

Investing in Nutrition: The Foundation for Sustainable and Equitable Development in Timor-Leste*

“Zero hunger would boost economic growth, reduce poverty and safeguard the environment. It would foster peace and stability.”

—UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, June 2012

Good nutrition enables individuals, households and nations to reach their full economic potential. A well-nourished society provides the foundation for more effective investments in education, business, health, agriculture and infrastructure. By investing in better nutrition, a nation invests in the most important ingredient for sustainable and equitable development: the intellectual capital of its people.

Whilst the causes of malnutrition are multifaceted, no scientific breakthroughs are needed to begin to tackle this critical issue. Simply put, we know how to meet the nutrition challenge—the evidence already exists. Many countries have shown what can be achieved when nutrition is prioritized. The cost for not investing in nutrition is too high. And with nutrition now rising to the top of the global development agenda, the time for action is now.

The Cost of Neglect

Undernutrition imposes a staggering cost to societies both in human and economic terms¹. More than one third of all deaths for children under the age of 5 years can be attributed to undernutrition² and it is the largest risk factor in any age group for the global burden of disease³. Poor nourishment in the first 1,000 days of life can cause irreversible damage to both physical and cognitive development in children, thereby thwarting their chances of ever reaching their full potential.

Undernutrition weakens the immune system and increases both the risk and severity of infections⁴. It has been shown that malnutrition in early life also contributes to non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some types of cancer⁵. Paradoxically, children who are undernourished are also more prone to obesity later in life. Malnutrition places a tremendous burden on national health systems, and will continue to do so if action isn't taken.

A Critical Investment with Positive Returns

In addition to the debilitating and tragic human cost of undernutrition, the economic losses are enormous. Productivity losses to malnourished individuals are estimated at more than 10% of lifetime earnings⁶ and national losses to gross domestic product (GDP) are currently estimated at around 2–3%⁷. Interventions targeting nutrition have been proven to be highly cost-effective, yielding a benefit to cost ratio of 15.8 to 1⁸. Even using conservative estimates, each dollar spent to reduce chronic malnutrition can have at least a thirty dollar payoff⁹. A study of boys in Guatemala found that those who participated in a nutrition program before the age of three years grew up to have wages that were 46% higher than those who were not in the program¹⁰.

The 2012 Copenhagen Consensus, an expert panel of world-renowned economists including four Nobel Laureates, found that five of the top ten solutions to address underdevelopment were directly related to nutrition.

¹ World Bank, Horten et al, 2010

² Black et al, 2008

³ Murray et al, 2008

⁴ Victora et al, 2008

⁵ Murray et al, 2008

⁶ World Bank, Horten et al, 2010

⁷ World Bank, Horten et al, 2010

⁸ Scaling Up Nutrition Roadmap. September 2010.

⁹ Copenhagen Consensus 2012

¹⁰ Hoddinott et al 2008

Nobel Laureate Vernon Smith stated; *“One of the most compelling investments is to get nutrients to the world’s undernourished. The benefits from doing so – in terms of increased health, schooling and productivity are tremendous”*¹¹.

A Focus on Evidence Based Solutions

Encouragingly, the evidence on how to tackle and prevent malnutrition already exists. In 2008 a groundbreaking series in the highly respected medical journal *The Lancet*, highlighted a short list of the most effective interventions that address the immediate causes of malnutrition. These scalable interventions, including for example the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding and micronutrient fortification, can reduce chronic malnutrition levels (measured by stunting)¹² in high burden countries by about one third in the short term¹³.

Many countries have shown what is possible through strong national-led initiatives. Brazil for example is widely credited for achieving outstanding reductions in child undernutrition, largely due to the high level of political will and ownership from the former President Lula da Silva and his landmark *“Fome Zero”* approach. Stunting prevalence in Brazil fell by half between 1996 and 2006 (from levels of 13.5% to 6.8%). These huge improvements in nutrition have unleashed the intellectual, physical and economic potential of millions of Brazilians and will likely become the most significant legacy of President Lula da Silva who was jointly awarded the World Food Prize in 2011 for his achievements.

Key Lesson: the Need for a Multi-Sector Approach

Undernutrition is a complex problem with multiple causes and as such it requires a package of complementary interventions that affect several sectors. Real impact will not be achieved if the issue is only viewed as a health problem. Every sector has a role to play. For example, “nutrition sensitive” agricultural interventions can improve the production and consumption of nutritious food among poor households. Improved water access can reduce the burden and cycle of infectious disease which is one of the key drivers of malnutrition. Education can also play a major role, not just in the dissemination of information but also in addressing gender inequality; a key underlying determinant of malnutrition. Nutrition indicators can and should be viewed as key measures of progress across all sectors in development¹⁴.

The Time to Act is Now

There has never been a more favorable international context for tackling malnutrition. Whilst nutrition has long been overlooked and neglected in development, a new global movement to support national leadership for tackling malnutrition has developed in recent years. “Scaling Up Nutrition” (often referred to as SUN) is a multi-stakeholder movement which brings together more than 100 global partners in the international community, business, civil society, academia and donor governments. The fundamental and guiding principle behind SUN is the importance of country-level planning. SUN focusses financial and technical support behind **nationally owned** and **nationally led** nutrition plans.

The movement has already led to high-level political commitments to tackle malnutrition in 28 high-burden countries, all of whom can learn from and support each other in the process.

¹¹ www.copenhagenconsensus.com

¹² Stunting is measured as height-for-age. Children are stunted at -2 z scores or more below the median of the WHO child growth standards

¹³ Bhutta et. al 2008

¹⁴ As stated in the Scaling up Nutrition, Framework for Action.

SUN countries have all agreed on a number of processes that will help align support with their policies, strategies and plans. These include:

- the identification of a Government nutrition focal point
- the identification of a donor convener
- the setting up or strengthening of a multi-sectoral platform which can engage multiple stakeholders
- updating national policies, strategies and plans of action
- the establishment of a common results framework

Through the SUN movement, Niger has publically committed to reducing child stunting by 30% percent by 2021 and countries including Nepal and Tanzania have already tripled national resources that they dedicate to nutrition¹⁵.

Building on Success to Achieve Sustainable and Equitable Development

As stated in the government's Strategic Development Plan, "maximizing the overall health, education and quality of life of the Timorese people is central to building a fair and progressive nation".¹⁶ As Timor-Leste reflects on a remarkable decade of nation-building, attention now turns to the country's economic and social development. Timor-Leste has already seen great success in improving key child and maternal health indicators, including child mortality rates, TB and malaria incidence and access to antenatal care. Building on these achievements - and on existing successful government initiatives such as school feeding, social protection and agricultural programs - will now be crucial in the next phase of combatting malnutrition.

Malnutrition is more than a public health issue. It will require a concerted multi-sector approach, bound by a common goal, across

health, education, agriculture, social services, and infrastructure to achieve real results.

The Strategic Development Plan (SDP) sets out a vision of building a prosperous, stable and knowledge based economy by 2030. The Plan asserts that "the true wealth of any nation is in the strength of its people". Investing in nutrition is the best way to build that national strength. It will yield high returns in the form of healthier children, more able and productive workers, and a more peaceful and stable society.

For Further Reading

- *Scaling Up Nutrition: A Framework for Action and A Roadmap for Scaling Up Nutrition*; both available at <http://www.scalingupnutrition.org/>
- *SUN: A Global Movement to Accelerate Progress in Reducing Maternal and Child Undernutrition*; <http://www.ifpri.org/publication/sun-global-movement-accelerate-progress-reducing-maternal-and-child-undernutrition>

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¹⁵ Nabarro et al, 2012

¹⁶ Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan, 2011, p.13