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Partnerships for Progress: The G20's Role in Addressing Maternal and Child Malnutrition in Africa

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Abstract

Maternal and child malnutrition in Africa continues to challenge child development and economic prosperity despite global progress. This policy note highlights the G20's efforts, including the Early Childhood Development Initiative, the Bhopal Declaration and the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, to fight this crisis. It advocates for accelerated action and increased investments to turn these commitments into effective outcomes. The paper recommends that the 2025 G20 South Africa Presidency should address barriers that hinder nutrition effectiveness in Africa, improve health and data systems for better monitoring, encourage multisectoral cooperation, and champion women's empowerment. Implementing these recommendations is key to reducing malnutrition rates, enhancing maternal and child health outcomes, and moving towards an inclusive and sustainable future.



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Introduction

Maternal and child malnutrition remains a persistent global challenge impeding human development and economic progress. In response, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 ambitiously aims to eliminate all forms of malnutrition by 2030. Specifically, Target 2.2, under this goal, establishes bold yet attainable benchmarks for 2025, focusing on reducing stunting and wasting in children under the age of five and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, including pregnant and lactating women. Despite strides in alleviating poverty and food insecurity, maternal and child nutrition, especially in Africa, has shown considerable lag in improvement. This policy brief explores the current state of maternal and child malnutrition in Africa, examines the G20's contribution towards addressing global maternal and child nutrition, and proposes actionable recommendations for the 2025 G20 South Africa Presidency to accelerate progress towards meeting SDG Target 2.2.

The Current State of Maternal and Child Malnutrition in Africa

Africa has the highest global burden of maternal and child malnutrition. Women of reproductive age, particularly pregnant and lactating women, along with infants and young children, are the most nutritionally vulnerable groups. Maternal malnutrition significantly increases morbidity and mortality risk among African women. Key contributing factors include inadequate food intake, poor dietary diversity and quality, frequent infection, and short interpregnancy intervals.

Child malnutrition, including stunting, wasting, and underweight, remains a serious public health concern in many African countries. Despite global progress in reducing stunting rates among children under five years of age, the total number of stunted children in Africa has alarmingly increased from 54.4 million in 2000 to an estimated 63 million.^[1]

Several global crises have worsened the malnutrition crisis in Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic and Ukrainian war disrupted global supply chains, increased food prices, and spread food insecurity. Estimates suggest COVID-19 caused an additional 130,000 global deaths in children under five years of age, with 50% of the deaths occurring in Africa, largely due to reduced access to healthcare and essential nutrition interventions. Ongoing conflicts and the escalating effects of climate change further threaten food security and the well-being of vulnerable populations, impacting food production and accessibility. ^[2]

These global events and the resulting economic downturn have substantially worsened malnutrition in low- and middle-income countries. The 2022 Global Nutrition Report estimates that the annual nutrition-specific funding required to meet the targets for maternal, infant, and young child health will rise to US\$8 billion between 2022 and 2030. When considering the nutrition-sensitive interventions needed to achieve SDG 2 targets, the total estimated annual financial needs increase to US\$39-50 billion. ^[3]

[1] AFDG 2024. East Africa joins other regions, launches bold plan to tackle widespread child malnutrition. 07 November 2024 ed. Online: African Development Bank Group.

[2] SESITO, P., VELASQUEZ, S., OREL, E. & KEISER, O. 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic and child malnutrition in sub-Saharan Africa: A scoping review.

[3] SHEKAR, M., DE MEL, R., AKUOKU, J. & BEECHER, J. 2022. Chapter 3: More money for nutrition, more nutrition for the money: Financing nutrition. Online: Global Nutrition Report.

Malnutrition has far-reaching consequences that hinder human development and economic progress. It affects brain development, educational achievement, and long-term health, imposing substantial financial burdens on individuals, families, and national economies. Globally, malnutrition costs the economy an estimated US\$3.5 trillion annually, representing 3% to 16% of the GDP in low-income settings. In Africa, undernutrition alone accounts for up to 16.5% of GDP loss. These economic costs stem from lost productivity, reduced human capital investment due to preventable child deaths, premature adult mortality linked to diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and increased healthcare expenditures. Additionally, adult earnings are estimated to decrease by 2.4% for every 1% of lost potential height, further demonstrating the economic impact of early childhood malnutrition. [4]

G20's Role in Addressing Global Maternal and Child Malnutrition

The G20 is committed to ending all forms of malnutrition by 2030, recognising the pivotal role of nutrition in achieving the SDGs. Representing 85% of the global GDP and two-thirds of the world's population, the G20 nations have the potential to significantly influence global health and nutrition outcomes through domestic policies, international leadership, and development assistance. While the G20 has increasingly prioritised health with its agenda, a holistic approach to addressing maternal and child malnutrition has been less evident.

An overview of the G20 presidencies that launched initiatives related to maternal and child malnutrition.

- 2017 Germany: The G20 Health Working Group initiated efforts to develop a shared international agenda on key health issues, including nutrition-related policies concerning maternal and child health.
- 2018 Argentina: The G20 emphasised maternal and child health and nutrition in its joint statement and endorsed the Nurturing Care Framework, which encompasses policies and intervention programmes to support early childhood development. Additionally, the G20 launched the Initiative for Early Childhood Development (ECD), promoting a life-course approach and advocating multisectoral strategies to improve child outcomes. [5]
- 2021 Italy: The G20 Health Ministers convened to address the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on global health. The G20 Health Declaration stressed the importance of global cooperation, solidarity, and innovation in tackling the pandemic and building more resilient healthcare systems. The G20 pledged to promote equitable vaccine distribution and strengthen health systems in preparation for future crises.
- 2023 India: The G20 India Declaration, culminating in the Bhopal Declaration, aimed to eliminate hunger and malnutrition. The declaration encouraged investment in gender-responsive and age-sensitive nutrition and food system interventions using innovative financing and social protection systems. The Bhopal Declaration prioritised “child budgets”, focusing on early childhood development and universal social benefits. [6]

[4] ROCHE, C. & TUCKER, P. 2023. Breaking the cycle of chronic child malnutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa. 09 February 2023 ed. Online: Economist Impact.

[5] ECDAN 2018. G20's Initiative for Early Childhood Development. September 2018 ed. Online: Early Childhood Development Action Network.

[6] G20 2023. Bhopal Declaration.

- 2024 Brazil: The emphasis on integrated maternal and early childhood interventions paved the way for the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty launch during the G20 Brazilian Presidency. The initiative aims to expand the adoption of evidence-based national policies and programmes targeting the most vulnerable populations in lower- and middle-income countries. It also aims to secure commitments from financial and knowledge partners to support the scale-up of maternal and early childhood programmes. [7]

Building on previous G20 presidencies, South Africa's G20 Presidency under the theme Accelerate Health Equity, Solidarity, and Universal Access focuses on accelerating UHC through primary health care (PHC) approach, strengthening human resources for health, stemming the tide of NDCs, pandemic prevention preparedness and response (PPPR), alongside promoting science and innovation for health and economic growth.[8] By prioritising these actions, South Africa aims to advance global health, strengthen international partnerships, and foster long-term solutions to the world's most pressing health issues.

Recommendations for Advancing Progress on SDG 2.2

Based on the analysis, the G20 South African Presidency should consider these recommendations to improve progress on SDG 2.2 targets for maternal and child nutrition in Africa.

1. **Address Barriers that impede the effectiveness of nutrition interventions in Africa:** The G20 should address systemic and structural barriers that hinder the effectiveness of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions, including limited resources, poor infrastructure, weak health systems, and inadequate coordination between sectors.
2. **Improve Health Systems in Africa:** Strengthen health systems in Africa by focusing on primary care and community-based services, investing in infrastructure, training healthcare workers and improving supply chains for nutrition supplies.
3. **Strengthen the Implementation of the Nurturing Care Framework and ECD Policies:** The G20 needs to enhance the implementation of national and global nutrition policies and guidelines by integrating nutrition interventions within early childhood development policies and programmes.
4. **Promote Multisectoral Collaboration and Monitoring:** The Solidarity for the Achievement of SDG Task Force should convene representatives from relevant ministries, civil society organisations, think tanks, international and African organisations, and the private sector to develop and coordinate a comprehensive G20 Action Plan on nutrition.
5. **Strengthen Data Systems:** The G20 must prioritise investments in health information systems for monitoring and evaluating policies and programmes addressing maternal and child malnutrition.
6. **Prioritise Women's Empowerment and Engagement:** The G20 should ensure women's participation and engagement in policy development and decision-making processes related to nutrition, health, and well-being.

[7]G20 2024. G20 Rio de Janeiro Leaders' Declaration. 18 November 2024 ed. Rio de Janeiro.

[8] G20 SOUTH AFRICA 2025. Health. Online.

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