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An Agenda to Accelerate Progress on Global Nutrition

by Jordan Teague



Laura Elizabeth Pohl for Bread for the World

Bread for the World Institute provides policy analysis on hunger and strategies to end it.

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“We have a unique opportunity to fully embrace the scale of the challenge ahead and commit to the holistic, systemic changes that are required.”

– Gerda Verburg, Coordinator, Scaling Up Nutrition Movement

SUMMARY AND HIGHLIGHTS

Exciting progress has been made in the struggle against global malnutrition, but many obstacles remain. There is no silver bullet that will end malnutrition, but this paper presents an agenda of policies and practices that offer a clear way forward when combined with investments in proven, effective nutrition services. These include, for example, treatment or preventive treatment of children affected by wasting, multiple micronutrient supplementation for pregnant women, adequate breastfeeding/complementary feeding for infants, and Vitamin A supplementation for children. In order to make significant lasting progress, all stakeholders—including the U.S. government—in all sectors will need to contribute to strategic, cohesive, and coordinated action to:

- Bolster nutrition governance structures and mechanisms
- Align investments with regional and national nutrition strategies, plans, and systems
- Invest in nutrition capacity in health services
- Invest in building both supply and demand for nutritious foods
- Improve equity in policies and practices in order to advance nutrition for people at highest risk
- Strengthen community resilience to protect nutrition gains

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Introduction

This is the final decade of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the deadline for the 2025 World Health Assembly Global Nutrition Targets is almost here. The nutrition community needs to make swifter progress toward the day when all people, no matter where they live, have the nutritious food they need to survive and thrive.

There is ample evidence that more funding is needed for proven, cost-effective nutrition efforts to reach the global nutrition goals that countries around the world have adopted. But global funding for nutrition peaked in 2013 and, as of 2019, it continued to decline.¹ The critical question for the global nutrition community is: how can we make faster progress using the resources we already have?

Accelerating progress on nutrition depends on investing in direct nutrition services, such as treatment or preventive treatment of children affected by wasting, multiple micronutrient supplementation for pregnant women, adequate breastfeeding/complementary feeding for infants, and Vitamin A supplementation for children. In order to end malnutrition in all its forms, these essential services must be scaled up and complemented by a broader set of actions.

Drawing on recent published reports and on lessons from countries that have achieved rapid progress,* Bread for the World Institute has compiled a

set of policies and practices that are important to creating enabling environments for better nutrition. We hope that this compilation serves as an agenda for action that is useful to all actors working to improve nutrition in countries with heavy burdens of malnutrition, including the U.S. government, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, national governments, other donors, the private sector, and civil society.

All real, lasting progress on nutrition must be built on the foundation of supporting and strengthening national and local actors and systems. Ensuring that people and communities in need receive all necessary services is always the goal. Bread for the World Institute calls on the U.S. government and its partners to collectively adopt this agenda and put in place policies and practices that will accelerate progress on nutrition (see Box 2 on the next page).

*See the other papers in this series, Key Ingredients for Faster Progress on Nutrition and Accelerated Nutrition Progress in Kenya.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

U.S. leadership is critical in the global conversation on how to advance nutrition. The U.S. government should prioritize strengthening partner countries' capacity and commitment to improve nutrition as part of the Journey to Self-Reliance.

The agenda to enable swifter, sustainable progress on nutrition described in this paper does not call on the U.S. government to lead all aspects of improving nutrition for the global population. It does call for carefully determining the U.S. role and comparative advantage with other actors, including the government, other donors, local civil society, and the local private sector, in each country where it works. It also calls on the United States to strengthen and use its convening power to encourage global nutrition stakeholders to adopt the agenda's policies and practices.

BOX 1: NUTRITION IN A POST-COVID WORLD

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life as people knew it, and there is a great deal of uncertainty about what the world will be like in the coming years. It is certain, however, that good nutrition was, is, and will be critical for the health and well-being of all people. An urgent priority during the COVID-19 global pandemic is to protect mothers, young children, and others who are more vulnerable to severe illness or death because they are malnourished at the time they contract the virus.

With the virus now spreading in low-resource contexts and new waves of infection expected in the coming year, better nutrition for people in the

hardest-hit countries is more important than ever. Good nutrition has always been critical to building resilience during and after crises—especially for communities that face multiple shocks and stresses. The COVID-19 crisis is no exception. In the long term, the need to rebuild offers an opportunity to rethink health, food, and social protection systems, making them more equitable and effective in enabling people to become resilient to subsequent shocks.

Nutrition must be integrated as a core value of a post-COVID world. The agenda described in this paper can guide stakeholders as the world seeks to rebuild for better nutrition.

BOX 2: RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON GLOBAL NUTRITION

- Bolster nutrition governance structures and mechanisms
- Align investments with regional and national nutrition strategies, plans, and systems
- Invest in nutrition capacity in health services
- Invest in building both supply and demand for nutritious foods
- Improve equity in policies and practices to advance nutrition for people at highest risk
- Strengthen community resilience to protect nutrition gains

RECOMMENDATION 1: Bolster nutrition governance structures and mechanisms

“Nutrition governance” simply means the institutional framework and structures that support efforts to promote better nutrition. Nutrition governance includes policies, laws, strategies, budgets, coordination mechanisms, and implementing bodies. Larger-scale nutrition efforts could not be sustained without a nutrition governance structure that is initiated and coordinated by countries themselves.

Local stakeholders—including government, civil society, and the private sector—bear most of the responsibility for nutrition governance, but external actors should encourage, align with, and help strengthen these efforts. Investments in nutrition can support or help establish regional, country, and sub-national structures. Many countries have put in place nutrition-related technical working groups or partner coordination mechanisms. External stakeholders should align themselves with these efforts rather than seek to establish structures or mechanisms that replace or duplicate them.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

Lead the global community in affirming locally-led nutrition governance, strengthening local capacity to establish effective nutrition governance, and participating in locally-led nutrition governance structures in countries with high burdens of malnutrition.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Align investments with regional and national nutrition strategies, plans, and systems

According to the 2nd Global Nutrition Policy Review in 2018,² nearly 95 percent of countries have some type of national strategy, policy, or plan for nutrition, and of those, 89 percent have developed a comprehensive nutrition strategy.

When a government chooses to join SUN, it commits to completing an extensive process to develop a comprehensive plan, a process that emphasizes domestic stakeholders and includes multi-stakeholder, multi-sector consultations. Most SUN countries host a multi-stakeholder platform that includes participants from civil society and the private sector.

Once the plan has been negotiated and adopted, all actors—internal and external—should align and coordinate their activities. Outside donors should ensure that their investments, projects, and activities all support the country in achieving the goals it has identified and, in addition, contribute to strengthening existing local structures. Projects led or funded by external actors should seek to integrate their activities into local efforts or, at minimum, coordinate their plans with local officials. For example, a U.S.-funded nutrition program might work with a local health system and its community health workers or volunteers to deliver nutritional supplements, set up a referral system for children with signs of wasting, or build community demand for nutrient-dense foods.

Some regions have nutrition plans and strategies in place to coordinate and guide all nutrition investments in the region. In Africa, for example, the African Union’s Africa Regional Nutrition Strategy³ and the Malabo Montpellier Panel’s Action Agenda⁴ should inform and steer nutrition funding and approaches.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

The goals and activities of all U.S. government-funded nutrition programs should clearly align with regional and country nutrition goals, and these programs should aim to strengthen existing local processes and capacities to deliver quality nutrition services.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Invest in nutrition capacity in health services

Integrating nutrition into the national health system can enable a country to make significant progress. To be effective in promoting better nutrition, however, the health system needs adequate human resources, particularly nutritionists and health workers trained in nutrition. These staff members should work in accordance with the principles of an equitable health system; be trained and able to provide quality nutrition services; and be deployed geographically to reach the country's entire population.

Ensuring a strong workforce for nutrition requires investing in quality educational programs and training in nutrition at universities, technical schools, and community colleges. Trained professionals must be positioned to deliver services to underserved communities. External stakeholders should support government efforts to do this. It is also important to support incentives for health professionals, including nutritionists and community health workers, to continue to

work in underserved areas of their countries.

The health system should be able to provide the following nutrition services: iron and folic acid supplementation for all adolescent girls; micronutrient supplementation for pregnant women; preventive treatment for malaria during pregnancy; vitamin A supplementation for children; promotion of good feeding and hygiene practices for infants and young children, including exclusive breastfeeding; and screening and treatment for acute malnutrition. Any of these can and should be provided through existing health services delivery platforms, which are generally clinics or community health programs.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

- All U.S. government-funded health programs should, as relevant to the context, train community health workers in prevention and treatment of malnutrition as part of their pre-service and in-service training.
- All U.S. government health systems investments should, as appropriate, include scaling up priority nutrition-specific services as an integral part of basic health service delivery, especially in underserved communities.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Support efforts to increase both supply and demand for nutritious foods

Just as important as equipping health systems to promote nutrition is improving the capacity of food systems to produce and deliver nutritious foods that meet people's needs. The local private sector, made up of markets, entrepreneurs, banks, and small businesses, is a major driving force in the food system, and thus an important stakeholder in efforts to increase access, availability, and affordability of nutritious foods for all communities.

Government policies that govern businesses in sectors such as agriculture, food production, marketing, and so forth are also important determinants of the country's success in bringing healthy, affordable foods to consumers. Policies should create and support the conditions necessary for farms and businesses in the food system to operate in the public interest while also making a profit. Too often, subsidies or other incentives encourage farmers to produce foods that are not nutrient-dense or nonfood "cash crops" at the expense of foods with nutrients that many people may be lacking.

To make nutritious foods available to households, the whole food value chain, a series of "farm to fork" steps such as processing, transporting, and marketing, must be functioning effectively and prioritizing good nutrition. Government policy can support and strengthen the food value chain for better nutrition. For example, farmers who own cattle and want to sell milk may lack facilities for pasteurization, cold storage, or another method of preserving the milk's nutrients and safety until it is brought to market and sold. Government could help support stronger infrastructure. Both support for producers and enforcement of food safety standards are needed to ensure a reliable supply of nutritious food.

Another link that is often part of the food value chain is fortification of staple crops and other frequently consumed crops. Adding vitamins and minerals to certain crops is feasible and can

improve the food's overall nutritional value. Fortification of staple crops is one of the highest priority and most effective nutrition interventions.

But supply responds primarily to demand, so it is also critical that people are motivated to buy and consume nutritious foods once they are for sale. Farmers, processors, and others may be understandably reluctant to devote resources to something that they may not be able to sell, so demonstrating at least the beginnings of consumer demand for a new or seldom seen food may be an essential first step. Providing families with education about healthy foods and why they are healthy, perhaps along with samples, will help create that demand. There are many other ways to build demand that this paper can only allude to, such as giving presentations on nutrition in clinics at times when families are already there for primary health services, or launching a private sector marketing campaign.

As mentioned in *Key Ingredients for Faster Progress on Nutrition* in this series,⁵ countries that have made rapid progress against childhood stunting and wasting are also *increasing* the consumption of fruits and vegetables or, more broadly, making non-staple crops a growing share of an average family's diet. These foods are typically more nutritious than staple grains such as wheat or rice.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

The staff of Feed the Future, the U.S. government's flagship food security program, has taken time to study and understand how food value chains work in different contexts. Feed the Future should take a similar holistic approach to nutrition:

- Feed the Future should support national governments in developing the skills needed to formulate policies that enable and encourage nutrition-sensitive agriculture.
- Feed the Future should support local private sector actors in acquiring the skills and experience needed to maintain a food value chain that provides as much nutritious food as possible.
- Feed the Future should invest in efforts within communities to build demand for nutritious foods.

BOX 3: COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES FOR COMMUNITIES

Making lasting progress on nutrition requires a comprehensive plan that meets all the needs of the community. Health services, agriculture or food security programs, social protection programs, and investments in poverty reduction are all needed in any given community. Meeting one nutrition need but not others, and/or overlooking gaps, cannot produce sustainable improvements in nutrition.

This does not mean that one or two stakeholders must provide every essential component for a community. Instead, all actors, including those already providing services in the area, should contribute to a plan that seeks to provide communities with the tools they need to improve nutrition. A number of organizational structures have the potential to be effective, depending on local needs and capacities. One donor may integrate or co-locate several of its programs. In another community, two or more donors, along with community groups or local government, could each take responsibility for a sector.

What does this mean for the U.S. government?
Ensuring that all households have access to quality

services that will enable people to improve their nutritional status should be a top priority. Making nutrition for families a top priority could include any of the following actions:

- Co-locating U.S.-funded programs and services to ensure that all households are served by redesigning, repackaging, or integrating programs to serve the same location (e.g., nutrition "zones of influence").
- Working with other stakeholders, particularly local civil society and in addition, national or local government bodies and other external donors, to ensure that all households receive a comprehensive package of services, whether through the efforts of one organization or agency, or several.
- Creating, with other donors and civil society, a system of financing to enable the government to close the funding gap and provide all households with nutrition services.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Improve equity in policies and practices in order to advance nutrition for people at highest risk

A look at sub-national data for many high-burden countries makes it clear that national-level nutrition trends do not tell the full story. To make more rapid progress against malnutrition, programs must prioritize supporting and investing in basic nutrition in communities with the highest burdens of malnutrition, often those that have historically been oppressed or marginalized.

It stands to reason that those with the highest rates of malnutrition should be top priorities to receive services.

for families at high risk of malnutrition. Higher incomes do not automatically lead to improved nutrition, but given the right conditions, additional income can be a pathway to better nutrition. Greater purchasing power can allow families to pay for more nutritious food, essential health services, and more.

It is essential to recognize that in isolation, neither social protection plans nor increased income can ensure that a person's nutritional status will improve. Other important parts of the puzzle are efforts to help people understand the connections between choosing nutritious foods and better

health and greater well-being for both themselves and their children; and efforts to enable people to identify potential obstacles to accessing and eating a more nutritious diet and, to the greatest extent possible, to develop ways of avoiding or overcoming these obstacles.

Donors and governments, in particular, should assess how their nutrition-related investments are allocated: are more resources going to people most impacted by malnutrition? Often foreign assistance budgets are tight: how can the available funds do the most good for marginalized communities? Ending hunger and malnutrition, by definition, means ending these conditions for all people. It stands to reason that those with the highest rates of malnutrition should be top priorities to receive services.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

- Use U.S. influence and provide capacity support to encourage national and local governments to focus additional resources on groups most impacted by malnutrition as well as take additional steps toward achieving equal outcomes for their populations.
- Partner with other stakeholders to help ensure that social protection programs are nutrition-sensitive.
- Invest U.S. resources first in communities most impacted by malnutrition, so that assistance contributes as much as possible to reaching equal economic and nutrition outcomes for all.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Strengthen community resilience to protect nutrition gains

Natural disasters have always put human food security and nutrition at risk, and in this time of intensifying climate change impacts, this will not change for the foreseeable future. The better news is that investing in emergency preparedness and resilience pays off—in lives saved, in human well-being, in shortened recovery times, and in lower financial costs.

Resilience programs should identify, as a top priority, preventing malnutrition and protecting people's access to nutrients. When leaders and communities are prepared in advance to identify and respond to threatening conditions, whether sudden disasters or slow-onset crises such as prolonged drought, they are in a better position to avert the worst impacts.

Early warning systems such as FEWS NET, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, are critically important. They enable all concerned to anticipate and prepare for hunger crises by using a wide range of indicators to identify potential emergencies and gauge their likelihood—as far in advance as possible. Forecasting is especially important if the region faces these conditions on a

recurring basis. In many parts of the world, for example, childhood wasting, also called acute malnutrition, is seasonal. Spikes in the numbers of children suffering from wasting can be anticipated and acute malnutrition prevented or at least treated early, before it becomes life-threatening. Childhood wasting is a major concern during natural disasters as well.

Preparations include strengthening the supply pipeline for lifesaving items such as ready to use therapeutic foods (RUTF) and ready to use supplemental foods (RUSF). In addition, health services must be strengthened in vulnerable areas so that the system is strong, well-functioning, and able to handle the increased needs when the time comes. A strong outreach, screening, and referral protocol and system for acute malnutrition is especially important if communities or households are isolated or lacking year-round access to essential services. It is not surprising that putting better systems in place when there is no emergency will pay off when there is an emergency.

Conclusion

While positive gains have been made against malnutrition this century, urgent action is still required to reach good nutrition for all. This agenda of policies and practices, in addition to investment in proven, effective nutrition services—such as treatment or preventive treatment of children affected by wasting, multiple micronutrient supplementation for pregnant women, adequate breastfeeding/complementary feeding for infants, and Vitamin A supplementation for children—offers a clear way forward. In order to make significant lasting progress, all stakeholders—including the U.S. government—in all sectors will need to contribute to strategic, cohesive, and coordinated action. It is both important and worthwhile to improve, strengthen, and reinforce the systems that should contribute to the health, nutrition, and well-being of all people in all countries.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

- Continue to invest in early warning systems such as FEWS NET.
- Work with United Nations partners and national governments to strengthen supply pipelines for RUTF, RUSF, and other nutritional products.
- Invest in efforts to strengthen the health system in rural, drought-prone, and disaster-prone areas, including outreach, screening, and referral systems for wasting.

Endnotes

- 1 OECD (2020). Development Assistance Committee Creditor Reporting System.
- 2 WHO (2018). Global nutrition policy review 2016-2017: country progress in creating enabling policy environments for promoting healthy diets and nutrition. <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/9789241514873>
- 3 African Union (n.d.). Africa Regional Nutrition Strategy 2015-2025.
- 4 Malabo Montpellier Panel (2017). NOURISHED: How Africa Can Build a Future Free from Hunger and Malnutrition.
- 5 Teague, J. (2020). Key Ingredients for Faster Progress on Nutrition. <https://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Paper-38-Faster-Progress-on-Nutrition.pdf>



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