

ACCELERATING THE FIGHT AGAINST MALNUTRITION: OPTIMIZING EVIDENCE AND RESOURCES FOR EFFECTIVE MULTISECTORAL NUTRITION ACTION IN AFRICA



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PROFILE Shirley Kansabe is a public health practitioner with interest and experience in research, advocacy, and implementation of interventions in nutrition and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). She currently works at Kyambogo University as a Nutrition Research, Learning, and Linkage Officer (Responsible for five districts in South Western Uganda). Through her involvement in several local and international collaborative interventions, she has acquired numerous skills including design thinking, strategy development, critical analysis, and evaluation. She has a keen interest in policy, design, and implementation questions that probe failure to achieve change from interventions. She is dedicated to understanding, promoting, and supporting the role of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in attaining public health goals, especially for collaborative interventions. She does this by investigating change processes and promoting the use of evidence in intervention design and implementation. In her work, she has won several grants, published peer-reviewed articles, and mentored students, among others. She has also led advocacy campaigns that have yielded national results on nutrition and NCDs.

Executive Summary

Africa continues to experience a dual burden of malnutrition, with undernutrition declining at the slowest rate globally while overnutrition steadily increases. Malnutrition in all its forms costs the continent an estimated USD 135 billion annually and leads to a 16.5 percent loss in GDP, the highest worldwide. The slow progress in reducing malnutrition is attributed to multifaceted causes, including fragmented sectoral responses and limited optimization of available resources.

The World Bank's Optima Nutrition model has the potential to improve nutrition outcomes by reallocating resources more effectively within the health sector. However, its current scope excludes other key sectors agriculture, education, water, and social protection that significantly influence nutrition outcomes. This policy brief highlights the need to expand the Optima Nutrition model across multiple sectors, build country capacity to apply it, and promote evidence-based decision-making for nutrition investments. Such an approach would accelerate progress toward reducing malnutrition in Africa while ensuring more efficient use of scarce resources.

Introduction

Globally, the decline in the prevalence and mortality associated with undernutrition and overnutrition has been slow. Between 2000 and

2019, Africa recorded the lowest annual reduction in age-standardized malnutrition prevalence of only 0.37% (Lin et al., 2025). Yet, obesity is on the rise with a 0.87% annual increase in Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) in Africa according to a recent re-analysis of the Global Burden of Disease Data (Chong et al., 2023). Undernutrition

means growth faltering, frequent illness and death for children, while obesity is a risk factor for chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes, and high blood pressure, among both adults and children. The slow decline in under and over nutrition has a multiplicative negative effect on the human capital of Africa, as more and more people succumb to the deterrent effects, notwithstanding the loss in GDP and productivity (Africa Union Commission, 2020).

Forty-two African countries are signatory to the SUN Movement, a global coalition to end malnutrition through multisectoral interventions. Since the SUN Movement adopted the six World Health Assembly targets for ending malnutrition by 2025, none of the SUN African countries is on track to achieve these targets (Coile et al., 2021). Nor is the world on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) two and three to end hunger, and ensure good health and wellbeing by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2024). The African Union's Malabo declaration which ended in 2024 did not achieve its targets either. Therefore, there is a dire need to accelerate the reduction in malnutrition and mitigate its impact on development on the African continent.



Fig. 1: The Double Burden of Malnutrition

Policy Options

1. Do nothing

Existing policy solutions have not been effective in reducing malnutrition to the desired targets in Africa. The 2025 Kampala Declaration is ambitious in its third commitment, aiming to reduce the different forms of malnutrition by 25% by 2035. Its emphasis on multisectoral collaboration through the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Plan (CAADP) Strategy is commendable. However, African governments have not been investing much in multisectoral nutrition interventions on their own, with much funding coming through the SUN Movement. This status quo means that the reduction in undernutrition will remain slow while overnutrition will keep increasing. Annually in Africa, malnutrition would claim lives of 824,000 children and 12,800 women if nothing is done to accelerate the reduction in malnutrition (Nutrition International, 2024). This means a high burden on health care systems, and exacerbate the loss in human capital and GDP on the continent.

2. Optimize sectoral investments in nutrition-relevant interventions

The World Bank has identified five key sectors for investment to improve nutrition, namely health, agriculture, water, social protection, and education (Shekar et al., 2024). This portfolio of interventions has also been adopted by the Africa Development Bank as priority investments through 2025 to yield a 40% reduction in stunting, among other nutrition goals (Aguilera Vasquez &

Daher, 2019). Cognizant of the resource constraints in African countries, and the need to optimize the little that is available, the World Bank developed Optima Nutrition, an open access model that supports countries to contextually optimize investments in nutrition interventions using existing data.

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Based on Optima Nutrition modelling for example, Bangladesh did not have to increase its funding but optimize it to attain a 5% reduction in stunting in a period of 12 years. This would be achieved by augmenting vitamin A supplementation and infant and young child feeding only, especially in the regions of Dhaka and Chittagong (Pearson et al., 2018). Such evidence from Optima Nutrition is crucial in guiding policy decisions and investments yet, Optima Nutrition's modelling focuses only on nutrition interventions in the health sector. As highlighted above, there is need to optimize the combined benefits of multisectoral investments for nutrition in

agriculture, education, social protection and water, in addition to those in the health sector. Optima Nutrition's expansion to model the multiplicative effect of multisectoral investments, as well as its use by policy makers in Africa will expand the evidence base and accelerate the reduction in malnutrition in Africa.

3. Pool resources and efforts into multisectoral nutrition interventions

Malnutrition is a multi-faceted public health problem whose solutions cannot be borne by the health sector alone (Bach et al., 2020), and extant research underscores the importance of multisectoral actions for nutrition at all levels of governance. The complexity in malnutrition has been met with a group of practitioners that are applying various approaches to address malnutrition. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organization, financed by the World Bank (Hricko, 2025) are leading food systems transformation, an approach that is conceptually similar to the Scaling Up Nutrition's multisectoral initiatives. In fact, the stakeholders engaged at national level are the same for food systems transformation and multisectoral nutrition actions.

The Nutrition for Growth initiative rallies commitments towards nutrition. For example, USD 27 billion were mobilized during the 2025 Nutrition for Growth Summit in Paris (O'Connell, 2025). The United Nations Nutrition on the other hand coordinates UN actors for nutrition. These many actors promote coordinated multisectoral actions for nutrition in Africa and on other continents, leaving a trail of discordance among themselves while spending lots of resources in their silos. There is a need to harmonize approaches to avoid the misuse of the dwindling resources and duplication of efforts. However, this option creates numerous enemies and would take a long time to implement.

Policy recommendations to the World Bank

→ The World Bank should expand the Optima Nutrition model beyond the health sector to include agriculture, education, water, and social protection. Developing and piloting these additional modules in a few African countries would demonstrate the potential for multisectoral optimization and generate evidence to guide continent-wide adoption.

- Countries should institutionalize the use of evidence-based models in planning and budgeting for nutrition. This means building the capacity of planning and finance ministries alongside health agencies to interpret Optima Nutrition results and integrate them into national nutrition action plans and budget frameworks.
- To avoid duplication and maximize resources, optimization approaches should be embedded into existing financing platforms such as the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), national food systems and nutrition strategies/plans, and World Bank-supported sector projects. This will ensure coherence and stronger returns on investment.
- Optima will prioritize high-impact, low-cost interventions in key sectors. In agriculture, countries can promote biofortified crops and nutrition-sensitive practices. In education, scaling up locally sourced school feeding programs can improve child nutrition while supporting farmer incomes. Social protection can deliver nutrition-sensitive cash transfers to vulnerable households, while water and sanitation interventions should focus on safe water supply and community-led sanitation. Governments can also introduce annual nutrition budget reviews to track spending efficiency and the impact of nutrition interventions across all sectors.

Conclusion

Three policy alternatives to accelerate reduction in malnutrition in Africa have been identified. However, the optimization of sectoral investments in nutrition is the least expensive yet, it carries huge potential in sustaining the reduction in malnutrition on the continent. It is politically friendly, takes less time to implement and more motivating to the various stakeholders involved. This is because there will not be much pressure to secure extra funding for nutrition at the sector level.



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