

Health, Science & Technology

Chronic Diseases and Malnutrition

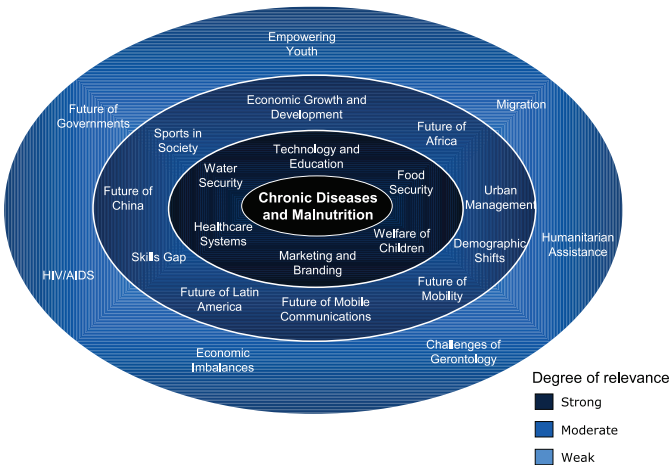
A. Description of the issue



Malnutrition can be defined as under- **or** over-nutrition. Under-nutrition remains a devastating problem in many developing countries – affecting over 815 million people and causing more than one-half of all child deaths, with irreversible effects in the first two years of life. Yet, more than half of deaths in the population worldwide are caused by chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, some cancers and adult-onset diabetes. These diseases are caused by the underlying risk factors of poor diet – normally over-nutrition, physical inactivity and smoking.

The common assumption is that under-nutrition affects developing economies and that over-nutrition and chronic diseases afflict the rich. This is not the case. The problems increasingly manifest in the same countries in a phenomenon called the “dual burden”. Among children in developing countries, underweight is still a greater problem than overweight. But many countries (such as Morocco, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic) have experienced a rising trend in the prevalence of overweight children. Malnutrition and chronic disease can also appear in the same individual – foetal malnutrition is shown to impact health later in life.

The burden of these intertwined health trends is significant at a macro- and micro-level and yet our understanding and awareness of the problem, the level of investment at a global level and the level of coherence in approaches to addressing the problem are insufficient.



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B. Dimensions

- **Nutrition and changing diets:** A dual burden in developing countries exists between the increased demand for meat due to rising incomes and changing diets and a deficit in nutritional balance and fortification of food supplies.
- **Globalization:** With the globalization of food markets, developing countries have larger quantities of low-cost, high-calorie foods being aggressively marketed towards poorer households.
- **Economic impact:** The impact at a macro- and micro-level of both malnutrition and chronic disease has been shown to be significant, yet the full extent of that burden is unknown and under-appreciated.
- **Healthcare systems:** Healthcare systems, presently oriented towards treating infectious diseases, might need to shift resources to chronic diseases, weakening already overburdened systems. The role of government, the corporate sector and other actors within the healthcare system needs to be re-examined.
- **Behavioural change:** The key risk factors behind most chronic diseases are poor diet, lack of physical activity and smoking, changes in all of which require education and a supportive environment.
- **Child and maternal health:** There is increasing understanding of the significant impact of poor foetal health and poor health in early childhood on later development across a spectrum of chronic diseases.
- **Sport:** Regular physical activity, which is declining among adults worldwide, reduces people's risk of heart attack, colon cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure and may reduce their risk for stroke.
- **Ageing:** Declining birth rates, combined with increases in life expectancy, are leading to population ageing. This phenomenon, which took place in some developed countries in the 1990s, is presently increasingly evident in developing countries.
- **Urbanization:** Since most population growth over the next three decades is expected to occur in developing countries' urban areas, special attention is needed on the impact of urbanization on dietary habits.