

# Undernutrition in Africa: Economic Implications

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the global challenge that undernutrition poses, the continent of Africa has a greater number of undernourished persons. Evidences of undernutrition in the form of stunting, wasting and underweight children as well as adults abound in all regions of Africa. This has only negative health and thus economic consequences on individuals, households and the development of the continent. The first impact is the decline in the quality of human capital in the current and future period and the resulting decline in labour productivity and economic growth. The backward dragging effect of under nutrition is the reason why sincere and well-targeted government and private interventions are paramount towards recording great reductions in undernutrition prevalence.

**Keywords:** Undernutrition, Health, Africa, Economic Implication, Stunting, Wasting

## INTRODUCTION

Even though under nutrition is a worldwide challenge because it is present in all countries, a greater number of affected individuals are concentrated in Africa. <sup>[1]</sup> Undernourished children become emaciated and stunted; they are unable to fight diseases because they lack the necessary nutrient in their diet.

The negative implications of undernutrition prevalence on health cannot be overemphasized. African countries that have recorded more than 5 percent of stunted children include South Sudan which had as high as 10 percent in 2010, followed by Nigeria with 7 percent in 2008, Chad and Mali with 6 percent in 2010 and 2006 respectively; and Sudan with 5 percent in 2010. <sup>[2]</sup> According to, <sup>[2]</sup> in 2011 at least one in every three under-five children in Africa were stunted and it is more likely that boys become stunted than girls. For the period from 2007 to 2011, Eastern Africa had the highest stunting prevalence of 42 percent, followed by West Africa with 38 percent, Central Africa with 36 percent,

Southern Africa with 35 percent and North Africa having the least of 28 percent. <sup>[2]</sup> West Africa still has the largest number of undernourished children and adults <sup>[3]</sup> and various factors are responsible for this.

Based on, <sup>[1]</sup> in Africa, 58 million under-five children are stunted (too short for their age) while 13.9 million are wasted (have a weight that is too low for their height). Also, the number of anemic children and women of reproductive age is about 163.6 million and an estimated 220 million people are calorie deficient. Only very few children (between 48 to 48 percent) are free from stunting and waste as seen in several African countries including Ethiopia, Nigeria and Democratic Republic of Congo. Between 1990 and 2014, stunting in Africa declined from 42.3 percent to 32 percent while the number of stunted children increased from 47 to 58 million. Thus, although there has been decline in stunting in Africa, it has been progressively slow and on the other hand the number of stunted children is still rising. No region in Africa has less than 5 percent wasting which

is the acceptable level of wasting. <sup>[4]</sup> “From 2014 to 2015, the number of countries on course towards meeting the global target of reducing stunting increased from a share of 6 percent to 18 percent, particularly for countries with available data”. <sup>[1]</sup>

Rather than focus on malnutrition as some studies have done, this paper narrows down on undernutrition, which is a type of malnutrition as against overnutrition. This decision is based on the fact that there is a greater tendency of the occurrence of undernutrition than overnutrition in Africa where poverty has been and is still a major challenge such that with the persistent lack of adequate food supply, many households find it hard to afford the generally high food cost. The characteristic large population in most countries makes access to food in good quantity and quality a huge problem. The frequent social and communal conflicts leave many impoverished and thus worsen the situation. The problem of hunger and starvation still stare many in the face.

Undernutrition problems in Africa can still be attributed to poor policy and actions of government. Even when there are aids, both foreign and domestic, corruption (such as diversification and personal enrichment) could prevent it from getting to the targeted vulnerable population. There has been less than adequate government effort towards increasing food supply, increasing access and affordability of healthcare, and empowering more women, which would have gone a long way to increase the income of many households and consequently improve the nutritional status of children and adults. The rest of the paper reviews some of the literature, presents economic implications arising from undernutrition and suggests the way forward.

### **The Literature**

Some studies have shown that several factors including gender, income, maternal education, sanitation facilities in households (toilet type and pipe borne water), maternal age, marital status and

cultural factors such as breastfeeding beliefs explain the prevalence of undernutrition. Harsh and drastic climate change affects food supply and consequently worsen undernutrition levels. <sup>[5]</sup> Government decisions and corruption influence the level of undernutrition <sup>[5,6]</sup> empirically showed that poverty is a root cause of child undernutrition in developing countries. This is because increase in wealth was found to significantly reduce stunting and underweight among children in all four developing countries understudied. Some families are not able to afford adequate nutritious meals especially in the right quantity as a result of no or low income. The income of households undoubtedly determines their capacity to afford quality foods in good quantity and a variety as well. Thus whether income is being earned and how much income is earned is a matter of concern. Two studies <sup>[7]</sup> and <sup>[8]</sup> revealed that poor households were found to significantly have higher malnutrition in South Africa and Ghana respectively. Underweight in children can be attributed to large family size as this reduces the income and resources available per household member.

The potential of children can be affected by undernutrition and the loss in such potentials follows them to adulthood and ultimately affects their economic contribution. <sup>[9]</sup> explained that poverty could lead to inadequate food consumption and not being able to afford good hygiene and sanitation facilities, which would increase infections and stunting prevalence. They also showed that early childhood stunting could affect the cognitive development and educational performance of children, thus reducing their potential. Some studies have shown that though diseases cause child deaths, the presence of malnutrition worsen the number of recorded deaths. <sup>[10]</sup> examined the relation between malnutrition and infectious disease related death in developing countries and found that malnourished children had an increased risk of death when infected with diseases. It was strongest for those with diarrhoea and acute

respiratory infection. There was also a potential high risk of death from malaria but a lower risk for measles. Estimating child deaths linked to malnutrition effects on disease using epidemiological methods, [11] found a percentage of 56 percent deaths with 83 percent associated with mild to moderate malnutrition in developing countries. The study therefore emphasized the strong effect of malnutrition on child mortality.

The lack of education and low levels of education especially among girls and women is a characteristic dilemma in Africa, which influence the health practices of women. The lack of education influences individuals' choice of food and how to combine foods, taking opportunity of seasonal foods. The lack of knowledge among both the rich and poor explains why some very nutritious foods and fruits are abandoned even when they are easily available and cheap. Thus access to enlightenment and knowledge sharing could help the masses get useful information from knowledgeable experts. From a review of several studies on sub-Saharan Africa, [12] found that the level of a mother's education and her occupation as well as household income were significant determinants of stunting; also male children and those in rural residence were more likely to be stunted.

### **Economic Implications of Undernutrition**

Undernutrition has negative effects on the health status of both children and adults and this amounts to a poor population health status. This has negative consequences on the economic status of individuals, households and the country at large since a sick labour cannot be productive. This increases the characteristic problems of low productivity, low output, unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment in Africa.

Undernourished adults have poor health status because as a result of inadequate food intake causing their immunity levels to decline and making them

susceptible to diseases. They are also less productive as a result of their poor health status and thus add to the already large dependent population in Africa. This in turn increases the poverty rate and the low welfare level among households, as more of undernourished adults exist.

With respect to children, undernourished children are at higher risk of death and thus add to the already high child mortality rates that characterize Africa's underdevelopment. Undernutrition makes children physically and mentally incapable because their cognitive and physical growth gets impeded and this has negative effects on their educational participation, performance and completion. Thus primary and secondary school enrollment and completion continue to dwindle downwards with high illiteracy rates being recorded even among adults. This has an overall effect on the human capital development experience in Africa.

The effect on economic growth cannot be underestimated because the low productivity resulting from poor health due to undernourishment culminates in low total output and per capita income. The problem of underdevelopment in Africa is thus allowed to continue as long as government interest and effort continue to bypass the undernutrition problem.

### **The Way Forward/ Recommendations**

The implementation of any nutritional intervention must be done in such a way that it actually gets to the targeted population. A strong political will must be displayed by public authorities so that private partners can be motivated to trust the system and contribute immensely. Improved nutrition among women before, during and after pregnancy, early and exclusive breastfeeding, consuming high quality nutritious diet and maintaining hygienic and sanitation conditions could help prevent malnutrition among children in the form of stunted growth.

Towards reducing the prevalence of undernutrition, government should be more

dedicated to funding programs that economically empower individuals and households and thus improve their ability to consume more quality foods as well as a variety. Public welfare programmes should take the free feeding of vulnerable children with adequate and nutritious meals seriously in order to improve their cognitive development as well as their overall health status. Social conflict among groups of people, communities and terrorist acts are common in Africa hence, among people impoverished by war and conflict, public awareness and education on proper diet and nutrition is pertinent as this would help them get the best even from the cheap food and fruits available in their environment.

As a support to government effort, donations from individuals and corporate groups to conflict and war affected areas would help in alleviating the impoverishment resulting from societal conflict. Also among low-income households, television adverts, community programs and door to door campaigns on healthy lifestyle feeding habits as well as methods of combining the common and easily available food would be very important interventions. Hygienic and improved sanitation practices among households should be enhanced by enabling households have access to clean toilet facilities, safe drinking water sources and improved power supply.

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