

# DETERMINANTS OF MALNUTRITION ARE MULTIDIMENSIONAL IN NATURE

Efforts to reduce malnutrition are challenged by the fact that the determinants of malnutrition are multidimensional, therefore requiring systemic and coordinated efforts. The United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) conceptual framework of malnutrition (see Figure 1) clearly illustrates that there is usually not one single cause for malnutrition. Instead, malnutrition is usually the result of a variety of interconnected economic and social risks and vulnerabilities. It identifies three levels of interrelated causes of undernutrition:

**IMMEDIATE CAUSES:** these operate at the level of the individual and are related to inadequate food and nutrient intake and to disease. Ill health and malnutrition are correlated in many ways. One of the most obvious links is the loss or malabsorption of nutrients during episodes of diarrhoea – which is a leading cause of child mortality in developing countries<sup>1,2</sup> – or vomiting.

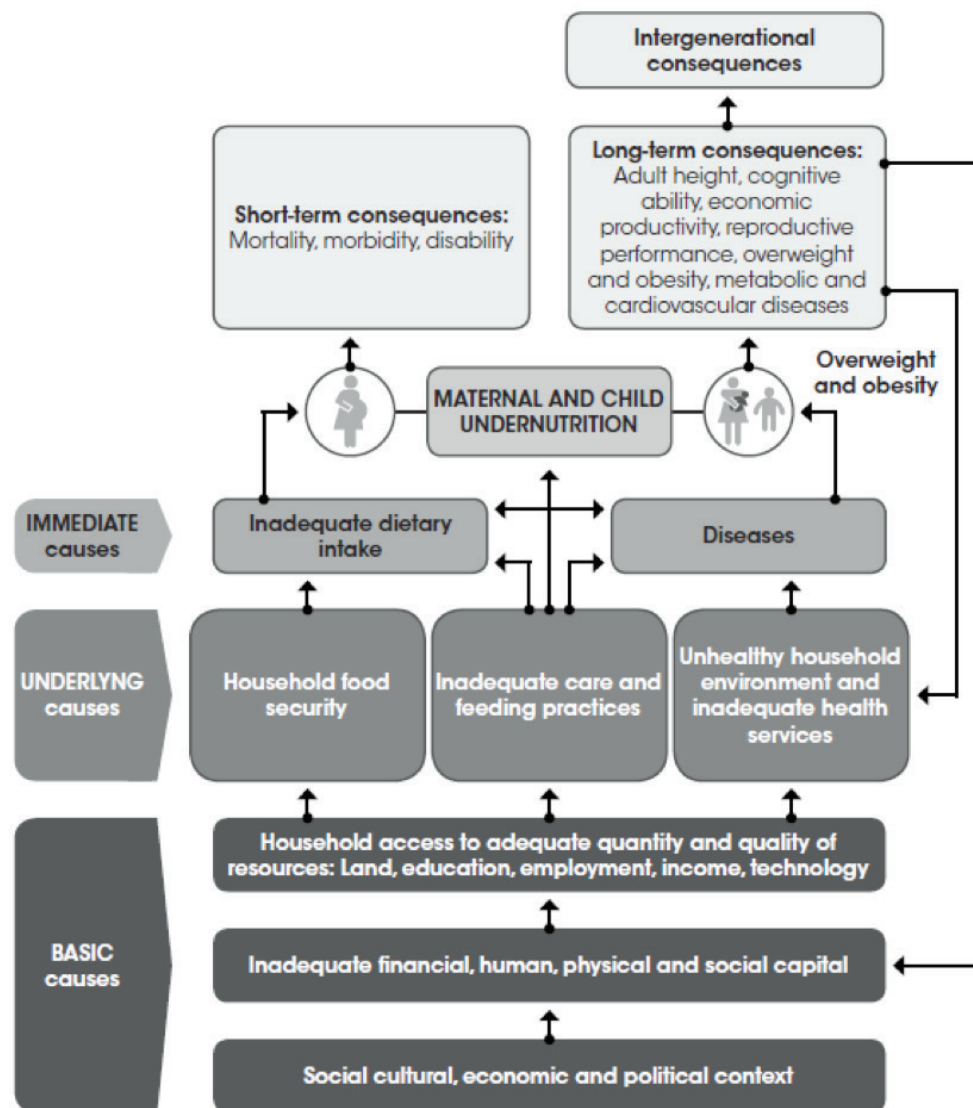
**UNDERLYING CAUSES:** these influence households and communities. They are grouped into three broad categories: household food insecurity (in terms of food availability, access, utilization and stability); inadequate care (e.g., poor breastfeeding, weaning practices or personal hygiene and child care); and poor access to, and availability of, clean, safe water, sanitation, and health services. These are further affected by factors such as agricultural practices and levels and sources of household income.

**BASIC CAUSES:** these relate to structures, processes and phenomena that operate at the level of the society. They include political and socio-economic factors such as governance and institutional capacities (including public services and the private sector), gender relations, social solidarity mechanisms and the presence of safety nets, access to education, presence of infrastructure, trade policies and systems, as well as conflict. Basic causes also include environmental factors, such as climate change, and the agro-ecological context in which communities live.

Given the multidimensional nature of malnutrition, the causes of malnutrition vary in space, time and according to households' livelihoods and social, economic and cultural characteristics.

1 Parashar, U.D., Bresee, J.S. & Glass, R.I. 2003. The Global Burden of Diarrhoeal Disease in Children. *Bull World Health Organ.* 81(4):236.  
2 Murugaiah, C., Aye, T.S., Soelyoadikoesoemo, B.S., Radhakrishna, H. & Bilung, L.M. 2013. The Burden of Diarrhoeal Disease in Malnourished Children. *Rev Med Microbiol.* 24(3):55–62.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of nutrition



Source: Unicef, 2013

Fighting malnutrition in a comprehensive way thus requires the adoption of approaches that combine short- and long-term actions, and fostering of linkages between curative and preventative aspects of humanitarian and development interventions. Nutrition-sensitive interventions in agriculture have the potential to affect both the underlying and basic determinants of malnutrition, as well as improve food security and reduce the incidence of poverty<sup>3</sup>.

Source:

FAO. 2015. Nutrition and Social Protection. 2015. Rome, Italy. Available online: [https://www.enonline.net/attachments/2426/FAO\\_SocialProtection\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enonline.net/attachments/2426/FAO_SocialProtection_2015.pdf)

*This brief was prepared by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction with support from SUN Civil Society Network.*

<sup>3</sup> Ruel, M.T. & Alderman, H. 2013. Nutrition-sensitive Interventions and Programmes: How Can they Help to Accelerate Progress in Improving Maternal and Child Nutrition? The Lancet: 382(9891):536–51.