

WHA Global Nutrition Targets 2025: Stunting Policy Brief



**TARGET: 40% reduction
in the number of
children under-5 who
are stunted**



WHO/Antonio Suarez Weise

What's at stake

In 2012, the World Health Assembly Resolution 65.6 endorsed a *Comprehensive implementation plan on maternal, infant and young child nutrition*¹, which specified six global nutrition targets for 2025². This policy brief covers the first target: **a 40% reduction in the number of children under-5 who are stunted**. The purpose of this policy brief is to increase attention to, investment in, and action for a set of cost-effective interventions and policies that can help Member States and their partners in reducing stunting rates among children aged under 5 years.

Childhood stunting is one of the most significant impediments to human development, globally affecting approximately 162 million children under the age of 5 years. Stunting, or being too short for one's age, is defined as a height that is more than two standard deviations below the World Health Organization (WHO) Child Growth Standards median³. It is a largely irreversible outcome of inadequate nutrition and repeated bouts of infection during the first 1000 days of a child's life. Stunting has long-term effects on individuals and societies, including: diminished cognitive and physical development, reduced productive capacity and poor health, and an increased risk of degenerative diseases such as diabetes⁴. If current trends continue, projections indicate that 127 million children under 5 years will

be stunted in 2025. Therefore, further investment and action are necessary to the 2025 WHA target of reducing that number to 100 million.

Stunting is a well-established risk marker of poor child development. Stunting before the age of 2 years predicts poorer cognitive and educational outcomes in later childhood and adolescence^{5,6}, and has significant educational and economic consequences at the individual, household and community levels. Recent longitudinal studies of children from Brazil, Guatemala, India, the Philippines and South Africa associated stunting with a reduction in schooling, where adults who were stunted at age 2 completed nearly one year less school than non-stunted individuals^{7,8}.

Similarly, a study of Guatemalan adults found that those who were stunted as children had less total schooling, lower test performances, lower household per capita expenditure and a greater likelihood of living in poverty⁹. For women, stunting in early life was associated with a lower age at first birth and a higher number of pregnancies and children¹⁰. According to World Bank estimates, a 1% loss in adult height due to childhood stunting is associated with a 1.4% loss in economic productivity¹¹. It is estimated that stunted children earn 20% less as adults compared to non-stunted individuals¹².

Stunting is linked with the other global nutrition targets (anaemia in women of reproductive age, low birth weight, childhood overweight, exclusive breastfeeding, and wasting). Wasting is caused by the same factors that contribute to stunting. Actions focused on prevention, such as ensuring that pregnant and lactating mothers are adequately nourished, that children receive exclusive breastfeeding during the first 6 months of life, and provision of adequate complementary feeding in addition to breastfeeding for children aged 6–23 months, can help address both stunting and wasting¹³.

Conversely, stunted children who experience rapid weight gain after the age of 2 years have an increased risk of becoming overweight or obese later in life. Such weight gain is also associated with a higher risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, hypertension and type 2 diabetes⁶. Finally, interventions targeted at increasing exclusive breastfeeding rates, reducing rates of anaemia in women of reproductive age, and reducing the rate of infants born with low birth weight are all associated with a decreased risk of stunting.

Stunting is an enormous drain on economic productivity and growth. Economists estimate that stunting can reduce a country's gross domestic product by up to 3%¹¹. Policy-makers should consider prioritizing the following actions in order to achieve a 40% reduction in the number of stunted children less than 5 years of age:

- improve the identification, measurement and understanding of stunting and scale up coverage of stunting-prevention activities;
- enact policies and/or strengthen interventions to improve maternal nutrition and health, beginning with adolescent girls;
- implement interventions for improved exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices; and

- strengthen community-based interventions, including improved water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), to protect children from diarrhoeal diseases and malaria, intestinal worms and environmental causes of subclinical infection.

What causes stunting?

Factors that contribute to stunted growth and development include poor maternal health and nutrition, inadequate infant and young child feeding practices, and infection. Specifically, these include: maternal nutritional and health status before, during and after pregnancy influences a child's early growth and development, beginning in the womb¹⁴. For example, intrauterine growth restriction due to maternal undernutrition (estimated by rates of low birth weight) accounts for 20% of childhood stunting⁶. Other maternal contributors to stunting include short stature, short birth spacing, and adolescent pregnancy, which interferes with nutrient availability to the fetus (owing to the competing demands of ongoing maternal growth).

- Infant and young child feeding practices that contribute to stunting include suboptimal breastfeeding (specifically, non-exclusive breastfeeding) and complementary feeding that is limited in quantity, quality and variety.
- Severe infectious diseases lead to wasting, which may have long-term consequences for linear growth, depending on the severity, duration and recurrence, particularly if there is insufficient nourishment to support recovery.
- Subclinical infections, resulting from exposure to contaminated environments and poor hygiene, are associated with stunting, owing to nutrient malabsorption and reduced ability of the gut to function as a barrier against disease-causing organisms¹⁵.
- As a result of household poverty, caregiver neglect, non-responsive feeding practices, inadequate child stimulation and food insecurity can all interact to impede growth and development.

Framework for action

Inadequate nutrition is one of the many causes of stunting. Growth failure often begins in utero and continues after birth, as a reflection of suboptimal breastfeeding practices, and inadequate complementary feeding and control of infections¹⁷. Therefore, focusing on the critical 1000-day window from a woman's pregnancy to her child's second birthday is critically important.

Action can be taken across multiple areas to reduce rates of stunting. First, improving optimal breastfeeding practices is key to ensuring a child's healthy growth and development. Early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding for six months provides protection against gastrointestinal infections, which can lead to severe nutrient depletion and therefore stunting¹⁸. Breast milk is also a key source of nutrients during infection. Studies in resource-poor settings have associated non-exclusive breastfeeding with poorer growth outcomes, because breast milk is displaced, or replaced, by less nutritious foods that often also expose infants to diarrhoeal infections¹⁹⁻²¹. Similarly, continued breastfeeding in the second year contributes significantly to intake of key nutrients that are lacking in low-quality complementary diets in resource-poor settings²²⁻²⁴.

Second, among the most effective interventions for preventing stunting during the complementary feeding period is improving the quality of children's diet. Evidence suggests that greater dietary diversity²⁵⁻²⁸ and the consumption of foods from animal sources are associated with improved linear growth^{22,29}. While these solutions have not been tried

as standalone large-scale programmatic interventions, assessments of nutrition-sensitive agriculture recognize dietary diversification and income generation through family farming as likely pathways through which agriculture and food systems could improve nutrition and reduce stunting. Recent analyses suggest that households that can afford diversified diets, including fortified complementary foods, experience improved nutrient intakes and reduced stunting^{11,a}.

Thirdly, because stunting results from several household, environmental, socioeconomic and cultural factors, reduction of stunting requires that direct nutrition interventions are integrated and implemented in tandem with nutrition-sensitive interventions. For example, prevention of infections requires household practices such as hand-washing with soap, the success of which depends on behaviour change to adopt the practice (culture), the availability of safe water (water supply), and the affordability of soap (socioeconomic status)^{30,31}. Similarly, the availability of high-quality foods (food supply) and affordability of nutrient-rich foods (socioeconomic status) will affect a family's ability to provide a healthy diet and prevent child stunting.

Box 1: Progress on Reducing Child Undernutrition in Brazil

In the last three decades, Brazil has made significant progress in socioeconomic development, with marked improvements in the living conditions and health status of its population, including a substantial decline in child undernutrition. The number of Brazilians living on less than US\$ 1.25 per day dropped from 25.6% to 4.8% between 1990 and 2008. Stunting among children aged under 5 years also dropped from 37.1% in 1974 to 7.1% in 2007^{33,34}. Undernutrition among children aged between 1 and 2 years fell from 20% to 5%³⁴, and less than 2% of children currently suffer from wasting^{33,34}. Five key factors have contributed to Brazil's successes in combating malnutrition:

- improvements in the purchasing power of families through increases in the minimum wage and expansion of cash-transfer programmes;
- a rise in the rates of female education;
- improvements and expansion of maternal and child health services;
- expansion of water and sanitation systems; and
- improvements in the quality and quantity of food produced by small family farms.

Brazil's success was also driven by political leadership, effective decentralization, active civil society involvement and conditional and targeted funding. Not only has the Government of Brazil demonstrated strong political will to combat malnutrition, it has also invested strategically in policies and programmes to improve access to social services.

^a The safety of complementary foods is also an important intervention area for preventing microbial contamination due to poor hygiene and mycotoxicity from poor food handling and storage. For the latter, stunting has been linked with the ingestion of aflatoxin-contaminated cereals and nuts, which contribute to stunting through suppression of the immune system (increasing risk of infection) and interference with micronutrient metabolism in the liver.

Finally, at the programme level, specific contextual factors should be taken into account in order to determine the right mix of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions that are most likely to succeed. Important contextual factors include the magnitude of the stunting burden, household wealth, complexity of food value chains and systems' capacity for service delivery³².

Boxes 1-4 summarize experiences from four countries suggesting that equity-driven nutrition-sensitive

programmes that have the ability to improve vulnerable populations' access to and utilization of services achieve high reductions in the national average prevalence of stunting. Such programs also close gaps between the wealthier and poorer population segments. Political commitment, multisectoral collaboration, integrated service delivery and community involvement in programme activities are all common elements that contributed to success.



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Box 2: Progress on Reducing Child Undernutrition in Peru

In Peru, CRECER (“grow”) – the National Strategy against Child Malnutrition – had an initial target of 9% reduction in stunting between 2005 and 2011³⁵. Under the Prime Minister’s leadership, the strategy was implemented at national, regional and district levels and involved various sectors including health, education, water and sanitation, housing, agriculture and nongovernmental partners. An associated programme, JUNTOS (“together”), is a conditional cash-transfer programme targeting the poorest municipalities, with the aim of improving resources at the household level, educational opportunities and the utilization of health and nutrition services. Stunting among children aged under 5 years dropped from 22.9% in 2005 to 17.9% in 2010. Improvements in poor rural areas were larger than the national average, thanks to targeting through JUNTOS^{36,37}. Following more than a decade (1995–2005) when the national average rate of stunting remained unchanged (rural prevalence of stunting stagnated at 40% while urban stunting dropped from 16% to 10%), the dramatic improvements in Peru between 2005 and 2010 highlight the positive effect of a policy reform that integrated nutrition into social-protection strategies.

Box 3: Progress on Reducing Child Undernutrition in the Plurinational State of Bolivia

Zero Undernutrition in the Plurinational State of Bolivia is a joint programming model involving multiple sectors at national, regional and municipal levels³⁸. In order to eradicate undernutrition below the age of 2 years, the programme integrates the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months and the use of fortified complementary foods from 6 to 23 months, in interventions to improve food and nutrition security and access to clean water, sanitation, education, health care and nutrition services. Zero Undernutrition supports sustainable family farming, including raising guinea pigs and chickens and the production of staples, legumes and vegetables. Participating families were encouraged to consume their own produce and to apply “10 keys to safer foods and healthy diets”³⁹. After eight months of programme implementation, a survey in 24 food-insecure municipalities found that, in 80% of families, children aged under 5 years consumed one or more family farm products daily⁴⁰. An independent evaluation documented a promising trend of sustained yearly decline (2008 to 2011) in stunting among children under 2 years (from 18.5% to 13.5%)⁴¹.

Box 4: Progress on Reducing Child Undernutrition in Indian State of Maharashtra

India is the country with the largest number of stunted children aged under 5 years – about 61.7 million⁴. However, Maharashtra, a state in western India, was able to successfully reduce stunting rates in children under 2 years, from 44% in 2005 to 22.8% in 2012. Maharashtra’s success is based on a whole-of-government approach launched in 2005: the Rajmata Jijau Mother–Child Health and Nutrition Mission. This is a technical, advisory and training body with a three-part mission: to advocate for the importance of the first 1000 days, to provide policy advice to the government on evidence-based interventions, and to act as a platform to foster convergence among different departments with a common objective of reducing malnutrition. The mission built sustainability by promoting community-led and community-managed programmes. It also promoted behaviour change through the use of technology and media, as well as traditional media such as printed educational material and word of mouth. Moreover, the Mission encouraged additional data collection to measure progress and reveal gaps.

As illustrated by these examples, multisectoral approaches are required to effectively address stunting. For example, education policies that keep girls in school throughout adolescence may also have an impact on delaying marriage and childbearing and are associated with positive economic and health outcomes. Similarly, laws curtailing the marketing of breast-milk substitutes, and labour laws that provide maternity protection in support of exclusive and continued breastfeeding, including in the workplace, can improve the health of the mother and her children. Additionally, agriculture and food policies and innovations designed to improve household food security, food diversity and food safety and can also help contribute to the reduction of stunting.

Actions to drive progress in reducing stunting

In order to achieve the global stunting target for 2025, countries should begin with a situation analysis to determine how many under-5 children are stunted and assess the determinants of stunting in specific geographical and social contexts, so that actions are tailored to address contextual needs. A deliberate equity-driven policy targeting the most vulnerable populations is an effective strategy for reducing national stunting averages.

The following evidence-based recommendations should be implemented at scale, in order to achieve progress on stunting reduction in accordance with the World Health Assembly target.

1. Improve the identification, measurement and understanding of stunting and scale up coverage of stunting-prevention activities.

- Develop national stunting targets that are in line with, and will contribute to, the achievement of the global World Health Assembly targets^{2,42}.
- Strengthen methods to accurately assess the burden of stunting, in order to effectively plan, design and monitor programmes.
- Incorporate linear growth assessment into routine child health services, to provide critical, real-time information for target setting and progress monitoring.
- Integrate nutrition in health-promotion strategies and strengthen service-delivery capacity in primary health systems and community-based care for

prevention of stunting and acute malnutrition, supported by social protection programmes where feasible.

- Promote a holistic view of malnutrition through the understanding that stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies can occur in the same child, family and community, and ensure services for undernutrition are implemented in a more cohesive fashion.

2. Enact policies and/or strengthen interventions to improve maternal nutrition and health, beginning with adolescent girls.

- Implement programmes that deliver weekly iron and folate supplementation, as well as the prevention and treatment of infections and nutrient supplementation during pregnancy.
- Enact labour policies, including maternity protection, in support of exclusive and continued breastfeeding.
- Apply regulatory instruments such as the Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes⁴³ and food safety regulations in compliance with the Codex Alimentarius⁴⁴, to protect infant and young child nutrition.

3. Implement interventions for improved exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices.

- Protect and promote exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months to provide “secure” nutrition and protect infants from gastrointestinal infections.
- Promote consumption of healthy, diversified diets, including high-quality, nutrient-rich foods⁹ in the complementary feeding period (6–23 months).
- Improve micronutrient intake through food fortification, including of complementary foods, and use of supplements when and where needed.
- Foster safe food-storage and handling practices, to avoid infections from microbial contamination and mycotoxins.

4. Strengthen community-based interventions, including improved water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), to protect children from diarrhoeal diseases and malaria, intestinal worms and environmental causes of subclinical infection.

^b Animal-source foods are the best sources of high-quality nutrients. In vegetarian diets where cereals and legumes are the main sources protein, nutrient supplements or fortified foods can fill gaps.

World Health Organization Nutrition Tracking Tool

To assist countries in setting national targets to achieve the global goals – and tracking their progress toward them – the WHO's Department of Nutrition for Health and Development and partners have developed a web-based tracking tool that allows users to explore different scenarios to achieve the rates of progress required to meet the 2025 targets. The tool can be accessed at www.who.int/nutrition/trackingtool.

Additional resources

Scaling Up Nutrition Movement	<p>Scaling up nutrition in practice: effectively engaging multiple stakeholders. SUN; 2014 (http://scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Sun-in-Practice-issue-1.pdf, accessed 6 October 2014)⁴⁵.</p> <p>SUN Movement Strategy – 2012 to 2015. SUN; 2012 (http://scalingupnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/SUN-MOVEMENT-STRATEGY-ENG.pdf, accessed 6 October 2014)⁴⁶.</p>
Landscape analysis	<p>World Health Organization. Landscape analysis on countries' readiness to accelerate action in nutrition (http://www.who.int/nutrition/landscape_analysis/en/, accessed 6 October 2014)⁴⁷.</p>
Mainstreaming Nutrition Initiative	<p>Highlights importance of high-level political attention but also of strengthening the design of interventions and delivery systems, defining targets and giving focus to implementation of nutrition programmes⁴⁸.</p>
Lancet series 2008; 2013	<p>These series identify effective actions, costing, and policy and programmatic considerations for addressing maternal and child malnutrition^{49,50}.</p>
WHO colloquium on stunting reduction	<p>Childhood stunting: challenges and opportunities. Report of a colloquium. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2014 (http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/107026/1/WHO_NMH_NHD_GRS_14.1_eng.pdf?ua=1, accessed 21 October 2014).</p> <p>Horizontal and vertical coherence requires mutually reinforcing processes to foster grassroots participation, subnational-level service delivery and national coordination⁵¹.</p>
Global nutrition policy review	<p>Global nutrition policy review. What does it take to scale up nutrition action? Geneva: World Health Organization; 2013 (http://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/policies/global_nut_policyreview/en/, accessed 21 October 2014).</p> <p>This review provides an overview of the status of nutrition policies and programmes, especially what it takes to scale up nutrition action⁵².</p>
Issue 40 of SCN News	<p>Changing food systems for better nutrition. SCN News 2013;40 (http://www.unscn.org/files/Publications/SCN_News/SCNNEWS40_final_standard_res.pdf, accessed 21 October 2014).</p> <p>Papers reflecting on how to change food systems for better nutrition, with examples of countries and cities that are integrating agriculture and nutrition⁵³.</p>

State of food and agriculture 2013

The state of food and agriculture 2013. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; 2013 (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3300e/i3300e.pdf>, accessed 6 October 2014).

This report provides a very good analysis of nutrition problems by level of development of countries, as well as of food value chains by level of development⁵⁴.

World Bank

Horton S, Shekar M, McDonald C, Mahal A, Brooks JK. Scaling up nutrition – what will it cost? New York: World Bank; 2010 (<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/HEALTHNUTRITIONANDPOPULATION/Resources/Peer-Reviewed-Publications/ScalingUpNutrition.pdf>, accessed 6 October 2014)⁵⁵.

Improving nutrition through multisectoral approaches. New York: World Bank; 2013 (http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2013/02/05/000356161_20130205130807/Rendered/PDF/751020WP0Impro00Box374299B00PUBLIC0.pdf, accessed 6 October 2014)⁵⁶.

IDS – Fighting Maternal and Child Malnutrition

Acosta AM, Fanzo J. Fighting maternal and child malnutrition. Analysing the political and institutional determinants of delivering a national multisectoral response in six countries. Institute of Development Studies; 2012 (https://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/DFID_ANG_Synthesis_April2012.pdf, accessed 6 October 2014).

This report analyses the political and institution determinants of delivering a national multisectoral response in six countries – 2012⁵⁷.

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