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BMJ Global Health

Investing in nutrition throughout the first 8000 days of life: a multisectoral approach to supporting well-being and creating future human capital

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ABSTRACT

Nutrition plays a fundamental role in human development, especially during critical growth periods. It is already well recognised that the first 1000 days—from conception to a child's second birthday—are vital for cognitive, physical and immune system development, and setting a child on a positive trajectory for subsequent growth. Less well recognised is the importance of the next 7000 days (ages 2–21) when good nutrition continues to be important to secure those early gains and to shape development during the next vulnerable phases, including puberty, the rewiring of the brain during adolescence and the establishment of lifelong healthy behaviours and dietary preferences. Poor nutrition during these stages can severely impact cognitive function, leading to learning difficulties, attention deficits and poor academic performance, ultimately limiting future productivity and life opportunities. The next 7000 days are a crucial phase in the development of adolescents and, by influencing their health and well-being, have profound consequences for intergenerational health and nutrition, especially for girls. Finally, to maximise opportunities for physical, cognitive, social and emotional gains during the first 8000 days, it is essential to invest in multisectoral initiatives, leveraging health, nutrition, education and early childhood development, for an integrated response.

This paper draws on contemporary scientific evidence to advocate for increased investment in nutrition, not only during the first 1000 days but also throughout the next 7000 days. It examines the biological, social and economic benefits of prioritising nutrition through integrated approaches, highlighting its crucial role in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to synthesise the latest evidence supporting greater investment in nutrition. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for coordinated action from governments, multilateral and philanthropic actors, the private sector, civil society, communities and other stakeholders to ensure sustained nutrition investment from early life through adolescence, with particular emphasis on investment in integrated, multisectoral approaches.

SUMMARY OF KEY MESSAGES

⇒ The first 1000 days are crucial for a child's growth and cognitive development. Creating a supportive environment during this period is essential for optimal short- and long-term health and well-being.
⇒ While the first 1000 days receive strong emphasis in global health and nutrition policies, the next 7000 days are afforded far less attention and investment.
⇒ Investment in nutrition in the next 7000 days secures the gains from earlier investment, supports young people through the especially vulnerable phases of puberty and adolescent brain rewiring and helps ensure children and adolescents are able to take full advantage of educational opportunities at those ages.
⇒ High-quality, integrated interventions delivered during the first 8000 days can yield significant short- and long-term benefits in nutrition, health and education outcomes, contributing to future productivity—not just at an individual level but also contributing human capital to support broader societal benefits, including economic growth.

BACKGROUND

The Global Hunger Index report estimates that, in 2022, approximately 735 million individuals worldwide were undernourished, reflecting an increase of 122 million compared with 2019.[1] The upward trajectory of undernourishment is exacerbated by rapid population growth, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, which continues to have the highest prevalence of malnutrition (including undernutrition, overweight and obesity and micronutrient deficiencies) worldwide. Notably, Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for nearly one-third of the world's undernourished children.[2] If left unaddressed, malnutrition can have profound and enduring consequences for the cognitive and physical development of children and their health and education

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outcomes.[3] For example, stunting (an indicator of chronic undernutrition characterised by low height-for-age) is associated with long-term health risks. These include an increased risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), diminished intellectual potential, poor academic performance and, consequently, reduced labour productivity. Stunting is also linked to a higher risk of obstetric complications during pregnancy in later adulthood.[4] Furthermore, undernutrition during early childhood can elevate the risk of overweight and obesity later in childhood and adolescence, particularly in environments where children experience rapid catch-up growth in the context of calorie-dense diets.[5] This phenomenon underscores the complex interplay between early nutritional deficits and subsequent excess, an essential aspect of the double burden of malnutrition in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), particularly prominent in Sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia and the Pacific regions experiencing rapid nutrition transitions.[6]

In LMICs, approximately 43% of young children are at risk of failing to achieve their full developmental potential due to the double burden of malnutrition, influenced by factors such as poverty, inadequate access to sufficient and diverse diets and quality nutrition services and morbidity linked to preventable diseases.[7] These interrelated challenges constitute a significant global public health concern, necessitating the implementation of integrated, context-specific, evidence-based and sustainable interventions to address them.[8] Despite strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of multisectoral nutrition interventions, many programmes continue to operate in isolation due to entrenched sectoral silos.[8] For instance, education and health sectors often design and implement initiatives independently, with limited coordination or shared objectives. A school feeding programme may be run by the education ministry with minimal input from health or agriculture sectors, resulting in meals that fail to meet nutritional standards or overlook local food systems. Conversely, nutrition-specific interventions may ignore the critical role that school attendance and learning environments play in improving child nutrition outcomes. Until recently, there was limited recognition of how nutrition influences educational attainment through mechanisms such as cognitive development and school attendance and how, in turn, education can enhance nutrition literacy and long-term health behaviours.[9] This paper argues in favour of a coordinated, multisectoral approach that strategically integrates health, nutrition, early childhood development (ECD) and education to contribute to the development of human capital and enhance long-term developmental outcomes.

The Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition (2008, 2013 and 2021) and Adolescent Nutrition (2022) have shaped global understanding of nutrition's role across critical life stages.[10–13] A summary of evidence-based nutrition interventions across the life course, along with their associated outcomes, is presented in table 1. These publications further emphasise that early nutritional deficits can have long-term, often irreversible effects on health, education and productivity, while also highlighting the growing burden of overweight and obesity, often coexisting with undernutrition in LMICs. Together, these insights underscore the need for integrated, life-course approaches to nutrition that tackle the biological, social and structural determinants of all forms of malnutrition. Nutrition is not only a biological necessity but also a central pillar of public health and development, essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This paper underscores that increased and sustained investment in nutrition, not only during the critical first 1000 days of life but also throughout the subsequent 7000 days of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, is fundamental to building robust human capital.[14] As earlier stated, optimal nutrition during the adolescence phase is essential to support physical growth, cognitive development, educational achievement and future economic productivity, laying the foundation for healthier, more resilient and more prosperous societies.[15] Neglecting nutrition at any point along this continuum risks undermining the full developmental potential of individuals and, by extension, national social and economic progress.[16] By investing in nutrition, we mean strategic deployment of financial, policy and systems strengthening interventions to improve nutritional outcomes at scale.[17] These investments could include:

- Nutrition-specific interventions targeting immediate causes of malnutrition (eg, micronutrient supplementation, breastfeeding support);
- Nutrition-sensitive interventions delivered through other sectors (eg, school feeding, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), social protection) and
- Policy and system-level actions, such as food fortification, regulation of unhealthy foods and multisectoral coordination mechanisms.

According to the World Bank Investment Framework for Nutrition,[18] scaling up a package of evidence-based interventions to achieve 90% coverage in 34 high-burden countries between 2025 and 2034 has the potential to prevent approximately 6.2 million child deaths, avert 27 million cases of stunting and generate an estimated return of US$23 for every US$1 invested. The required additional investment, approximately US$13 billion per year, is modest relative to its benefits, which include gains in productivity, cognition and health system savings.

Despite this, significant financing and coverage disparities persist across LMICs, especially across Sub-Saharan Africa and South–East Asia, where malnutrition remains most prevalent. Many countries lack dedicated nutrition budgets, and domestic investment remains low and fragmented. As a result, essential services such as maternal supplementation, child feeding support and food fortification fail to reach large segments of the population.[18] The evidence available suggests that school meals do not

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Table 1 Nutrition interventions across the life course

Life stage	Example interventions	Key outcomes
Preconception (men and women)	► Multimicronutrient supplements (MMS) for women ► Weekly iron–folate for adolescents ► Nutrition counselling (diet, weight management) ► Male preconception support: weight loss, micronutrient optimisation	► Reduced maternal anaemia ► Improved birth outcomes ► Improved sperm epigenetics ► Reduction in paternal obesity impact on offspring ► Improved sperm quality and offspring markers
Pregnancy and lactation	► MMS for pregnant women ► Lipid-based nutrient supplements (LNS) ► Micronutrient supplementation (iron, vitamin A/D, calcium) ► Breastfeeding support and counselling	► Improved birth outcomes (weight and height) ► Reduction in low birth weight/preterm births ► Reduction in neonatal mortality ► Increase in exclusive breastfeeding
Infancy (0–6 months)	► Early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding ► Vitamin A for mothers and infants	► Reduction in neonatal infections ► Reduction in child mortality ► Reduction in diarrhoeal morbidity
Early childhood (6–24 months)	► Complementary feeding promotion ► Micronutrient powders (MNPs) ► Care-group behaviour change support	► Reduction in cases of stunting and wasting ► Reduction in anaemia ► Improved nutrient intake ► Improved developmental outcomes
Childhood and school-age	► School meals with nutrition standards ► Deworming programmes ► Nutrition education and regulation (eg, sugar taxes)	► Reduction in parasitic worm infections ► Improvement in cognitive development (including numeracy and literacy skills)
Adolescence (girls and boys)	► Weekly iron and folic for girls ► Male adolescent lifestyle programmes ► Preconception interventions (both sexes)	► Reduction in adolescent anaemia ► Reduction in unhealthy BMI ► Improved healthy eating behaviours ► Improved sperm and ovum quality and offspring markers
Adulthood and preconception	► Antenatal Care (ANC) nutrition counselling (diet, weight gain) ► Large-scale food fortification (eg, salt iodisation) ► Food environment policies (sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) taxes)	► Reduction in low birth weight, maternal poor nutrition ► Reduction in essential micronutrient deficiencies (iodine, anaemia) ► Reduction in NCD risk ► Improved diet quality
Older adults	► Micronutrient supplementation ► Diet counselling focused on chronic disease	► Reduction in anaemia ► Reduction in hypertension and heart disease risk

This table summarises evidence-based nutrition interventions across different life stages, highlighting their key outcomes. The interventions are adapted from key global evidence sources, including *The Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition* and *Adolescent Nutrition*, as well as related global nutrition frameworks.[11–13]
ANC, Antenatal Care; ECD, early childhood development ; LMICs, low- and middle-income countries; MNPs, Micronutrient powders; NCD, non-communicable disease; SSB, sugar-sweetened beverage ; USD, United States Dollar; WASH, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene .

only support physical growth and cognitive development but also boost school attendance, particularly among vulnerable populations, while providing a platform to promote local agriculture and sustainable food systems.[19] Yet in many countries, especially LMICs, a large proportion of school children do not have access to school meals because of funding limitations. Crucially, strengthening nutrition investment is critical not only for improving health and nutrition outcomes but also for accelerating progress across the SDGs. Achieving this will require increased and better-aligned funding, stronger accountability and the integration of innovative financing mechanisms, including fiscal policy tools and cross-sectoral partnerships.[20]

The life-course approach to nutrition emphasises that each stage of life presents distinct nutritional requirements, which, if unmet, can result in profound and often irreversible consequences. Each phase of the life-course represents a critical window of opportunity, reinforcing the need for sustained, evidence-driven policies and programmes to support optimal nutrition throughout the life-course.[21]

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Importance of nutrition in the first 1000 days

The first 1000 days of life—from conception to a child's second birthday—represent a critical window of opportunity for successfully averting suboptimal health and developmental outcomes among children.[21] During this period, the brain undergoes rapid structural and functional maturation, with synaptic development reaching its peak in infancy. The scientific consensus highlights the essential role of nutrition during this stage of life in influencing health and other developmental outcomes, with evidence demonstrating that inadequate maternal and infant nutrition can lead to irreversible consequences for cognitive development, long-term health and economic productivity.[22] Deficiencies in key micronutrients such as folic acid, iron, iodine and zinc are particularly detrimental, contributing to birth defects, stunted growth and cognitive impairments. Research shows that iron-deficiency anaemia during pregnancy is strongly associated with higher rates of preterm birth and low birth weight, both of which significantly increase the risk of infant mortality and developmental delays.[23]

Evidence suggests that protein and other micronutrient deficiencies in early infancy, if not addressed, can result in permanent cognitive impairments, reduced Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and poorer educational attainment.[24] Adequate maternal and infant nutrition also plays a pivotal role in strengthening immune function, thereby reducing susceptibility to infectious diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria. Malnourished children are disproportionately affected by these conditions and experience higher morbidity and mortality.[25] Beyond immediate health implications, the socioeconomic consequences of early-life malnutrition are profound. Empirical evidence indicates that children who experience poor nutrition in early life perform worse in school, leading to lower lifetime earnings and reinforcing cycles of poverty.[26] Investments in nutrition in the first 1000 days not only support individual lifetime health, education and productivity but are also key to breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition and enhancing equitable development pathways for LMICs. Investment in this stage of life is particularly critical for building the foundation for healthier, more productive adults.[6]

Furthermore, economic analyses suggest that investments in early childhood nutrition yield lifelong benefits, including reducing healthcare costs and enhancing economic productivity.[27] Further analysis shows that such investment yields substantial economic returns, with estimates indicating that every United States dollar (USD) spent on nutritional interventions generates up to $23 in economic benefits.[18] These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive policies and interventions that prioritise maternal and child nutrition as a fundamental strategy for improving global health and economic development through investment in human capital. Investing in nutrition during the first 1000 days of life is not only imperative for improving health outcomes but is also instrumental in advancing educational attainment, economic development and overall social well-being.[28] These factors underscore the necessity of a holistic, multisectoral approach that integrates health, nutrition, ECD and education initiatives. A well-integrated approach to health, nutrition and education services has the potential to generate significant benefits across the lifespan.[29]

Nutrition in the next 7000 days

Beyond the first 1000 days, nutrition during middle childhood and adolescence—the 'next 7000 days'—is increasingly recognised for its role in supporting catch-up during periods of rapid growth, particularly during growth spurts in middle childhood (between ages 5 and 9 years) and during puberty (adolescence), supporting the brain rewiring that occurs throughout this period and is most intense in later adolescence, as well as the establishment of lifelong healthy behaviours and dietary preferences.[30] Adolescents experience rapid growth spurts, increased macronutrient and micronutrient requirements and hormonal changes, making this period a 'second window of opportunity' for nutrition interventions.[31] Adolescent years are also said to pose the potential for catch-up nutrition and growth, providing a possible opportunity for childhood nutritional deficiencies and insufficient growth to be improved after stunting in early childhood.[32]

Studies have demonstrated that adequate intake of key nutrients, such as iron, zinc and omega-3 fatty acids during adolescence, is essential for optimum neurodevelopment and reducing the risk of poor growth and cognitive impairments.[33] Deficiencies in macronutrients and micronutrients during this time can have profound and long-lasting consequences, including impaired cognitive performance, weakened immunity and reduced physical capacity. These nutritional deficiencies can also affect final height, bone density and muscle mass development, influencing long-term health. The deficits not only compromise immediate well-being but also diminish future productivity and income-earning potential.[13]

The next 7000 days is also the phase when adolescents begin to develop and refine key life and cognitive skills, including problem-solving skills, decision-making and critical thinking. Poor eating habits and dietary preferences formed during adolescence can have detrimental effects on health outcomes in later years, including obesity, highlighted earlier, NCDs and other diet-related diseases.[34] Nutritional interventions during this phase have been shown to play a significant role in preventing obesity and the development of cardiovascular and other NCDs in middle age. This is strongly supported by evidence from recent reviews of randomised controlled trials, which show that nutrition interventions are associated with long-term cardiometabolic benefits.[35]

Ensuring optimal nutrition during the formative years and throughout the adolescent phase is essential for breaking the cycle of poverty, hunger and malnutrition, especially in countries with high prevalence of early

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adolescent pregnancy, which increasingly jeopardises the growth and nutrition of female adolescents and extends to the next generation.[36] Investing in adolescent nutrition is particularly important for young women, as their nutritional status directly affects pregnancy outcomes and the health of future generations. Undernourished adolescent girls are more likely to give birth to low-birthweight infants, perpetuating a cycle of malnutrition.[37] Similarly, adolescence represents a critical developmental window for male individuals, characterised by rapid and coordinated hormonal changes, accelerated musculoskeletal growth, neurocognitive development and the programming of long-term metabolic and cardiovascular health trajectories.[36] Nutrition during this life stage is not merely supportive but foundational—shaping not only the physical and cognitive potential of the individual adolescent male but also exerting biological influence across generations. Specifically, optimal nutritional intake during male adolescence facilitates peak height velocity, maximises bone mineralisation and supports the accrual of lean muscle mass, all of which are essential for achieving adult health potential.[33] Conversely, undernutrition during this sensitive phase can result in delayed or disrupted pubertal progression, compromised physical and neurodevelopmental outcomes and adverse epigenetic modifications to sperm, which may negatively impact offspring health. Thus, investing in the nutritional well-being of adolescent boys is both a matter of immediate developmental concern and a strategic intervention for long-term, intergenerational health equity.[37]

Furthermore, adequate nutrition throughout the 8000 days is also strongly associated with improved academic performance and greater educational attainment for both boys and girls. Malnourished boys and girls are more likely to experience absenteeism, reduced concentration and lower academic achievement.[38] Well-nourished children and adolescents demonstrate better academic outcomes, higher attendance rates and a greater likelihood of completing their education.[38] The world currently invests US$5.8 trillion annually in education during the next 7000 days, yet estimates suggest that current investment in well-being during this phase represents <2% of the amount invested in education. Investing in nutrition for its associated health, well-being, growth and cognitive benefits ensures that investment in education is maximised, as children and adolescents are able to achieve improved educational outcomes as a result.[39] Altogether, recent research continues to highlight the foundational role that nutrition plays throughout the 'first 8000 days' in promoting long-term health, educational outcomes and future productivity, emphasising the need for comprehensive strategies to ensure adequate nutrition throughout this developmental phase.

Integrated nutrition interventions to maximise impact

The implementation of multisectoral nutrition interventions is essential for optimising health, educational and economic outcomes and fostering broader societal benefits. Empirical evidence demonstrates that targeted strategies, such as maternal supplementation, breastfeeding promotion and enhanced infant and young child feeding practices, yield high returns on investment, both in terms of individual well-being and economic productivity.[40] These interventions are particularly effective when implemented alongside complementary multisectoral initiatives, such as ensuring access to clean water, improving sanitation and promoting hygiene practices. For instance, one recent review of LMIC studies reported that combining WASH interventions with nutrition programmes significantly improved children's height-for-age and weight-for-age z-scores, suggesting enhanced growth outcomes.[41] This evidence is further strengthened by earlier randomised control trials demonstrating that integrating WASH and nutritional strategies can independently reduce enteric infections and growth faltering in children.[42] By preventing nutrient depletion associated with waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea, these measures significantly enhance the impact of nutrition-focused programmes. Additionally, comprehensive infant and early childhood immunisation is crucial, given the well-documented link between malnutrition and increased susceptibility to vaccine-preventable diseases.[43]

Another critical area of opportunity for multisectoral intervention is integrating nutrition and ECD. ECD programmes that integrate nutrition, health, early learning and responsive nurturing care practices provide a foundational framework for ensuring optimal child development.[39] Programmes that incorporate both early learning and nutrition services, whether in preschool or community-based settings, have been shown to enhance school readiness and long-term academic achievement. Investments in ECD yield not only individual benefits but also substantial societal returns by reducing future healthcare costs, improving educational outcomes and employment prospects and fostering economic growth.[40]

School meal programmes represent another critical component of an integrated approach to nutrition and development. Their benefits extend across at least four key sectors: (i) education, by increasing school attendance and retention rates; (ii) health and nutrition, through improvements in dietary intake and the prevention of conditions such as anaemia; (iii) social protection, by providing a significant value transfer to households through free or subsidised meals and (iv) the local food systems and agricultural economy, by creating stable markets for smallholder farmers.[44] Although school meal programmes may not be the most efficient intervention within any single domain, their capacity to address multiple policy objectives simultaneously makes them an attractive option, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Preliminary evidence from eight sub-Saharan African countries indicates that school feeding programmes are cost-beneficial across all subregions, particularly in terms of educational and nutritional gains. The evidence suggests that for every dollar invested in school feeding, the expected return ranges

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from US$3 to US$20, depending on programme design and the socioeconomic, educational and epidemiological characteristics of each country.[27] Notably, in some contexts, these benefits are more pronounced for young girls than for boys. Moreover, school feeding initiatives contribute to equity and redistribution by disproportionately benefiting the most vulnerable populations. In the poorest households, the value transfer per school meal beneficiary can represent up to 10%–20% of annual food expenditures.[45]

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the first 1000 days of life is a critical phase for human development and essential for building future human capital. However, an exclusive focus on this period risks neglecting the equally vital nutritional needs of middle childhood and adolescence. To optimise human capital, reduce global health inequities and break intergenerational cycles of poverty, it is imperative to extend nutritional interventions beyond the first 1000 days to prioritise the full 8000 days of a child's development. Evidence highlights the lifelong benefits of adequate nutrition during these formative years, particularly in enhancing cognitive development, preventing disease, improving educational outcomes and economic productivity and fostering social stability. Delivering sustainable improvements in health, education and economic well-being requires a holistic, integrated approach, mobilising multisectoral actors behind nutrition objectives. This approach should encompass health, nutrition and education, including ECD and school-based initiatives, to deliver maximum human capital and developmental returns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence presented, we recommend that governments, multilateral, bilateral, UN, philanthropic and private sector actors, civil society and communities must prioritise long-term investment in nutrition as a fundamental strategy for poverty alleviation and human capital development. Initiatives should be targeted to prioritise improvements to nutrition outcomes not only within the first 1000 days but also the next 7000 days to build the strongest foundation for human capital development. Finally, to achieve this, policy makers and practitioners must prioritise the implementation of integrated, evidence-based nutrition interventions, ensuring that multisectoral approaches incorporating education, ECD and health and nutrition initiatives are adequately resourced and multisectoral systems and governance structures are built to support quality, equity and sustainability.

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