

The cost of inaction:

The economic and human capital benefits of investing in nutrition

AT LEAST USD \$13 BILLION COULD BE SAVED ANNUALLY IN SOUTH AFRICA THROUGH SMART INVESTMENTS IN PROVEN, LOW-COST, HIGH-IMPACT NUTRITION INTERVENTIONS.

BACKGROUND

In 2012, the World Health Assembly (WHA) set global nutrition targets to spur action and investment for addressing malnutrition. They are currently being evaluated, reset, and will likely be extended to 2030. These 2030 targets aim to achieve a 50% reduction in the number of stunted children, a 50% reduction of the prevalence of anaemia in women of reproductive age, a 30% reduction of low birthweight among newborns, and an increase in the rate of exclusive breastfeeding to 70% in the first six months. Targets have also been set on overweight and obesity, and on wasting.¹ While South Africa is on course to meet two of the global nutrition targets (wasting and overweight children under five years of age), the rates of stunting in children under five and rates of anaemia in adolescent girls and women (15–49) have slightly worsened.² Overall, 30.5% of adolescent girls and women are still affected by anaemia.³

In South Africa, over 1.3 million children under five are stunted, close to 2.3 million are anaemic, nearly 200,000 are born with low birthweight and more than 390,000 are being sub-optimally breastfed for the first six months of life. Additionally, there are 4.8 million cases of anaemia in older adolescent girls and women (15–49).⁴

The interrelated crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and cost of living have put unprecedented pressure on social sector accounts and caused many governments to consider diverting investments from public health and prevention programs to bolster short-term responses to urgent needs.

However, emerging data continues to support the importance of investing in nutrition, and the compounding benefits that can be realized through smart nutrition interventions. The 2024 World Bank Group Investment Framework found that an additional USD \$13 billion per year is needed to scale up nutrition interventions globally from 2025–2034. Every dollar invested was estimated to generate \$23 dollars in return.⁵

Through the development of an online, user-friendly Cost of Inaction Tool, Nutrition International has sought to support policy makers as they weigh their options. The tool provides an analysis of the costs of “inaction” – of allowing limited to no progress on key indicators of undernutrition to be made – and how doing so affects countries’ income in both

the immediate and long term. The new tool demonstrates that investments in nutrition can generate significant economic savings, as long as smart investments are made in proven, low-cost and high-impact nutrition interventions.

THE FINDINGS

Findings from the Cost of Inaction Tool estimate that the total global economic cost of undernutrition is more than USD \$761 billion per year. In South Africa, at least USD \$13 billion could be saved with increased investments in stunting, anaemia in children, anaemia in adolescent girls and women of reproductive age, low birthweight, and the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding.³ The impacts of poor nutrition are wide-ranging and serious.

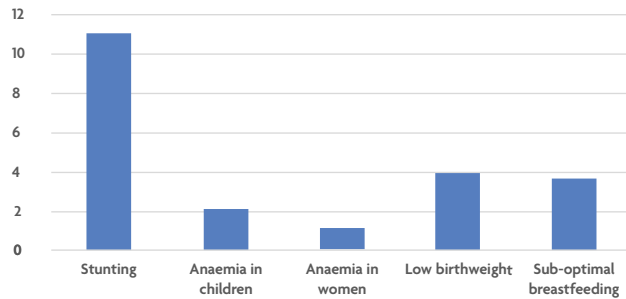
When a population is undernourished, it is more vulnerable to preventable infections and diseases. With adequate nutrition, not only does a population strengthen immune systems against preventable diseases and infections, but healthcare costs and treatment expenses are also reduced. Ensuring proper nutrition for vulnerable groups, such as infants, young children and pregnant women, is key to unlocking their potential. When children are well-nourished, they are more likely to succeed in school, which in turn helps them to live a better life, thrive and contribute to socio-economic development.

South Africa has taken several actions to help improve nutrition in the country. Through the implementation of the National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan (2018–2023), South Africa has sought to improve food security and combat malnutrition in all its forms over the past 15 years. A new phase of this plan is expected for 2024–2029.⁶ Additionally, the National School Nutritional Programme, launched in 1994 and still ongoing, was implemented to provide students with daily nutritious meals,⁷ and the Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Obesity in South Africa 2023–2028 was introduced to fight high rates of overweight and obesity in the country.⁸





ECONOMIC COST OF INACTION IN SOUTH AFRICA, USD \$ MILLION PER YEAR



*** The total economic cost is lower than the sum of each individual cost. This estimate avoids double counting of costs associated with co-occurrence of stunting, anaemia, low birthweight and sub-optimal breastfeeding.**

South Africa has the 27th highest prevalence of stunting in Sub-Saharan Africa and the 55th highest in the world. With a current prevalence of 22.8%, South Africa's progress has slightly worsened against the 2012 prevalence of 22.5%.⁹

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF ACHIEVING GLOBAL NUTRITION TARGETS

Here are some of the benefits that South Africa stands to realize if the proposed extended 2030 global nutrition targets were to be met.

If South Africa was to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on stunting, an estimated 128,000 cases of stunting would be averted annually, preventing 3,800 deaths, the loss of 1.4 million IQ points and 216,000 school years. Overall, this would prevent USD \$5.5 billion in economic losses.

If South Africa was to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on anaemia, an estimated 2.6 million cases of anaemia would be averted annually, preventing USD \$603 million in economic losses.

If South Africa was to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on exclusive breastfeeding, 59,000 cases of low birthweight would be averted annually, preventing 900 deaths, the loss of 585,000 IQ points and USD \$1.2 billion in economic losses.

If South Africa was to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on exclusive breastfeeding, 108,000 cases of diarrhoea would be averted annually, preventing 1,100 deaths, the loss of 1.1 million IQ points and 395,000 school years. This would avert USD \$1.8 billion in economic losses.

NUTRITION FOR GROWTH

The next edition of the Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit will take place on March 27–28, 2025, in Paris. N4G Paris will be a multi-stakeholder summit that provides an opportunity for ambitious policy and financial pledges from different actors from all continents to move the nutrition agenda forward: governments, international organizations, research institutions, civil society organizations, philanthropies, private sector organizations and many more.

As the 2025 N4G Summit approaches, Nutrition International and the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE) are partnering to highlight the price of not investing in nutrition and to encourage ambitious commitment-making on nutrition at N4G Paris.

ABOUT NUTRITION INTERNATIONAL'S TOOLS

The Nutrition International Cost of Inaction Tool was developed in 2023 by Nutrition International, in partnership with Limestone Analytics and with funding from the Government of Canada. The Cost of Not Breastfeeding Tool was created in 2017 by Alive & Thrive, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and it was updated by Nutrition International and Alive & Thrive in partnership with Limestone Analytics in 2022, with funding from Government of Canada. Both tools present results for over 140 countries to see the potential benefits if action is taken now. All estimates included in this brief are as of September 2023. Visit both tools on Nutrition International's website to read about the methodology and data sources and to learn more about Nutrition International.

For further support, including additional analyses, tool demonstrations and technical assistance, you can reach out to Nutrition International at healthecon@nutritionintl.org.

[Cost of Inaction Tool](#)

[Cost of Not Breastfeeding Tool](#)

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