

# EDUCATION & NUTRITION

## PARTNERS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Worldwide, 200 million children fail to reach their full potential due to malnutrition.<sup>1</sup> These children are unable to access educational opportunities, or participate in national development.<sup>2</sup> The UN Secretary-General said in March that if we want to “avert a generational catastrophe, reduce inequalities, and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, then we simply must prioritize and protect education”.<sup>3</sup> **We welcome the European Commission’s determination to accelerate access to education and assert that, in order for the new 10% sub-target on education spending to be effective, the EU must supplement this effort by continuing to show leadership on nutrition with renewed commitments.**

In July, the EU will participate in the Global Education Summit, a key moment for the international community to come together and support, financially and politically, the global effort to provide quality education for all children. The EU has already made an ambitious pledge of €700 million for the period of 2021-2027 to this initiative. In December, the EU will also participate in the Nutrition for Growth Summit (N4G), an opportunity for the EU and Member States to commit to ending malnutrition in all its forms by 2030. Access to nutrition and education are mutually reinforcing development objectives: the European Commission should see these Summits as parallel processes that should complement each other. They represent key opportunities to establish a strong link between nutrition and education efforts, cultivating a true partnership for development. Realising the human right to food and the human right to education are inextricably linked.

### NUTRITION: A BEDROCK FOR EDUCATION

Research has shown that malnutrition is a strong risk factor for children’s cognitive development. A child who is acutely malnourished is unlikely to be able to access school programmes, since they will have a low levels of energy, health, and overall well-being. The impact of poor nutritional status on educational performances has been tracked into childhood and adolescence. Compared to non-stunted children, stunted children score an average of 7% lower in math tests, and are 19% less likely to be able to read at age 8. Research has shown that “malnutrition can cut the volume of the brain by as much as 40%, and prevent the synapses of the neurons from forming properly”.<sup>4</sup> As a result, a malnourished child has half the learning potential of a fully healthy child. Being well nourished is a baseline for accessing, and excelling in, educational settings.

“Nutrition provides the platform for progress in health, employment, empowerment of women and the reduction of poverty and inequality”<sup>5</sup>

The first two years of a child’s life, and especially the first 1,000 days including the time in utero, are a window of opportunity to tackle the adverse effects of malnutrition, and their impact on the cycle of poverty, including access to education. Interventions on health and nutrition before the child’s second birthday positively impacts learning, and are “high-priority investments in education and economic growth”.<sup>6</sup> Education can play an essential role in reducing undernutrition and contribute to breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition. Education has been identified

by experts as a key sector for the scaling up of nutrition sensitive interventions. 370 million children worldwide rely on school meals as a key source of their daily nutrition; however, more than 40% of school meals have been missed during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> As schools are reopening, it is critical to underline that schools without access to clean water, toilets, hygiene, and regular cleaning are not safe environments. The available data<sup>8</sup> shows that pre-primary and primary schools are least served with WASH services, which are essential to protect more vulnerable younger children from waterborne diseases. Furthermore, because schools have a key role in establishing social norms and healthy behaviours, it is key to integrate hygiene behaviour change into the education system to deliver long-lasting improved hygiene behaviours at scale and protect young children from diarrhoeal diseases and malnutrition.

## NUTRITION AND EDUCATION: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR HEALTHY SOCIETIES

Nutrition and education are both makers and markers of development. According to a study in 2016, the impact education has on food security is not only a result of higher disposable income, but also a different understanding of the importance of nutrition as a result of education, highlighting the connection between education and nutrition.<sup>9</sup> Mothers who have had access to childhood education have a significant increase in uptake of maternal health services, leading to increased birth weight and height of child.<sup>10</sup>

“The economic costs of undernutrition, in terms of lost national productivity and economic growth, are significant—ranging from 2 to 3% of GDP in some countries and up to 11% of GDP in Africa and Asia each year.”

The right to access proper food and education are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>11</sup>, and the EU, which counts human rights as one of its core values, should reinforce its commitment to these two imperatives. High rates of undernutrition also go hand in hand with high levels of poverty in developing countries. For example, a study by the African Union Commission and the World Food Programme estimated that malnutrition in Malawi reduced the country's GDP by 10.3%<sup>12</sup>, while combating malnutrition in children can increase a country's productivity and boost national GDP by as much as 12%.<sup>13</sup> Malnutrition in all its forms has also a huge negative economic impact. It is estimated that it costs the global economy up to US\$3.5 trillion annually.<sup>14</sup> **Eradicating malnutrition, promoting education and achieving economic growth are thus interdependent and part of the same process.**

# THE EU: WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The good news is that ensuring children receive adequate nutrition and education can foster rapid socio-economic change. Better nutrition contributes to better education by providing every child with the ability to succeed in life.

To empower the development partnership of education and nutrition, we call on the EU to:

## 1. Commit to an ambitious pledge at the N4G in Tokyo

The coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on children and families, and has had disastrous effects on both education and nutrition. The Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit in December 2021 comes at a critical time, as the development community reached a funding ‘cliff’s edge’ for nutrition and the EU’s financial commitment ended in 2020. The EU’s leadership at N4G will be vital, having committed 19.8% of the global commitment during the first summit in 2013. Renewal of the EU’s ambitious commitment to the fight against malnutrition through financial and policy pledges is a prerequisite towards ensuring healthy lives, in line with the SDGs. We must act now or risk reversing the gains made.

## 2. Focus on early childhood nutrition

Ensuring early childhood nutrition fits with Europe’s commitment to protecting children worldwide, and is economically smart. Every \$1 invested in the fight against undernutrition generates between \$16 and \$20 in economic return.<sup>15</sup> In a global economy requiring highly skilled workers more than ever, escaping the cycle of poverty requires eradicating child malnutrition.

## 3. Ensure girls have access to education, and provide maternal education to women

According to UNICEF, providing every woman in low and middle-income countries with primary education is expected to reduce stunting by 4%, representing 1.7 million children. Giving women a secondary education would reduce stunting by 26%.<sup>16</sup>



Generation Nutrition EU (GN) is a network of multisectoral civil society organisations, collaborating to end malnutrition in all its forms. Members of GN include Action Against Hunger, Alliance2015, CARE International, Global Health Advocates, Save the Children, WaterAid and World Vision. The coalition works with and towards the EU to ensure and enhance its commitments and action towards achieving a world without malnutrition in all its forms by 2030.

# Endnotes

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