Preventing undernutrition in children -
A moral imperative and an effective investment

M A Dhansay

Casa Toscana Lodge
Pretoria
27 March 2015
Undernutrition in Children – why bother?

- Undernutrition is associated with 45% of child deaths, resulting in 3.1 million deaths annually.
- Stunted linear growth is considered the main indicator of childhood undernutrition.
- Worldwide, stunting affected at least 165 million children younger than 5 years in 2011.
- Stunted children have compromised cognitive development and impaired physical capabilities.
- Prevention is the hallmark of an effective program.
- The science is clear that the first 1,000 days after conception are the most important. Poor nutrition during this period leads to irreversible consequences such as stunted growth and impaired cognitive development.
WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY-ENDORSED GLOBAL NUTRITION TARGETS FOR 2025

- 40% reduction of the global number of children < 5 years who are stunted
- 50% reduction of anaemia in women of reproductive age
- 30% reduction of low birth weight
- No increase in childhood overweight
- Increase the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months up to at least 50%
- Reduce and maintain childhood wasting to less than 5%
Prevalence of stunting - 2008

The Lancet 2008 371, 243-260 DOI: (10.1016/S0140-6736(07)61690-0)
Percentage of children under Five who are Stunted, 2009 - 2013

Source: UNICEF Global Nutrition Database 2014
Trends in the prevalence of undernutrition in children aged 1-3 years, SA 2005-2012
A study in Guatemala showed that improving physical growth among children (males) less than two years of age, resulted in a 46% increase in adult wages.

Successful Reduction of Stunting Prevalence

- In SSA, **Ghana** achieved a decline from 35% (2003) to 28% in 2008 - agriculture; IYCF and stable political environment

- **Brazil** reduced stunting from 37% in 1974 to 7% in 2007 – minimum wage and cash-transfer; female education; maternal and child health services; small farm food

- Zero Undernutrition in **Bolivia** is a joint programming model that was associated with a drop in stunting from 18.5% to 13.5% from 2008 to 2011

- Maharashtra State in **India**: using a ‘whole-of-government’ approach, the *Rajmata Jijau Mother-Child Health and Nutrition Mission* led to a decline in stunting from 44% in 2005 to 22.8% in 2012
Rates of return to investment in human capital as a function of age when the investment was initiated

Investments were initially set to be equal across all ages. $r$ represents the cost of the funds. Data are from Cunha et al. 2006
Recovery is possible – to a certain extent!

Initiatives to Address the Problem

- MDGs
- SUN
- NDP 2030
- Road Map for Nutrition in SA
- IYCF Policy
- ECD Policy and Plan
- DPME Review of Nutrition for Children
- Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Country Status:
- State Party (194)
- Signatory (2)
- No Action (1)
Actions to Achieve Optimum Child Nutrition & Development

Benefits during the Life Course

Optimum Fetal & Child Nutrition and Development

- Breastfeeding; nutrient-rich foods; eating routine
- Feeding and caregiving practices, parenting, stimulation
- Low burden of infectious diseases

Nutrition-specific interventions and programs

- Food security, including availability, economic access, and use of food
- Feeding and caregiving resources (maternal, household & community levels)
- Health services access and use, a safe and hygienic environment

Nutrition-sensitive programs and approaches

Knowledge and evidence
Politics and governance
Leadership, capacity, and financial resources
Social, economic, political, and environmental context

Summary

- Nutrition is beyond *child survival*. It is about realising children’s full potential, and building healthy families and a thriving nation.

- **Multi-sector partnerships** are required for implementing integrated and coordinated interventions to address the manifold causes of undernutrition.

- Attention to broad implementation, attention to quality, and establishing an enabling environment, are essential.

- Investments in early childhood nutrition can be long-term drivers of growth and a wise economic investment.
End Note

“Investing in young children is one of the wisest investments a nation can make. The reviewed literature indicates that countries that invest in early childhood education do so not because they have surplus resources; they do so because they appreciate the advantages for children, families, communities and ultimately entire nations.

Early childhood education must be conceptualized within a child rights framework. A child rights framework is an important tool for guiding the development of policy, plans and monitoring tools because it places the child in the centre and analyses the obligations of different levels of society or duty bearers in meeting the rights of the child.

Just as a child’s rights are indivisible and non-hierarchical, early childhood education cannot and must not exist in a separate compartment from basic health, nutrition and community development priorities. Hence, all relevant sectors need to contribute synergistically to the development of every child.”

Tassew Woldehanna