

## CONCORD Cotonou Working Group Briefing paper

### MALNUTRITION

#### What is malnutrition?

Malnutrition is defined as not having enough energy or nutrients to live a physically active and healthy life. It encompasses both overnutrition and undernutrition and has direct negative consequences in terms of disease and disability, brain development, educational attainment and income potential for individuals and communities. Adequate nutrition is therefore a key factor to inclusive and equitable growth and development.

The immediate causes of malnutrition are inadequate food intake (in terms of quantity or quality) and diseases. Malnutrition is also influenced by a host of underlying factors related to poverty, including food insecurity, poor water, sanitation and health services, which find their roots in factors that can vary from conflict to climate change; from scarce natural resources to high and volatile food prices; from poor governance to demographic growth.<sup>1</sup>

The cycle of undernutrition may begin with the undernourished mother who cannot provide her child with sufficient nutrients at the foetal stage, as she herself has not benefited from a rich diet. However, it is during the **first 1000 days** following its conception that the baby is most vulnerable and that damage incurred tends to be irreversible.<sup>2</sup> Undernutrition is also linked to **structural injustice**. Children are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to be stunted when living in rural areas, in the poorest quintiles and in regions where women's status/education is lowest. Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to undernutrition due to poverty, limited access to health and social services and stigma within families and communities.

Although the right to adequate nutrition is captured in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, undernutrition still affects large swathes of the world's population. In 2011, 52 million children below the age of five were wasted (acutely malnourished and below average weight for their age) and 165 million were stunted (chronically malnourished and below average height for their age). However, undernutrition and its effects can primarily be felt in the developing world as 90% of undernourished children reside in 34 countries in Africa and Asia.<sup>3</sup> In spite of its importance as a determinant of health and development, malnutrition is a largely neglected issue, which has received insufficient political and financial attention in the last decades.

#### What is the EU doing to fight malnutrition?

Traditionally, the EU mainly addressed nutrition through the lens of food security and hunger alleviation via its humanitarian policies and programmes. For example, the European Commission provided €164 million to beat undernutrition as a form of humanitarian relief in 2013.<sup>4</sup> Food security and agriculture similarly benefited from one billion euros annually from 2006-2011, while the EU financed a Food Facility and the MDG initiative which were allocated 1 billion each in the fight against hunger.<sup>5</sup> However, these policies did not entail a long-term vision of how undernutrition was to be combatted in a long-term and sustainable manner.

In 2013, the EU made a pledge of € 3.5 billion at the "Nutrition for Growth Summit", with €400 million dedicated to nutrition-specific programmes in the health sector, and € 3.1 billion to nutrition-sensitive programmes in other areas such as agriculture, education, water and social protection. Clearer EU policies

<sup>1</sup> Maternal and child undernutrition: global and regional exposures and health consequences, Robert E Black et al., The Lancet, Maternal and Child Undernutrition Series, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/Lancet\\_2013\\_Nutrition\\_Series\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/Lancet_2013_Nutrition_Series_Executive_Summary.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/Lancet\\_2013\\_Nutrition\\_Series\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/Lancet_2013_Nutrition_Series_Executive_Summary.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/nutrition\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/nutrition_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-09-797\\_en.htm?locale=en](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-09-797_en.htm?locale=en)

on nutrition have also been formulated by the European Commission with its 2013 Communication on “Enhancing Maternal and Children Nutrition in external assistance: an EU policy framework”. While the EU Communication commits to reducing both stunting and wasting, the subsequent 2014 EU Action Plan, solely focuses on stunting. The EU therefore aims at supporting countries in reducing the number of stunted children under-five by seven million by 2025. While this is an ambitious target, the EU is missing an opportunity to considerably improve child nutrition in a more coherent and holistic manner. For now, it appears that the EU will address stunting and wasting in silos within their development and humanitarian policies and programmes respectively. However, as global progress on wasting has been sluggish, key donor support is needed to tackle both of these interlinked consequences of undernutrition simultaneously.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the European Commission’s failure to develop comprehensive programmes that address both the short and long-term impact of undernutrition, the Action Plan has a number of strong points. It ascribes a central role to EU Delegations in high priority countries, making them responsible for mainstreaming nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive measures in the EU programmatic plans (NIPs), developing country fiches on nutrition, as well as supporting the development of country strategies on nutrition and encouraging EU delegations to be nutrition coordinators in some priority countries. In addition, it commits to operationalize an accountability framework on monitoring and measuring results, thus making it easier to track its progress in reducing stunting by 7 million. These developments are viewed favourably by civil society, even if the latter’s role in national planning, programming and monitoring processes has not been stressed sufficiently and should be upgraded.

### **Recommendations**

- ✓ Adopt a comprehensive and ambitious report of the Social Affairs Committee of the EU-ACP JPA on the social and economic consequences of malnutrition.
- ✓ Streamline EU policies and programmes on stunting and wasting as these are inextricably linked and must be tackled simultaneously for sustainable improvements and progress in child undernutrition.
- ✓ Ensure the integration of nutrition-sensitive interventions into all EU policies in order to address undernutrition from all angles (education, agriculture, gender, water, sanitation and hygiene policies).
- ✓ Ensure that adequate nutrition for all is identified in the post-2015 framework as a stand-alone goal with measurable indicators attached, and ensure respective links with health, education, sanitation, gender equality and poverty reduction.
- ✓ Advocate for the new European Commissioner for Development to take an equally active role in Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) as his predecessor and to remain accountable by making the disbursement of the €3.5 billion Nutrition for Growth pledge public and transparent.
- ✓ Ensure that at least 25% of all EU delegations in recipient countries mainstream nutrition interventions in their programmatic plans (NIPs) and make sure these interventions are accessible to all marginalised groups.
- ✓ Cater for the integration of prevention and treatment of stunting and wasting measures into primary health care packages at national level through health system strengthening support.

For further information, please go <http://www.concordeurope.org/> Tel +32 2 743 87 81

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<sup>6</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/documents/enhancing\\_maternal-child\\_nutrition\\_in\\_external\\_assistance\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/documents/enhancing_maternal-child_nutrition_in_external_assistance_en.pdf)