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Nutrition: Making the Case

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NUTRITION

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In the past 20 years hundreds of millions of people have benefited from improved living standards. Many countries have experienced increases in life expectancy, growth in per capita food production and gross domestic product, improvements in school enrollment, gains in the status of women, improved access to primary health care and clean water, and an increased respect for human rights.

The work is, however, substantially unfinished. Some countries and regions have seen only small gains, if any at all. Progress has been particularly slow in Sub-Saharan Africa, but many countries in South and Central Asia, Central America, and the Near East have also failed to witness improvements in welfare. For the developing world as a whole, poverty rates failed to fall in the 1990s (except in China), the number of young children that

TABLE 1—INDICATORS OF UNDERNUTRITION AND POVERTY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Indicator	Level (all developing countries)	Trend (all developing countries)
Preschool stunting (low height for age)	181.92 million (2000)	At current trends, predicted to halve by approximately 2030
Preschool underweight (low weight for age)	149.63 million (2000)	At current trends, predicted to halve by approximately 2030
Preschool wasting (low weight for height)	50.59 million (1995)	No data
Vitamin A deficiency	Preschoolers with subclinical deficiency: 75–251 million (global)	No data
Anemia prevalence	43 percent (1998)	No data
Iodine deficiency (percent affected by goiter)	38 percent (global)	No data
Number of “undernourished” (number of individuals affected by calorie supply deficits)	777 million people	At current trends, predicted to halve by 2055
Poverty rate (percentage living on less than a \$1 a day)	24 percent	If China is excluded, the percentage of people living on less than \$1 a day has been constant during the 1990s.

Sources: ACC/SCN, *Fourth report on the world nutrition situation* (Geneva: ACC/SCN in collaboration with the International Food Policy Research Institute, 2000); FAO, *The state of food insecurity in the world* (Rome, 2001); World Bank, *World development report 2000/2001: Attacking poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 2000).

are growth-impaired fell slowly, and the number affected by HIV/AIDS increased dramatically (Table 1 highlights progress in some development indicators linked to food and nutrition). Future improvements in agricultural productivity and water productivity will need to come within the context of increasingly fragile lands, changing global climate patterns, and increasing population. Against a backdrop of accelerating globalization of trade, investment, labor, and information, inequality is increasing, both between and, to some extent, within countries. Even if this growing gap between rich and poor does not come at the direct expense of the living standards of the poorest, rising inequality may threaten growth in many ways, not least by lending itself to economic and political instability as indicated in the extreme by conflict.

New policies, institutional arrangements, technologies, and resources will be crucial to accelerating positive trends and reversing negative ones. This set of briefs argues that good nutrition is an essential building block for development and that it supports efforts to generate new resources and technologies and to imagine, create, and nurture new institutions and partnerships to improve global welfare. The Millennium Development Goals (Box 1) serve to summarize the development ambitions of the global community over the next generation. Adopted by 189 member states as part of the United Nations Millennium Summit, the goals set an impressive agenda for the coming 20 years. These briefs show how nutrition can play a key role in realizing each of these ambitions.

The briefs focus not on the causes of undernutrition, but on the consequences of good nutrition. We know, for example, that poverty increases undernutrition. But the reverse is also true: good nutrition reduces poverty. Similar arguments can be made in other areas such as gender, education, human rights, and health. The briefs demonstrate that good nutrition will help countries meet a wide range of goals that are crucial to accelerating development. As such, it is an excellent investment.

But how easy is it for those outside of the nutrition community to make those investments? The briefs show that it is quite straightforward to make pro-nutrition investments within a variety of sectors. There are many pathways to undernutrition, and the baby that fails to grow properly has been let down by a potentially large set of actors and sectors. Correspondingly there are many opportunities within those sectors to effect improvements in nutrition.

Yet despite decades of nutrition advocacy, most developing countries and development agencies still do not adequately recognize nutrition in their policies and strategies. One reason is competition for resources among different sectors and a perceived conflict

Box 1—MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
2. Achieve universal primary education.
3. Promote gender equality and empower women.
4. Reduce child mortality.
5. Improve maternal health.
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.
7. Ensure environmental sustainability.
8. Develop a global partnership for development.

Source: United Nations General Assembly, *Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, Report of the Secretary-General* (New York, 2001).

between sector-oriented development strategies. Unfortunately, in a minefield of competing interests, nutrition advocates often still argue that malnutrition must be eliminated only for humanitarian purposes. These arguments are appropriate, as adequate food and nutrition are first and foremost human rights. However, nutrition is also an essential input to social and economic development and an invaluable cross-cutting investment. This series of briefs summarizes the contribution of nutrition to development in a number of areas and highlights the potential for many win-win investments that simultaneously advance nutrition and non-nutrition goals.

The briefs are intended primarily for development specialists who do not routinely work on nutrition policies and programs, but they are also targeted toward nutrition professionals. The briefs seek to expand the set of arguments for investing in nutrition and to stimulate reflection on what nutrition offers in addition to what the elimination of undernutrition demands. Ultimately we hope that the series will stimulate dialogue and joint action between nutrition advocates and individuals or groups concerned with other development goals.

Each brief addresses recent developments in a key development sector, identifies the potential contribution of nutrition to that sector, and shows how actions in that sector could promote nutrition. For instance,

- investments in girls' nutrition can help advance the status of women and increase the incentives for smaller desired family size;
- attention to nutrition concerns can make agriculture more profitable by connecting it to the needs of consumers, and it can make environmental practices more sustainable by bringing them in line with traditional dietary patterns;
- improved nutrition is an important first step in developing human capital and reducing poverty;



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- good nutrition can ameliorate the conditions for conflict;
- nutrition programming can help develop participatory processes that promote human rights and facilitate successful decentralization; and
- better nutrition status improves immunological integrity and helps prevent noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes.

The series closes with a brief that describes how the nutrition community can enhance the ability of others to perceive a convergence between the nutrition agenda and their own values, beliefs, and interests. Suggestions for further reading are included in all areas.

In an environment of increasingly scarce development resources, investments in nutrition are unique. Such investments have a wide range of positive develop-

ment effects and can be made by a wide range of development actors working within their own contexts. It is the numerous benefits to be derived from nutrition investments combined with the ease of making them that makes nutrition such a powerful means to the end we all seek: a better life for all.

Suggested Reading

ACC/SCN (United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination/Subcommittee on Nutrition). 2000. *Fourth report on the world nutrition situation*. Geneva: ACC/SCN in collaboration with the International Food Policy Research Institute.

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