favour of nutrition, recognising it as foundational to delivering on multiple developmental policy agendas.

# How good nutrition is foundational for development

## Nutrition and early childhood development

Children need the right nutrients to grow and flourish, particularly in the first one thousand days from conception.

Breastfeeding provides a complete, nutritious food source in the first six months of life. It saves lives, protects against disease, and boosts brain development. Yet worldwide only 44% of babies are exclusively breastfed.

Malnutrition is the cause of 45% of deaths of children under 5, claiming the lives of over 2 million children each year.

Poor nutrition during infancy and early childhood can have long-term effects on a child's development. Vitamin A deficiency weakens immunity, risking blindness and death from common illnesses like diarrhoea. Iron deficiency damages the brain and nervous and respiratory systems.

Today, approximately 20 million infants are born with a low birth weight (less than 2.5kgs) globally, and 73% of all low birthweight infants reside in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Adolescent girls need nutritious diets to establish reserves for childbearing. Malnourished mothers lacking iodine, iron, folate, calcium, and zinc are at risk of anaemia, and pre-eclampsia, more likely to haemorrhage, die during childbirth, or have a stillbirth. They are more likely to have a low birth-weight baby who may suffer impaired physical and cognitive development.

## Nutrition and health

Investing in good nutrition is an investment in the health, wellbeing, and prosperity of a nation.

Good nutrition creates a stronger immune system, lowers the risk of non-communicable diseases like diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and improves life expectancy.

Malnutrition is estimated to cost up to 16% of national GDP in the majority of affected African and Asian countries, compared to an average cost of 2-3% in countries across the world.

Well-nourished children learn better. Adults with adequate nutrition have higher productivity, making them more able to create opportunities to break the cycles of poverty and hunger.

Malnutrition and diet-related diseases are preventable but are a leading cause of death worldwide costing USD 5.5 trillion annually.

By contrast, malnutrition increases vulnerability to infectious diseases in childhood, and chronic conditions later in life. It undermines the effectiveness of vaccines and medical treatments and adds pressure on healthcare systems already under strain. Providing multiple micronutrient supplementation (MMS) to pregnant women is one example of an effective intervention to improve nutrition.

# Why good nutrition matters to the SDGs



Source: WHO, Department for Nutrition and Health Development, 2018 and Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition SDG brief, 2017.

## Nutrition and gender

Women's empowerment is critical to the elimination of global malnutrition. However, customs, social roles, and discrimination continue to sustain gender inequality in access to nutrition.

Women make up most of the labour force in agriculture and food production in the developing world. They prepare and preserve food. As marketeers, they connect producers with consumers. Women play a key role in helping families to gain access to nutritious food.

More than 1 billion adolescent girls and women worldwide suffer from malnutrition.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by hunger and malnutrition. In households they often eat least, last and worst and typically have less decision-making power and access to resources.

Evidence suggests that when women have the resources and opportunities they need, they can significantly improve food security and nutrition for their families and communities.

## Definitions

**Malnutrition:** a lack of the nutrients needed for physical and intellectual growth, development, and repair. Malnutrition in children can lead to stunting (low height for age) and wasting (low weight for height). Hunger leads to malnutrition if not addressed.

**Food security:** secure access to sufficient food which is safe and nutritious.

**Development:** aims to reduce poverty, improve healthcare, guarantee universal access to education, encourage sustainability, and promote inclusive growth.

**Good nutrition:** a diet providing the nutrients necessary for optimal health and development.

**Food systems:** networks of production, farming, processing, global supply chains, and retail.

## Nutrition and education

Nutrition is foundational to achieving the development goals of quality education and economic growth.

Every \$1 invested in nutrition generates \$16 in returns, making it one of the most impactful and profitable investments for communities.

Malnutrition, causing stunting in childhood, has a profound impact on cognitive development and educational attainment. It leads to lower academic performance and reduced future productivity and earning potential. For countries, it can act as a brake on economic development.

Investing in nutrition delivers a high return on investment and there is already good evidence of what policies and actions work. Providing nutritious school meals is just one example.

## Nutrition and food systems

Currently, the global food supply is too focused on quantity at the expense of food quality. It provides cheap calories lacking necessary nutrients by relying on a narrow range of crops.

To address malnutrition, all parts of the food system – from production, through to processing, storage, supply, and retail – need to work together. The goal is to provide diverse, nutritious foods that are both affordable and accessible, and which consumers want to eat.

Too many poor-quality foods are produced and consumed, including ultra-processed products, that are linked to poor health outcomes, in particular to diet-related chronic diseases which are increasingly putting unsustainable strains on health budgets around the globe. For example, low-quality diets are closely associated with the current global diabetes epidemic.

Healthy diets are unaffordable for much of the world's population, especially in South Asia and Africa. Nutrient-dense foods like fruits, vegetables, and animal-source foods are expensive compared with calorie-dense foods because agricultural policies and consumer subsidies have favoured the production of staple crops.

Food supply increasingly lacks the resilience to cope in a world which is becoming more uncertain and volatile. For example, many African countries have been dealing with multiple crises – including COVID-19, conflict, pests and diseases affecting crops, the growing debt crisis, and climate change.

Over a third of the global population, around 2.8 billion people, cannot afford a healthy diet.

## Nutrition and climate change

Better nutrition cannot be delivered in the longer term unless agriculture and food systems become more sustainable. Agriculture is a major contributor to climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. It is operating well beyond what the planet can sustain.

**Malnutrition and hunger could increase by 20% by 2050 if the effects of climate change are not addressed.**

Food systems are in a vicious feedback loop with the planet's environmental systems. They produce a third of the greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. At the same time, accelerating climate change is threatening global food security with droughts, extreme heat, and floods affecting food production. Too often, the response is to clear more forests and intensify production – leading to poorer soil and increased carbon emissions.

**Evidence suggests that a 2°C rise in global temperature could increase the prevalence of stunting by 7.4% compared with today.**

Agricultural and livestock production releases carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxides into the atmosphere. These gases decrease nutrients in some grains and legumes making people vulnerable to zinc and iron deficiencies.

Building climate change resilience in communities eases pressures on humanitarian food assistance and develops a locally sustainable supply of nutritious food.

Healthy diets that stay within planetary boundaries (the Earth's safe limits) are critical to achieving the development goals of responsible consumption and production, and climate action.

## Nutrition and conflict

Hunger and conflict are locked in a vicious cycle. When populations face severe hunger, social cohesion breaks down. At the same time, conflicts can affect food supply through the destruction of farms, irrigation systems, and storage facilities, triggering shortages and price rises. This cycle of instability renders impoverished and hungry populations vulnerable to further unrest.

Conflict is a major driver of hunger. In 2023, conflict-driven hunger affected nearly 135 million people in 20 countries.

Malnutrition is a typical outcome in conflict zones, with children most affected by increased mortality and stunted growth.

To achieve sustainable peace in places where hunger prevails due to conflict, international efforts must focus on immediate humanitarian aid and long-term development strategies that promote food security and peacebuilding.

Global nutrition is of huge geopolitical significance. A world in which billions of people are malnourished produces instability and perpetuates injustice.

## Endnotes

For further information and the references that informed this briefing, please go to [www.glopan.org](http://www.glopan.org) and [www.uamh.uk](http://www.uamh.uk)

## Recommendations

Malnutrition and hunger should be restored as an international priority for the UK. Specific recommendations to support low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) include:

- 1 Increasing financing for nutrition programmes, with an emphasis on long-term, predictable, and multi-year funding which builds resilience.
- 2 Addressing entrenched inequality in LMICs by prioritising the nutrition of women and girls to improve maternal health and child development.
- 3 Greater investments in research and development for improved treatment, early detection, and prevention of malnutrition.
- 4 Breaking the vicious cycle between food systems and the planet's environmental degradation – recognising that addressing hunger and improving nutrition cannot be delivered in the longer term unless they become sustainable.
- 5 Integrating nutrition services within national health systems as part of a wider package of services. Supporting health system strengthening efforts, including support for community health workers.
- 6 Putting pressure on warring parties in conflict zones to adhere to international humanitarian law to allow access to food supplies. Working with international and local partners to promote food security and peacebuilding.