

Food for Thought: Challenges for Global Nutrition



Global malnutrition persists at unacceptable levels. Yet the international community possesses the knowledge, experience, and tools it needs to address this problem at scale. This interactive document lists a few of the key challenges related to nutrition and poses questions meant to catalyze outcome-oriented discussion about solutions.

We at NBR would like to hear your thoughts and comments about the challenges listed in this document and the solutions that you or your organization recommends. If interested, please fill in answers and email PDF or print out and mail to the address provided below:

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Challenges

LACK OF COHERENT LEADERSHIP. The diversity of topics and corresponding organizations in the field of nutrition make it difficult to identify a clear champion or leading body of organizations that can help incentivize, monitor, and coordinate international nutrition programs and policies. One exception is in the area of micronutrient deficiencies, where well-defined international leadership helps drive innovation and intervention programs.

MALNUTRITION¹ IS NOT PERCEIVED TO BE AN “URGENT” ISSUE. Despite renewed momentum in the nutrition field—fueled in no small part by the launch of the 2008 *Lancet* Series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition—infectious diseases tend to attract the majority of funding and policy attention. Despite the clear relationship between nutrition and almost every other major health issue, malnutrition remains an abstract, low-priority issue for many decision-makers.

DEVELOPING NATIONS FACE HEALTH INEQUITIES AND A DUAL BURDEN OF DISEASE. Following unprecedented economic growth, many developing nations now face the dual burden of childhood undernutrition and adult obesity and their associated diseases. In countries such as Brazil, India, and South Africa, stunting and obesity now coexist at relatively high rates. In OECD countries and now China, stunting rates declined to relatively modest levels before populations began to feel the impact of obesity. However,

¹ The term “malnutrition” covers undernutrition; micronutrient and fatty acid deficiencies; and overweight/obesity.

large economic disparities still exist between the rural and urban populations in these countries.

THE NUTRITION TRANSITION. The nutrition transition denotes a shift from traditional plant-based diets to diets containing more animal products, added sugars, and fats. According to conventional wisdom, low prices for caloric sweeteners and vegetable oils are one cause of the skyrocketing rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes. However, the prices for grains, sugars, and oils have doubled or tripled in recent years, causing political instability and social unrest.

DEARTH OF PRIVATE-SECTOR ENGAGEMENT IN THE NUTRITION FIELD. Although many food and beverage companies have made concerted efforts to emphasize wellness and health by producing more nutritious products, those efforts are still fragmented and largely directed at upper-income consumers. Additionally, while some companies have successfully developed and marketed fortified foods for lower-income groups, those initiatives have been limited and most have not yet been scaled up. More proactive industry approaches to tackling both undernutrition and obesity, in full collaboration with the public and nonprofit sectors, would be of great help to efforts to improve nutrition worldwide.

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT BEST PRACTICES IN NUTRITION INTERVENTIONS. Conflicting opinions about best practices and scientific evidence mean that the application of many international nutrition intervention strategies at scale remains fragmented. Although significant, proven, cost-efficient interventions to combat undernutrition have been developed and implemented, the global health community is missing out on opportunities to reach more people. Public policies that incentivize more positive private-sector engagement in the nutrition field would help motivate industry to tackle nutrition issues, leverage their distribution systems, and share valuable knowledge about consumer behavior.

LACK OF CLEAR, ENFORCEABLE, FLEXIBLE POLICIES AT THE STATE LEVEL. The economic case for addressing malnutrition has been made by both the Copenhagen Consensus and the 2008 *Lancet Series*. Malnutrition increases a population's susceptibility to infectious and other diseases, impacts a population's intellectual and physical development, and, as a result, affects each country's productivity and advancement as a society. While government policies that tackle malnutrition remain rare, numerous countries have put in place comprehensive nutrition strategies in recent years. In many cases, implementation remains weak. In other cases, governments lack comprehensive strategies as well as specific policies. How do governments enforce and monitor policies that do exist? And can policymakers be flexible enough to change policies when new evidence becomes available or existing programs prove less effectual than anticipated? How can governments identify and develop effective new strategies?

What additional challenges does your organization or economy face?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

Key Questions

LEADERSHIP

Is the collective international nutrition leadership structure sufficiently coordinated to carry forward a global effort to combat malnutrition? If so, what does that leadership structure look like? If not, what do we need to do to create a more effective structure?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

PARTNERSHIPS

What do we need to do to foster more effective public-private partnerships within the nutrition community? What are the respective roles of industry and the public sector?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

What is the potential for collaboration between communities traditionally focused either on undernutrition or obesity and associated diseases to work together on broader nutrition issues?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

What financial investments could your organization or economy make to reduce the effects of undernutrition or obesity and its associated diseases?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

In what areas of nutrition would financial investment yield the greatest return?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

How do policymakers who represent nutrition transition regions determine where to invest limited resources when trying to tackle malnutrition?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

Malnutrition is a complex and challenging problem with many underlying causes. How do policymakers decide which causes to target?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

What effective policies exist that successfully combat undernutrition? What policies exist that successfully address obesity and its associated diseases?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

How can policymakers both incentivize private-sector engagement, as well as provide necessary regulations on products?

YOUR ANSWER HERE

Can government policies combat both problems associated with malnutrition and provide solutions to health system challenges?

YOUR ANSWER HERE