

# MALNUTRITION

## THE LEADING CAUSE OF CHILD DEATHS

### A CHILD DIES OF MALNUTRITION EVERY 11 SECONDS.

Although malnutrition is entirely preventable, it remains the leading cause of death for children—claiming three million lives annually.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of these children die in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

For those that survive, malnutrition in the early years of life stunts physical growth and brain development, causing irreversible damage. One in four of the world's children are permanently stunted, both cognitively and physically, by malnutrition. Compared to their well-nourished peers, they complete fewer years of school, earn less income later in life, and are at a higher risk for noncommunicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and diabetes. Girls and women are disproportionately impacted by malnutrition; they often eat last and least (even though they have greater nutritional needs). These negative impacts come with a hefty price tag to society: malnutrition is estimated to cost the global economy \$3.5 trillion annually.

It doesn't have to be this way. Proven, cost-effective solutions to prevent and treat malnutrition have long existed. Prenatal vitamins, breastfeeding support, vitamin A supplementation (VAS), and emergency therapeutic foods—together commonly known as the "Power 4"—are some of the most cost-effective, lifesaving tools in global health and development. However, across most low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) they have extremely low rates of coverage and, therefore, do not reach the majority of infants, children, young girls, and women who need such nutritional support.

The Biden administration has the opportunity to lead a movement that will make global hunger and malnutrition history. Nourish the Future is a five-year plan to scale up the most effective lifesaving nutrition interventions in the hardest hit countries.





If implemented, Nourish the Future will save at least 2 million lives, while markedly improving life for at least 500 million women and children. Developed in consultation with more than 100 nutrition, health, and agriculture experts, this plan would reduce severe malnutrition in focus countries by up to 50 percent and reduce child deaths in those countries by up to 11 percent. This would be one of the most dramatic global reductions in child deaths since 1990. By investing \$887 million per year—less than one-third of the amount Americans spend annually on Halloween candy—the United States could lead the next chapter of the child survival revolution, improve the school performance of 18 million children, and generate a minimum of \$56 billion in economic returns by saving lives and improving brain development and productivity.

Now is the time to bring the lifesaving power of these interventions to those who need them most. Experts predict COVID-19 related disruptions to food and health systems will cause up to a 50 percent rise in global malnutrition. In many parts of the world, malnutrition related to the pandemic is projected to kill more people—especially children—than COVID-19 itself. Malnutrition is also undermining global health security, since it compromises immune systems and is associated with a higher prevalence and severity of a host of infectious diseases, including COVID-19.



**“Over the past two decades, the world has reduced the proportion of children suffering from undernutrition by one third, and the number of undernourished children by an astonishing 55 million. This proves that progress is possible. However, a toxic combination of rising poverty, conflict, climate change and COVID-19 are risking a backwards slide. Solutions to prevent, detect and treat child malnutrition are proven and well known. Nourish the Future provides a visionary and actionable roadmap to take these solutions to scale, get back on track, and end malnutrition for good.”**

— Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF



In 2020, only \$150 million of U.S. global health investments were allocated to prevent and treat malnutrition—just 0.4 percent of overall U.S. foreign assistance. Immense global underinvestment in the most proven solutions to prevent and treat malnutrition has led to abysmally low rates of coverage, even as coverage of other complementary health services has increased.

An initiative to fight global malnutrition would not only revive the child survival revolution and preserve the health, brain function, and lifelong potential of millions of girls and boys. It would also directly address each of the “four crises” articulated by the Biden administration. It would dramatically increase the impact global COVID-19 response, saving many more lives. It would boost economies and build “gray-matter infrastructure” by improving cognitive development, education, and lifetime earnings. It would drive a just and equitable response to climate change, which is exacerbating malnutrition across vulnerable populations, particularly female small shareholder farmers and their families. And it would address global inequality, as nearly all cases of severe malnutrition occur in Africa, Asia, and South America and are concentrated within marginalized communities in those regions.

Nourish the Future builds off of decades of strong bipartisan U.S. leadership on global hunger and malnutrition—including President Obama’s bipartisan Feed the Future initiative and, most recently, the Global Nutrition Resolution that passed with an overwhelming majority in both houses of Congress last year. Nourish the Future is a heroic effort that Republicans and Democrats could achieve together—one that all Americans could be proud of.

Eliminating severe hunger and malnutrition would be an unparalleled advancement in the fight for universal human dignity. Delivering lifesaving new child health services and putting healthier food on millions of tables would build goodwill across allied countries in Africa and Asia for generations. But this will require renewed investment, energy, and optimism from the global community, especially from the most affected countries. And it is an effort that the United States is uniquely placed to catalyze.

As President Biden has said:

**“Nutrition is the foundation—the basic, fundamental foundation upon which every child’s future is built.”**



# THE PROPOSAL

Nourish the Future is a proposal to scale up the most lifesaving nutrition interventions in the hardest hit countries. Health and food systems—the two main vehicles for combating malnutrition—must work in harmony to fully eliminate severe malnutrition. Today, these systems generally operate in silos. To date, both have failed to consistently prioritize and scale high-impact nutrition interventions. Nourish the Future would change that by linking and strengthening global health and food systems, which would cut severe malnutrition in focus countries in half.

## APPROACH I: IMPROVING NUTRITION THROUGH HEALTH SYSTEMS

Many people think that malnutrition is simply a lack of adequate food. Although access to nutritious food is indeed essential, health systems often provide the most targeted and lifesaving nutritional support to vulnerable mothers and children. Build off analysis from The Lancet and the World Bank, Johns Hopkins University has identified four health systems interventions—collectively known as the “Power 4”—as the most cost-effective tools available to combat deadly malnutrition.



## THE POWER 4 PACKAGE



### 1 PRENATAL VITAMINS FOR PREGNANT WOMEN

Over 40 percent of pregnant women globally suffer from anemia and, in some countries, 80 percent of women have at least two micronutrient deficiencies at the outset of pregnancy.<sup>36</sup> Multiple micronutrient supplementation (MMS) combines 15 essential vitamins and minerals in a single daily pill and significantly improves birth outcomes and children's survival in the first 1,000 days of life. Despite the proven benefits of providing MMS during pregnancy, most women in LMICs do not have access to these extremely low-cost supplements.<sup>37</sup>

Most women do not have access to these extremely low-cost supplements.



2



## BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT FOR MOTHERS

Babies get the best start in life when they are fed only breast milk until six months old and continue breastfeeding until at least age two. Though breast milk is proven to protect newborns from malnutrition, infections, disease, and death, only 41 percent of babies around the world are exclusively breastfed.<sup>38</sup> Women who would like to breastfeed often cannot access the support and information they need to meet their breastfeeding goals. Skilled breastfeeding counseling can help them do so and protect vulnerable infants from becoming malnourished.<sup>39</sup> *The Lancet* reports that achieving optimal breastfeeding practices globally would result in the prevention of 820,000 child deaths and 20,000 breast cancer deaths each year.<sup>40</sup>



One-to-one and group breastfeeding counseling help provide mothers with the support they need to breastfeed.

3



## VITAMIN A SUPPLEMENTATION (VAS)

Nearly half of all children under five in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia suffer from vitamin A deficiency, which weakens the immune system.<sup>41</sup> Maternal vitamin A deficiency is also a problem in many countries, resulting in night blindness during pregnancy and babies born vitamin A-deficient.<sup>42</sup> Reaching young children with two high-doses of vitamin A supplements every year is one of the most cost-effective ways to protect children from blindness, diarrhea, and other fatal illnesses. It can reduce a child's overall risk of death by up to 24 percent.<sup>43</sup> One vitamin A dose costs just two cents to manufacture and is typically delivered through existing routine health services, annual health events, and/or vaccination campaigns.<sup>44</sup>



Child receives vitamin A supplementation (VAS). Two drops twice per year on a child's tongue cost just two cents to manufacture.

4



## READY-TO-USE THERAPUTIC FOOD (RUTF) FOR TREATMENT OF WASTING

Should prevention fail, RUTF (often known as Plumpy'Nut)—a relatively simple paste made of peanuts, powdered milk, and multivitamins—is a lifesaving medical food that can bring severely malnourished children back from the brink of death in a matter of weeks. The cost of this treatment is less than a dollar a day. Unfortunately, fewer than one in four wasted children in the world today have access to treatment.<sup>45</sup>



RUTF is given to children who suffer from wasting, bringing them back from the brink of death over a six-week period.

Nourish the Future proposes scaling up the Power 4 in nine USAID priority countries. This alone would reduce child deaths in those countries by up to 11 percent, saving nearly 1.2 million lives over five years and costing as little as \$1,570 per life saved (highly cost-effective compared to other global health programs). Nourish the Future would integrate the Power 4 into community health systems and child immunization campaigns, serving as a powerful booster shot for U.S. investments across global health and development. The Power 4 interventions help make vaccines more effective; make children significantly less likely to die from common diseases like measles, malaria, and pneumonia; lead to improved educational outcomes and workplace productivity; promote gender equality; and reduce the rapid spread of noncommunicable diseases. Reaching a child with the Power 4 package costs just \$23 a year.



Nourish the Future also proposes scaling up the global production of RUTF for the treatment of malnutrition. Currently, the global supply of RUTF is vastly inadequate — reaching only one out of every four children suffering from severe malnutrition. Nourish the Future proposes expanding U.S. production of RUTF in the short-term—since the United States is already one of the world’s largest producers of RUTF and the agricultural inputs (peanuts, milk powder, vegetable oil, and sugar) needed to produce it. Nourish the Future would simultaneously harness the power of USAID and the DFC to scale up local production of RUTF in high-burden regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Reaching severely malnourished children with several weeks of RUTF is the very best way to keep them alive and nurse them back to health.

## **APPROACH II: IMPROVING NUTRITION THROUGH FOOD SYSTEMS**

Today, billions of people across the globe survive mostly on empty calories—plates of rice, cassava, or maize—with very little of the protein and other nutrients that bodies, including the brain, need to function. Three billion people worldwide cannot access healthy diets. Globally, only 18 percent of children under two years of age receive a minimum acceptable diet. As we aim to build back better, food systems must start supporting human health and nutrition.

**“Food is the single strongest lever to optimize human health and environmental sustainability on Earth.”**

*— EAT-Lancet Commission*





Since 2010, President Obama's global food security initiative, Feed the Future, has brought more than 23 million people above the global poverty line and generated nearly \$14 billion in agricultural sales. However, one decade after its inception, the world is faced with new and pressing challenges. In many places, COVID-19 has undermined and weakened food system supply chains, while the global climate crisis is increasingly undermining them as well. Though international relief efforts have made progress in meeting the basic caloric needs of a growing, global population, much more remains to be done to ensure that food we grow and eat actually contributes to human health and reduces malnutrition. Further investment in the availability of nutritious foods has the potential to dramatically reduce malnutrition and improve the health and well-being of mothers and children around the world. Nourish the Future would build directly on the current work of Feed the Future, intensifying efforts to build stronger food systems that nourish people and better protect our planet's future.

Through Nourish the Future, the United States can: 1) promote and support value chains for safer, more nutritious foods with less food loss and waste; 2) improve the year-round consumption of safe, affordable, nutritious food for women and children; 3) empower female farmers with access to investment capital and supportive peer groups; 4) expand large-scale food fortification (LSFF); and 5) scale up market-driven, private-sector solutions to global malnutrition.

Nourish the Future would scale up the production of diverse, nutritious foods in LMICs. This would include more biofortified and drought-resistant crops, the reduction of food loss, and improved food safety. It would also scale up large scale food fortification to enrich processed staple foods with essential vitamins and minerals. In places where nutritious food is unavailable or unaffordable, Nourish the Future would support the World Food Programme and other stakeholders to distribute lipid-based nutrient supplements (LNS) as part of USAID's food basket, preventing malnutrition, averting stunting, and reducing young children's risk of mortality.

Many of these goals can be achieved through market-based solutions. By strengthening the Global Nutrition Financing Alliance and leveraging the skills and expertise of the U.S. Development Finance Corporation and USAID, Nourish the Future can mobilize billions of dollars in investment capital to both prevent and respond to malnutrition through self-sustaining business solutions.

This plan would reach 125 million more consumers with biofortified crops; increase access to sustainable, healthy diets for 63 million mothers and children; prevent millions of cases of malnutrition; empower female farmers; and make food systems far more resilient to climate change.

**"Nourish the Future reflects a modern approach to harnessing the power of the American government, NGOs, farmers, and producers to fight global hunger and malnutrition. This is a focused plan to supercharge our ongoing investments in food systems and health systems in order to sustainably improve the lives of millions, and to prove that America is more willing than ever to lead."**

*— Dan Glickman,  
former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture*



# THE ARCHITECTURE OF NOURISH THE FUTURE

Nourish the Future could be housed at USAID and led by a coordinator appointed by the president, reporting directly to the administrator of USAID. The coordinator would develop a strategy to scale proven nutrition interventions through both health systems and food systems in priority countries. Mission directors would oversee the implementation of country strategies that align with USAID's global health and food security programs and co-locate with them where feasible. USAID missions would also benefit from the appointment of nutrition advisors for the day-to-day oversight of strategy implementation and partner engagement.

## RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

While the Power 4 and food system transformations are proven interventions, with additional investments in research and development they can be even more cost-effective, efficient, sustainable, and aligned with countries' existing policies and programs. Nourish the Future proposes a research agenda that leverages the ingenuity of American universities and research institutions with institutions in focus countries and the CGIAR system. Through Nourish the Future, country-specific research agendas would focus on identifying and investigating improved channels for delivering nutrition interventions at scale. This effort would, wherever possible, build upon and expand the successes of existing Feed the Future innovation labs.

## THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

No child should die from malnutrition when we have the tools to stop it. Every child has a right to survive and thrive. Affordable, effective solutions have long existed—but are still waiting to be deployed. We can do so much more.

Millions of lives—and the human potential inherent in that multitude of futures—are at risk. And where human misery festers, so too does anger, instability, and violence. But it's not too late to nourish the future by bringing these basic, life-altering nutritional interventions to the women and children who need them most. Nourish the Future is an opportunity to produce dramatic, tangible results on a global scale in a short timeframe. With sustained determination, global vision, and adequate financing, Nourish the Future could help build a world where every mother and father can nourish their children.



As President Biden said on his inauguration day:

**“Ending hunger and malnutrition at home and around the world is consequential. If we do nothing today, food insecurity will loom as an even larger and bigger threat tomorrow. You’re fostering a world that is more just and peaceful.”**

[Read Nourish the Future](#)

[Sign on as a supporter](#)