

REVIEW ARTICLE

Ending the Scourge of Child Malnutrition in Africa: Causes, Consequences and a Call for Urgent Action; A Review

Isaac Iyinoluwa Olufadewa^{1,2,3*}, Miracle Ayomikun Adesina^{1,2}, Anuoluwapo Esther Odusanya^{1,2}, Mayokun Samuel Olufadewa^{1,2}, Adeyemi Emmanuel Adedeji^{1,2}, Toluwase Ayobola Ayorinde^{1,2}, Ruth Ifeoluwa Oladele^{1,2}

1. Slum and Rural Health Initiative Research Academy, Ibadan, Nigeria
2. University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
3. Pan African University of Life and Earth Sciences Institute, Ibadan, Nigeria

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Child
Malnutrition
Africa
Obesity
Stunting

ABSTRACT

With over one-third of the global under 5 stunting cases and a quarter of both the under 5 wasting and overweight cases in 2018, Africa is disproportionately affected by all forms of malnutrition. Furthermore, despite a reduction of childhood stunting in other regions of the world between 2000 and 2018, Africa is the only continent, where the number has increased from about 50 million in 2000 to almost 59 million under 5 stunting cases in 2018. The Global Nutrition Report in 2018 also revealed that 30 of the 41 countries worldwide with a high burden of the three types of malnutrition are from Africa. Economic consequences are estimated 11% of African countries' GDP lost every year due to unacceptably high levels of malnutrition. For African countries to end all forms of malnutrition, there is a need for political commitment and increased financial investment in nutrition interventional programs, strengthening the evidence-base on key nutrition indicators is also important. Also, bolstering the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs tackling malnutrition while building the research and leadership capacity of workers in this sector is crucial. International partners must also identify shared drivers of the double burden and establish comprehensive 'double-duty' interventions that simultaneously address the double burden of malnutrition. African countries must boost intersectoral actions through the strengthening of their security, agricultural, environmental, economic, and housing sectors while concurrently drive international and grassroots support for comprehensive evidence-informed nutritional interventions to put an end to all forms of malnutrition by 2030.

**Corresponding author:*

Isaac Iyinoluwa Olufadewa,
Faculty of Clinical Science,
College of Medicine,
University of Ibadan,
Ibadan, Nigeria.
Tel: +234-81-32021189
Email: Isaacolufadewa@yahoo.com
Received: February 29, 2020
Revised: July 16, 2020
Accepted: July 28, 2020

Please cite this article as: Olufadewa II, Adesina MA, Odusanya AE, Olufadewa MS, Adedeji AE, Ayorinde TA, Oladele RI. Ending the Scourge of Child Malnutrition in Africa: Causes, Consequences and a Call for Urgent Action; A Review. Int J Nutr Sci. 2020;5(3):109-111. doi: 10.30476/IJNS.2020.86677.1070.

Introduction

With over one-third of the global under 5 stunting cases and a quarter of both the under 5 wasting and overweight cases in 2018, Africa

is disproportionately affected by all forms of malnutrition (1). Furthermore, despite a reduction of childhood stunting in other regions of the world between 2000 to 2018, Africa is the only continent,

where the number has increased from about 50 million in 2000 to almost 59 million under 5 stunting cases in 2018 (1, 2). The Global Nutrition Report in 2018 also revealed that 30 of the 41 countries worldwide with a high burden of the three types of malnutrition are from Africa (3).

Malnutrition refers to deficiencies, excesses or imbalances in the intake of energy and/or nutrients and its physical manifestations range from stunting, wasting and being overweight. Malnutrition is life-threatening and the leading driver of the global burden of disease (4). About 18 million and 10 million children under 5 are wasted and overweight in Africa (1) leading to dire consequences that affects life expectancy, economic growth, education, development, and several other domains of physical, social, and mental health (5). Besides the significant loss in human potential, the economic consequences are dire – an estimated 11 percent of African countries GDP are lost every year due to the unacceptably high level of malnutrition in the region (4).

Living without the disabling consequences of malnutrition is a fundamental human right, so the persistent scourge of childhood malnutrition in Africa is immoral, unjust, and unacceptable. In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the first-ever United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition which will span from 2016 to 2025. UN Member-states also made a commitment to end all forms of malnutrition by 2030. Despite being in the midst of the UN Decade of Action, its achievement in Africa has been painfully slow to deliver results that are needed to eradicate all forms of malnutrition in 2030 (1).

Causes and Consequences of Malnutrition in Africa

Child malnutrition in Africa is caused by complex and multidimensional factors as a result of a constellation of political, sociocultural, economic, and environmental influences – from direct causes such as inadequate quantity and quality of food intake and repeated incidences of diseases such as diarrhea that compromise nutrient intake and absorption to indirect causes such as food insecurity which results from drought, climate change, explosive population growth, inequality, armed conflict, access to and use of health services; and a safe and hygienic environment (6-9).

A Call for Urgent Action to End Malnutrition in Africa

For African countries to end all form of malnutrition, there is a need for political commitment and increased financial investment in nutrition interventional programs – knowing fully well that

every \$1 invested on early nutrition intervention leads to an average return on investment close to \$20 (10). Scaling-up high-impact nutrition-specific interventions in Africa to address the global nutrition targets of stunting, breastfeeding, wasting, obesity and anemia would require an additional \$2.7 billion per year over the next 10 years (11). Hence, African governments and international donor agencies will have to triple their commitment this decade to meet these nutritional milestones (3).

Strengthening the evidence-based on key nutrition indicators is crucial to winning the war on malnutrition - as data is needed to drive decisions. Countries like Ghana, Senegal, and Burkina Faso that make nutrition a political priority are reaping the rewards; for instance, between 2011 and 2015, Senegal's stunting rate reduced by almost one-third after the establishment of the Cellule de Lutte contre la Malnutrition, a coordinating body tasked with reducing malnutrition by the government (12).

Bolstering the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs tackling malnutrition, while building the research and leadership capacity of workers in this sector is crucial to ending malnutrition in Africa (13). For instance, a school meal programme that tackles food insecurity can have a school nutrition education component, WASH component and ensure that sugar-sweetened beverages and snacks are kept out of schools. Also, multiple types of malnutrition co-exist (known as the “double burden”) in many African countries, but most nutrition policies and interventions target only one form. Countries and international partners must identify shared drivers of the double burden and establish comprehensive ‘double-duty’ interventions that simultaneously address the double burden of malnutrition (14).

Conclusion

African countries must do more against this burgeoning public health crisis by boosting intersectoral actions through the strengthening of their security, agricultural, environmental, economic, and housing sectors while concurrently driving international and grassroots support for comprehensive evidence-informed nutritional interventions to put an end to all forms of malnutrition by 2030. For Africa to unlock the demographic and economic dividends, countries must take bold actions for every child to thrive and achieve their full potential.

Acknowledgement

This study was self-funded. We received no external funding or grant for this study.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

References

- 1 UNICEF, WHO, World Bank. Levels and trends in child malnutrition: key findings of the 2019 Edition of the Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2019. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
- 2 UNICEF. The State of the world's children. Children, food and nutrition: Growing well in a changing world. UNICEF, New York; 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/media/60806/file/SOWC-2019.pdf>. Accessed May 5, 2020.
- 3 Development Initiatives. 2018 Global Nutrition Report: Shining a light to spur action on nutrition. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives; 2018.
- 4 International Food Policy Research Institute. Global Nutrition Report 2016 From Promise to Impact Ending Malnutrition by 2030. DOI:10.2499/9780896295841.
- 5 Victora CG, Adair L, Fall C, et al. For the maternal and child under nutrition group. maternal and child undernutrition: consequences for adult health and human capital. *Lancet*. 2008;371:340-57.
- 6 Prentice AM. The double burden of malnutrition in countries passing through the economic transition. *Ann Nutr Metab*. 2018;72:47-54. DOI: 10.1159/000487383.
- 7 Adesina MA, Oladele RI, Olufadewa II. Mental health and psychosocial support in conflicting Nigeria. *Yenegoa Med J*. 2020;2:15-23.
- 8 Adesina MA, Adesanya T, Olufadewa I. Mental Health and Conflict in Nigeria: An Overview. *Eur J Environ Public Health*. 2020;4. DOI:10.29333/ejeph/7806.
- 9 Adesina MA. The health status and demographics of a conflicting country: the Sudan experience. *Eur J Environ Public Health*. 2019;4. DOI:10.29333/ejeph/5933.
- 10 Shekar M, Kakietek J, Dayton Eberwein J, et al. An investment framework for nutrition: reaching the global targets for stunting, anemia, breastfeeding, and wasting. directions in development--human development. Washington, DC: World Bank; 2017.
- 11 World Bank. Stunting Reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2017. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/126621505397202676/pdf/119719-WP-ASA-Full-Report-V7-WEB-PUBLIC.pdf>. Accessed May 10, 2020.
- 12 Annan K. Data can help to end malnutrition across Africa. *Nature*. 2018;555:7. DOI:10.1038/d41586-018-02386-3. PMID:29493625.
- 13 Olufadewa II, Adesina MA, Ayorinde T. From Africa to the World: Reimagining Africa's research capacity and culture in the global knowledge economy. *J Glob Health*. 2020;10:010321. DOI:10.7189/jogh.10.010321. PMID:32257145.
- 14 WHO. Double-duty actions. Policy brief. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2017. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/255414/WHO-NMH-NHD-17.2-eng.pdf;jsessionid=29C245CB6491E59263DAB1E60C545DC3?sequence=1>. Accessed May 5, 2020.