

Reducing Child Undernutrition: Past Drivers and Priorities for the Post-MDG Era

As the post-MDG era approaches in 2016, reducing child undernutrition is gaining high priority on the international development agenda, both as a maker and marker of development. This research brief summarises a 2015 paper published in *World Development*, which used data from 1970-2012 for 116 countries to investigate the factors that have contributed to past reductions in child undernutrition and identify priorities for the future. The research finds that safe water and sanitation, women's education, gender equity, and the quantity and quality of food available in countries have been key drivers of past reductions in stunting. Income growth and governance played essential facilitating roles. Complementary to nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programmes and policies, accelerating reductions in undernutrition in the future will require increased investment in these priority areas.

Commitment within developing countries and internationally to address the problem of child undernutrition has never been higher. Answers to the question of how to reduce undernutrition are thus in great demand. Over the last decade, much attention has been given to identifying appropriate nutrition-specific interventions, such as micronutrient supplementation and breastfeeding promotion, and ways of making development programs more nutrition sensitive. This research aimed to contribute to the growing evidence base needed for prioritizing action to inform the post-MDG development agenda by investigating the roles of the underlying and basic determinants of child stunting. Interventions directed at these determinants are not necessarily nutrition-focused, yet may nevertheless be powerful drivers of stunting reductions because they address its root causes.

Research findings

The research gives clear guidance to governments and international development agencies regarding which underlying determinants of child undernutrition should be considered in policy strategies to accelerate reductions in stunting in the coming decades. Such strategies should focus on:

- Increasing food security by ensuring adequate availability of food at the national level and sufficient nutritional quality of that food;



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- Improving health environments through increasing access to safe water and sanitation;
- Improving the quality of caring practices for children through increasing women's education and promoting gender equality.

Health Worker, Durgesh (right), interacts with 6 months old Sonakshi in Bengali Basti.

A rough ranking of these six determinants in terms of their future potency in reducing stunting is: the nutritional quality of food available in countries (greatest), followed by access to sanitation and women's education. Access to

“Safe water access, sanitation, women's education, gender equity, and the quantity and quality of food available in countries have been key drivers of past reductions in stunting.”

safe water, gender equality, and national food availabilities have the lowest strength of impact, but do not fall far behind women's education.

The analysis also points to the key importance of economic growth and the quality of governance in providing an enabling environment for promoting the underlying determinants. Income growth reduces stunting by supporting access to sanitation, women's education, and the quality and quantity of food available in countries. The effect of governance appears to be strongest through improving access to safe water.

Specific findings for South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, the regions with the highest stunting prevalences, are the following:

- For South Asia, while continued improvements in women's education and food availabilities are needed, three of the determinants should be of particular focus: access to sanitation, nutritional quality of the food available in countries, and gender equality.
- For Sub-Saharan Africa the analysis points to access to sanitation, women's education, and gender equality as key priority areas.
- The two regions have the lowest national incomes among all developing regions; Continued income growth will be vital for reducing stunting.



TUGELA RIDLEY

Habiba holds her son, Masud, 20 month old, outside the outreach clinic in Abdiiaziz, Kenya.

- Improving the quality of governance should also be a priority, with a focus on political stability in South Asia and on bureaucratic effectiveness and restraint of corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Further reading

L Smith, L Haddad Reducing Child Undernutrition: Past Drivers and Priorities for the Post-MDG Era. *World Development*, Volume 68, April 2015, Pages 180–204 <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14003726>.

Haddad, L. 2013b. How should nutrition be positioned in the post-2015 agenda? *Food Policy*, 43, 341-352.

Lancet. 2013. Executive summary of the Lancet Maternal and Child Nutrition Series. *The Lancet*, June 6, 2013.

UNICEF. 2013. Improving child nutrition: The achievable imperative for global progress. New York: United Nations Children's Fund.

Credits

This research brief is based on a paper funded by Transform Nutrition and published in *World Development Reducing Child Undernutrition: Past Drivers and Priorities for the Post-MDG Era* by Lisa Smith from TANGO International and Lawrence Haddad from IFPRI, April 2015.

Overall conclusion

The six underlying determinants identified are powerful drivers of stunting reduction. Complementary to nutrition-focused interventions, they need to be accelerated rapidly; Continued income growth and strong governance are vital components of an enabling environment for nutrition improvements. The nutrition and broader development communities must not lose their focus on these factors as key forces for preventing the deaths, squandering of human potential, and impeded development stemming from child undernutrition.



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