Malnutrition in all its forms—undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity—imposes unacceptably high economic and social costs on countries at all income levels. The State of Food and Agriculture 2013: Food systems for better nutrition argues that improving nutrition and reducing these costs must begin with food and agriculture. The traditional role of agriculture in producing food and generating income is fundamental, but agriculture and the entire food system—from inputs and production, through processing, storage, transport and retailing, to consumption—can contribute much more to the eradication of malnutrition.

Malnutrition imposes high costs on society

Each year, the costs associated with undernutrition exceed $105 billion. More than 2.5 billion people suffer from undernutrition or micronutrient deficiencies. According to the World Health Organization, undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies cause 47 percent of deaths among children under five years old. In addition, undernutrition can cause long-term disabilities that cost society $50 billion per year. By contrast, the costs associated with overweight and obesity exceed $215 billion annually. More than 1.3 billion people are overweight, of whom 500 million are obese. The annual costs of overweight and obesity are twice as high in high-income countries as in low-income countries. One in three children under five years old also suffers from micronutrient deficiencies, consuming less than the minimum recommended intake, yet these figures represent only a fraction of the global burden of malnutrition. An estimated 24 percent of the world’s children are stunted, and people suffer from one or more micronutrient deficiencies and 1.4 billion people are overweight, of whom 500 million are obese.

Most countries are burdened by multiple types of malnutrition, which may coexist within the same country, household or individual. These countries include some of the world’s poorest. Malnutrition in all its forms imposes unacceptably high costs on society in human and economic terms. The costs associated with undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are higher than those associated with overweight and obesity, although the latter are rising rapidly even in low- and middle-income countries.

Within a multisectoral approach, food systems offer many opportunities for interventions leading to improved diets and better nutrition. Some of these interventions have the primary purpose of enhancing nutrition. Other interventions in food systems, and in the general economic, social or political environment, may affect nutrition even though this is not their primary objective.

Agricultural production and productivity growth remain essential for better nutrition, but more can be done. Agricultural research and development and for global food security.

The State of Food and Agriculture, FAO’s major annual flagship publication, is a key source for evidence-based assessments of important issues in the field of food and agriculture. Each edition of the report contains a comprehensive, yet easily accessible overview of a selected topic of major relevance for rural and urban development and the global food security.

Also available in:
Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, Spanish

FURTHER INFORMATION
For the State of Food and Agriculture 2013 http://www.fao.org/3/a-i3886e.pdf


Key messages of the report

• Malnutrition in all its forms imposes unacceptably high costs on society in human and economic terms. The costs associated with undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are higher than those associated with overweight and obesity, although the latter are rising rapidly even in low- and middle-income countries.
• Addressing malnutrition requires a multisectoral approach that includes complementary interventions in food systems, public health and education. This approach also facilitates the pursuit of multiple objectives, including better nutrition, gender equality and environmental sustainability.
• Both traditional and modern supply chains offer risks and opportunities for achieving better nutrition and more sustainable food systems. Improvements in traditional supply chains can help reduce losses, lower prices and increase diversity of choice for lower-income households. The growth of modern retailing and food processing can facilitate the use of fortification to combat malnutrition, but the increased availability of highly-processed, packaged goods may contribute to overweight and obesity.
• Consumers ultimately determine what they eat and therefore what the food system produces. And governments, international organizations, the private sector and civil society can help consumers make healthier decisions, reduce waste and contribute to the sustainable use of resources, by providing clear, accurate information and ensuring access to diverse and nutritious foods.
• Better governance of food systems at all levels, facilitated by high-level political support, is needed to build a common vision, to support evidence-based policies, and to promote effective coordination and collaboration through integrated, multisectoral action.
• Agricultural production and productivity growth remain essential for better nutrition, but more can be done. Agricultural research and development and for global food security.

Malnutrition in all its forms—undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity—imposes unacceptably high economic and social costs on countries at all income levels. The State of Food and Agriculture 2013: Food systems for better nutrition argues that improving nutrition and reducing these costs must begin with food and agriculture. The traditional role of agriculture in producing food and generating income is fundamental, but agriculture and the entire food system—from inputs and production, through processing, storage, transport and retailing, to consumption—can contribute much more to the eradication of malnutrition.

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Addressing malnutrition requires integrated actions across sectors.

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The social cost of malnutrition, measured by the “disability-adjusted life years” lost to child and maternal malnutrition and obesity, is very high. Beyond the health care costs, nutrition problems can arise as a result of lost productivity and direct health care costs. Together, these result in average GDP losses of 2% to 3% of global gross domestic product (GDP), equivalent to US$1.4–2.1 trillion per year.

Children and maternal malnutrition—both acute and chronic—cause a rapid reduction in malnutrition. The costs of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies persist across the life cycle, growing at an annual rate of almost 13 to 1. Increased future earnings, with a benefit-to-cost ratio of almost twice the social costs of adult overweight and obesity. The social burden due to child and maternal malnutrition— in particular—poses an even stronger focus on nutrient-dense foods and development priorities must be made more nutrition-sensitive, with a stronger focus on nutrient-dense foods.

The costs of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies must therefore continue to be the highest nutrition priority for all governments and development partners. Improvements in the agricultural sector can help reduce child and maternal malnutrition; in particular, efforts to reduce waste throughout food systems could make important contributions to nutrition. Improved sanitation, food handling, and storage technologies in traditional food systems could boost efficiency and improve the safety and nutritional quality of foods. Reducing food and nutrient losses and waste throughout the food system can make important contributions to better nutrition and relieve pressure on productive resources.

Policy environment and development priorities

The complexity of the food system for better nutrition. The complexity of the food system for better nutrition.

Malnutrition: Nutrition transition

Economic, social, cultural and physical environment

Institutional and policy environment for nutrition

Production “up to the farm” (marketing, storage, trade, processing, marketing, storage, trade, processing)

Nutrition-promoting farming systems, technical and economic efficiency

• Crop and livestock diversification
• Grain reserves and storage
• School and home gardens
• Improved sanitation, food handling, and storage technologies
• Nutrition education and information campaigns
• Targeted food assistance (prenatal, child, and adolescent nutrition)

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The immediate causes of malnutrition are complex and multiddimensional. They include inadequate access to health, education, work, adequate food, lack of clean access to water, sanitation, and health care, high risk of disability, and adult dietary choices. The root causes of malnutrition are even more complex and encompass the broader economic, social, political, cultural and physical environment. Addressing malnutrition, therefore, requires integrated actions and complementary interventions in agriculture and the food system, as well as health and education, as well as broader policy domains. Because the necessary interventions cut across sectors of the global community in the immediate future, which households and countries may simultaneously face growing demand for staple foods. These changes in activity and income levels, as well as in broader policy domains. Education and information campaigns within a supportive institutional and policy environment for nutrition are the primary channel for nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes and animal-source foods. Without effective and relevant interventions towards that goal, the costs of food for all nutrition but must do more. Agricultural productivity growth contributes to better nutrition through rising incomes, especially in countries where the sector accounts for a large share of the economy and through reducing the cost of food for all agriculture. In contrast, medical interventions such as vitamin supplements can address specific micronutrient deficiencies and their impacts are more easily observed, but they cannot fully substitute for the broader nutritional benefits offered by a well-functioning food system. Every aspect of the food system influences the availability and accessibility of diverse, nutritious foods and thus the ability of consumers to choose healthy diets. But the linkages from the food system to nutritional outcomes are often indirect — mediated through incomes, prices, knowledge and other factors. What is more, food system policies and interventions are rarely designed with nutrition as their primary objective, so impacts can be difficult to trace and researchers sometimes conclude that food system interventions are ineffective in reducing malnutrition. In contrast, medical interventions such as vitamin supplements can address specific micronutrient deficiencies and their impacts are more easily observed, but they cannot fully substitute for the broader nutritional benefits offered by a well-functioning food system. Every aspect of the food system must align with support to good agriculture; any single intervention in isolation is therefore unlikely to have a significant impact within such a complex system. Interventions that consider food systems as a whole are more likely to achieve positive nutritional outcomes.

Nutrition transition is driven by food system transformation

Economic and social development lead to the transformation of food systems as a whole are more likely to achieve positive nutritional outcomes. By rising labor productivity, shifting shares of population working in agriculture and urbanization, new modes of agricultural production, employment and land tenure within the household, and the resulting changes in activities and dietary patterns are part of a “nutrition transition” in which agricultural and nutrition interventions can make a difference. Nutrition transition is driven by food system transformation and complementary interventions in agriculture and the food system. Modifying the food system to reduce malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. The complexity and interdependence of both the malnutrition and food systems in individual countries mean that policies and interventions need to be context-specific.

Agricultural productivity growth contributes to better nutrition through rising incomes, especially in countries where the sector accounts for a large share of the economy and through reducing the cost of food for all agriculture. In contrast, medical interventions such as vitamin supplements can address specific micronutrient deficiencies and their impacts are more easily observed, but they cannot fully substitute for the broader nutritional benefits offered by a well-functioning food system. Every aspect of the food system must align with support to good agriculture; any single intervention in isolation is therefore unlikely to have a significant impact within such a complex system. Interventions that consider food systems as a whole are more likely to achieve positive nutritional outcomes. By rising labor productivity, shifting shares of population working in agriculture and urbanization, new modes of agricultural production, employment and land tenure within the household, and the resulting changes in activities and dietary patterns are part of a “nutrition transition” in which agricultural and nutrition interventions can make a difference. Nutrition transition is driven by food system transformation and complementary interventions in agriculture and the food system.
Malnutrition in all its forms – undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity – imposes unacceptably high economic and social costs on countries at all income levels. The State of Food and Agriculture 2013 for better nutrition argues that improving nutrition and reducing these costs must begin with food and agriculture. The traditional role of agriculture in producing food and generating income is fundamental, but agriculture and the entire food system – from inputs and production, through processing, storage, transport and retailing, to consumption – can contribute much more to the eradication of malnutrition.

Malnutrition imposes high costs on society
Highly nutritious food systems are essential for better nutrition and reducing these costs. For example, an estimated 24 percent of the world's children are stunted and 1.4 billion people suffer from overweight and obesity. But governments, international organizations, the private sector and civil society can help consumers make healthier decisions, reduce waste and contribute to the sustainable use of resources, by providing clear, accurate information and ensuring access to diverse and nutritious foods.

Agricultural production and productivity growth remain essential for better nutrition, but more can be done. Agricultural research and development and for global food security. The State of Food and Agriculture 2013: Food Systems for Better Nutrition contains a comprehensive, yet easily accessible overview of a selected topic of major relevance for rural and agricultural development and a global food security.

Some of these interventions have been implemented in various forms and at different levels, facilitated by high-level political support, to tackle world hunger, improve food security and promote effective coordination and collaboration through integrated, multisectoral action.

Addressing malnutrition requires a multisectoral approach that includes complementary interventions in food systems, public health and education. This approach also facilitates the pursuit of multiple objectives, including better nutrition, gender equality and environmental sustainability.

Within a multisectoral approach, food systems offer many opportunities for interventions leading to improved diets and better livelihoods. Some of these interventions have the primary purpose of enhancing nutrition. Other interventions in food systems, and in the general economic, social or political environment, may affect nutrition even though this is not their primary objective.

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Key messages of the report

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Within a multisectoral approach, food systems • Addressing malnutrition requires a • Malnutrition in all its forms – undernutrition, • This approach also facilitates the pursuit of multiple objectives, including better nutrition, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. • Within a multisectoral approach, food systems offer many opportunities for interventions leading to improved diets and better health. Some of these interventions have the primary purpose of enhancing nutrition. Nutrition-oriented interventions, if well designed, can influence diet and health in a more cost-effective manner than other interventions. • Agricultural production and productivity growth remain essential for better nutrition, but more can be done. Agricultural research and development and engineering understandings are more effective when they are sensitive to nutrition. • Both traditional and modern supply chains offer risks and opportunities for achieving better nutrition and more sustainable food systems. Improvements in traditional supply chains can help reduce losses, increase prices, and increase diversity of choice for lower-income households. The growth of modern retailing and food processing can facilitate the use of fortification to combat malnutrition, but the increased availability of highly processed, packaged goods may contribute to overweight and obesity.

Key messages of the report

- Malnutrition in all its forms – undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity – imposes unacceptably high economic and social costs on countries at all income levels. The State of Food and Agriculture 2013 food systems for better nutrition argue that improving nutrition requires that efforts must begin with food and agriculture. The traditional role of agriculture in producing food and generating income is fundamental, but agriculture and the entire food system – from inputs and production, through processing, storage, transport and retailing, to consumption – can contribute much more to the eradication of malnutrition.

- Malnutrition imposes high costs on society. High estimated costs of 3.1% of GDP, and even higher estimates (up to 12.5% of the world’s population in some rich countries) may motivate action. In terms of energy intake, just three figures represent only a fraction of the global burden of malnutrition. An estimated 24% of the world’s children are stunted and 10% suffer from severe malnutrition. Every country is affected, with 60% of children suffering from stunting within the same country, household or individual.

The costs associated with undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are higher than those associated with overweight and obesity, although the latter are rising rapidly even in low- and middle-income countries.

Addressing malnutrition requires a multisectoral approach that includes complementary interventions in food systems, public health, and education. This approach also facilitates the pursuit of multiple objectives, including better nutrition, gender equality, and environmental sustainability.

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