



United Nations
System

Standing
Committee on
Nutrition

A Policy Brief

NUTRITION **and** the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals

Explicit attention to nutrition is needed as the world seeks to accelerate and sustain recent gains in development, and to expand these to include places and people who have been left behind. Action is urgently needed, and so is a more prominent role for nutrition across the Sustainable Development Goals. Nutrition is also, not least, a fundamental right of all of humanity. Without good nutrition, the mind and body cannot function well. When that happens, the foundations of economic, social and cultural life are undermined.



Nutrition must be understood as both an input to, and an outcome of, the SDGs. Malnutrition derives not just from a lack of food, but from a host of interacting processes linking health, care, education, sanitation and hygiene, access to resources, women's empowerment and more. The choices that individuals make regarding foods to produce and market, the diets that their families consume, and the care and nurture of nutritionally vulnerable people (particularly mothers and infants), all have a direct bearing on nutrition outcomes.



© World Vision

Good nutrition leads to higher earnings and mental acuity, which in turn support macroeconomic and societal growth. Poor nutrition (which includes several forms of undernutrition as well as overweight and obesity) impairs productivity, which acts as a drag on national growth. Without appropriate investments, poor nutrition persists, contributing to the global burden of disease and impaired quality of life. In this sense, malnutrition poses a pernicious, often invisible, impediment to achieving all SDG targets.

As such, the nutrition community, and its natural allies in the food security, agriculture, WASH, gender and health communities, are advocating for nutrition in the SDG framework. In the end, sustainable development will depend on it.



© Patrick Webb

THE PURPOSE OF THIS POLICY BRIEF

Explicit attention to nutrition is needed as the world seeks to accelerate and sustain recent gains in nutrition, and to expand these to include places and people who have been left behind. Action is urgently needed, and so is a more prominent role for nutrition across the SDGs. This Brief encourages dialogue on how to apply best practices at scale to resolve the world's nutrition challenges quickly, and how to ensure that all SDGs benefit from the gains made possible by good nutrition for all.

EXAMPLES OF HOW NUTRITION INTERACTS WITH THE SDGs

SDG1: END POVERTY IN ALL ITS FORMS

The productivity losses to individuals from undernutrition have been estimated as >10% of lifetime earnings, while losses to national productivity can be as high, with 11% or more of Gross National Product lost annually in Africa and Asia due to malnutrition alone.

Conversely, the economic gains from investments aimed at tackling malnutrition

yield an average benefit-cost ratio of 15; that is, even under the most conservative assumptions, US\$1 invested in a bundle of evidence-based interventions for nutrition generates average returns of US\$15.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM IS HUGE

Today, 161 million children less than 5 years old are stunted (too short for their age), at least 51 million are severely or moderately wasted (weighing too little for their height), while another 42 million children are overweight or obese. In addition, there are several billion children and adults who are deficient in vitamins or minerals which can lead to anaemia, blindness, cognitive impairment, greater susceptibility to many diseases, resulting in higher mortality. Losses to national productivity linked to these conditions can be as high as 3% of total output per year.



© Patrick Webb

SDG2: END HUNGER, ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY, IMPROVED NUTRITION, AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Governments are paying more attention to the importance of linking policies and investments that integrate agriculture with improved health and nutrition. Nutrition-sensitive agricultural interventions can have positive nutritional impacts by increasing the quality and availability of agricultural commodities, as well as the quality of food in terms of diversity, nutrient content and safety. On the other side, malnutrition affects the productivity of the people working in agriculture and food systems.

For people to be well-nourished at all times, efforts are required to enhance access to healthy diets, improved knowledge for food choices, stronger resilience of food systems to economic, climatic and human-made shocks, and remediation of food-borne threats to consumers. Achieving all of these things would,

in the words of the UN Secretary General, not only translate into zero hunger, but also “boost economic growth, reduce poverty and safeguard the environment.” (UN 2012)

Ensuring year-round access to adequate, safe, diverse and nutrient-rich food for all will support healthy diets and healthy food systems. This requires a twin-track approach: adopting a long-term vision to resolving underlying constraints, while also dealing urgently with immediate needs.



© Marzella Wüstefeld

SDG3: ENSURE HEALTHY LIVES

There are strong synergies between health and nutrition; good health is not possible without good nutrition. Malnutrition remains one of the main determinants of the global burden of disease, with 45% of child mortality attributable to undernutrition. Between 1990 and 2010, the global disease burden attributable to overweight and obesity, rose from 52 million to 94 million Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs).

Appropriate investments in the first 1,000 days (from pregnancy through the first two years), including prevention of low birth weight, early initiation of and exclusive breastfeeding,

will yield benefits not only for that child's lifetime, but across generations. The cost of implementing evidence-based nutrition interventions amounts to US\$370 per life-year saved. The benefits to global health would be vastly greater.



© Marzella Wüsterfeld

SDG4: ENSURE QUALITY EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Children who are more affected by stunting early in their life have poorer test scores on cognitive assessments and activity levels. Being stunted at age six carries the risk of losing 4 grades of schooling in terms of impaired test performances linked to reduced cognitive development. Over 2 billion people worldwide are believed to be lacking in dietary iodine, including around 240 million children, and such deficiency is correlated with up to a 15 point reduction in IQ at a population level. No nation can afford to waste the latent capabilities of its citizens on such a scale. The education of girls in particular has been shown to have direct links to improved nutrition of their children, and others.



© Patrick Webb

SDG5: ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT

Gender equality and empowerment (particularly of girls, adult women and marginalized vulnerable populations), is a critical contributor to good nutrition. Laws and policies that achieve equality and empower go a long way to securing nutrition for all. Undernourished

girls and women are often least able to take advantage of microcredit, schooling or paying jobs because of lower work capacity, sickness and inability to take advantage of resources to their benefit.

SDG6: ENSURE SUSTAINABLE WATER AND SANITATION

Roughly 14% of the total fall in stunting between 1970 and 2010 resulted from improved sanitation. As nutrition improves, which leads to the associated benefits of demand for higher food quality, education, preventative health-seeking behaviours, and a voice in development, there is greater practice of appropriate hand-washing practices, personal hygiene, and sanitation.



© Marzella Wüsterfeld

SDG12: ENSURE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION PATTERNS

Appropriate actions are required across the entire food system, based on an understanding of the nature of local food environments in which dietary choices are made. Good nutrition represents an input to, and an outcome of, such choices. All forms of undernutrition as well as overweight and obesity reflect (at least in part) the enabling or disabling nature of local food environments in relation to appropriate choice.

Enhanced food supply chains can work for nutrition by reducing or stabilizing food

prices, extending the seasonal availability of nutrient-rich foods, improving information flows or by enforcing food safety standards. When such systems fail, as in emergencies or significant food price volatility, safety nets are essential to protecting the food consumption and nutrition of the world's most vulnerable populations.



© Patrick Webb

SDG17: REVITALIZE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

A revitalization of global partnerships for development is needed, and nutrition is leading the way. In just half a decade, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement grew from an idea to a global network of informal partners working through a collaborative process of consensus building on how to scale up nutrition interventions. This as well as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and other global initiatives, including the ICN2, offer a platform to catalyze political priorities and urgent actions.

Leaders in the public and private sectors are beginning to recognize nutrition as an investment in economic and social develop-

ment to strengthen their nations. The SDGs therefore offer a chance to promote global partnerships in a new spirit of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual accountability.

A concerted effort is required to promote best practices across the food system focused on the needs of the most nutritionally vulnerable. This must include all stakeholders and sustain progress for future generations.

The SDGs are attainable if nutrition is put front and center of the sustainable development agenda and linked to all of the ambitious new goals.

KEY MESSAGES

- 1 **Nutrition must be highlighted not hidden in the SDGs.** The causes of malnutrition are well-understood, as are evidence-based solutions. Urgent action is essential and possible.
- 2 **Nutrition-relevant indicators should be included in several SDGs.** Key indicators for diet quality, food safety, maternal nutrition (in its own right), and nutrition of often neglected vulnerable groups (such as the elderly, obese adults, displaced peoples, the physically and mentally challenged) should be an essential part of SDGs and its framework for action. All six World Health Assembly targets should be included as part of the SDG agenda.
- 3 **Nutrition underpins sustainable development.** All SDGs must be explicit about their relationship with nutrition. Action-oriented accountable targets on nutrition improvement are needed, not just descriptive statements of the problem.
- 4 **Nutrition actions in the SDGs must be evidence-based and promoted at scale.** To support the SDGs, nutrition must be appropriately resourced. Some interventions must target individuals while others demand population-wide and food system-wide coverage of policies or programmes. Defining the ambitious agenda needed to implement such essential initiatives must be an early time-bound milestone of SDG implementation.
- 5 **Nutrition must be well-documented and disseminated.** Much needs to be understood about why countries are on or off course for particular targets. Given the complex causality of malnutrition, combinations of policy and programming actions will advance nutrition, and governments should test the appropriate blend of actions that achieves sustained gains.
- 6 **Nutrition progress must be well measured.** Many nations with high burdens of malnutrition, collect inadequate nutrition data. The quality and coverage of disaggregated data must be significantly improved to support policy and programming decisions.
- 7 **Nutrition priorities must acknowledge and embrace complexity.** Simple and siloed one-nutrient-at-a-time agendas that fund single projects in isolation of others can hurt progress. Nutrition has multiple multi-directional links with all SDGs. Transparent, rather than oversimplified, messaging on these critical links is key to priority setting at all levels of government.
- 8 **Nutrition governance must be empowered but also accountable** Multiple stakeholders must be involved in the nutrition-related agenda framed by the SDGs, but responsibility for actions and results must be transparent. Leadership in this sphere should be promoted and rewarded. Governments should allocate more resources to monitoring their own commitments, and innovative accountability mechanisms should be tested and adopted.
- 9 **The SDGs represent a window of opportunity for nutrition.** Now is the time for governments to finally make good on commitments to improved nutrition.
- 10 **Urgent, well-funded actions at scale are essential to achieving the vision of good nutrition for all.** Achieving that vision means putting nutrition sustainability at the core of the human development agenda.

RESOURCES

The full technical report, written by Patrick Webb PhD, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University in Boston, on Nutrition and the Sustainable Development Goals can be found on the UNSCN website: <http://unscn.org/en/publications/nutrition-and-post-2015-agenda/>

The titles of each SDG as currently proposed are at: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>
As of November 2014, the number of goals, their titles, and metrics for assessing success are still under discussion.





United Nations
System

Standing
Committee on
Nutrition

November 2014

United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition

The United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN) is the food and nutrition policy harmonization forum of the United Nations. Its vision is a world free from hunger and malnutrition, where there are no longer impediments to human development.

UNSCN Secretariat
c/o World Health Organization
20 Avenu Appia
CH 1211 Geneva 27
Switzerland

Telephone: +41 22 791 04 56
Email: scn@who.int
Web: www.unscn.org

Follow us on <https://twitter.com/UNSCN>

Acknowledgments

The author of this policy brief is Patrick Webb PhD, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University in Boston, USA. The project is managed by Marzella Wüstefeld PhD, UNSCN Secretariat. The funding support by the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany is gratefully acknowledged.

With support from



Federal Ministry
of Food
and Agriculture

by decision of the
German Bundestag