



FEDERAL MINISTRY OF HEALTH, NIGERIA

# Malnutrition: Nigeria's Silent Crisis

## WHAT IS MALNUTRITION?

Malnutrition is a condition that occurs when people consistently do not consume or absorb the right amounts and types of food and essential nutrients. Globally, it contributes to nearly half of all child deaths — that is more than 3 million children each year.<sup>1</sup>

The main indicator of childhood malnutrition is stunting — when children are too short for their age. Stunted children have poor physical growth and brain development, preventing them from thriving and living up to their full potential. With over 11 million stunted children, Nigeria is facing a crisis of malnutrition and ranks second behind India among all countries with the highest number of stunted children.<sup>2</sup>

## IS THERE A WINDOW OF TIME TO PREVENT MALNUTRITION?

Yes! The 1,000 day period — from the start of a woman's pregnancy until her child's 2nd birthday — represents a critical window of opportunity. Adequate nutrition during this period can avert malnutrition, ensuring that children have the best possible opportunity to grow, learn, and rise out of poverty. When nutrition is not optimized during the 1,000 day window, the effects are often irreversible.

## WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN NIGERIA?

Malnutrition among Nigeria's children is a serious problem throughout the country:

- Each year about 1 million Nigerian children die before their 5th birthday.<sup>3</sup> Malnutrition contributes to nearly HALF of these deaths.<sup>4</sup>
- Rates of stunting in Nigeria have stagnated for more than a decade. About 2 in 5 Nigerian children are stunted, with rates of stunting varying throughout the country (see map).<sup>5</sup>
- Almost 30 percent of Nigerian children are underweight, meaning they don't weigh enough for their age. This is more than double the proportion of neighbouring Ghanaian children who are underweight.<sup>6</sup>
- The percent of children in Nigeria who are wasted, or too thin for their height, has steadily increased over the last decade, rising from 11 percent in 2003 to 18 percent in 2013.<sup>7</sup>

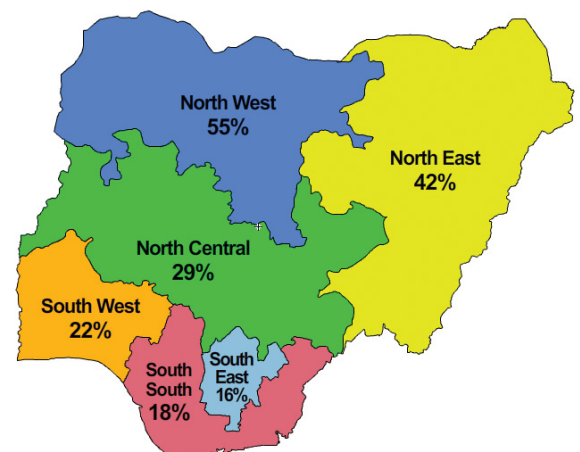
- Up to 1 million Nigerian children under age 5 are affected by severe acute malnutrition (SAM) each year.<sup>8</sup> These children have severely low weight for their height and are at risk of dying unless given urgent attention.
- Nearly 4 out of 5 Nigerian children do not meet the World Health Organization's recommendation for exclusive breastfeeding during the first 6 months of life.<sup>9</sup>
- About 70 percent of children ages 6 to 23 months are not receiving the minimum acceptable diet.<sup>10</sup>

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ADDRESSING MALNUTRITION?

Adequate nutrition during the 1,000 day window produces a lifetime of benefits for individuals, families, and nations:

- **Health:** Well-nourished children will have improved brain and physical development; they will develop good motor skills, have stronger immune systems to fight off infection and disease, and have sharper mental abilities.
- **Education:** Healthier children will be better able to focus and learn, and will thus have improved school performance and complete more years in school.

## Percent of Children Stunted Under Age 5 by Region, 2013



Source: Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2013: Preliminary Report, 2013.

- **Earnings:** Improvements in school performance and completion will lead to increased job opportunities and personal income, adding at least 10 percent to lifetime earnings and helping families step out of the cycle of poverty.<sup>11</sup>
- **Economy:** Well-nourished, well-educated children will grow into a more productive labor force as adults. Improvements in nutrition could lead to a boost in GDP growth by as much as 11 percent annually.<sup>12</sup>
- Parents and caregivers should be given up-to-date information on infant and young child feeding practices, as well as the support that they need to feed their children in the best way possible.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO COMBAT MALNUTRITION IN NIGERIA?

There is a role for everyone in combatting malnutrition. You can:

Also, investments in nutrition produce returns up to 25 times greater than the initial investment—for every N100, 000 spent, we generate N2.5 million in economic returns.<sup>13</sup>

## WHICH STRATEGIES WORK TO IMPROVE MALNUTRITION?

The following four proven strategies can protect mothers and children from malnutrition:

- Mothers should put babies to the breast in the first half-hour after birth and breastfeed them exclusively for the first six months without any other foods or liquids — not even one drop of water!
- After the first 6 months of life, mothers should start giving their children sufficient quantities of a variety of healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables, eggs, and meat, along with continued breastfeeding for up to 2 years or beyond.
- Mothers and children should be ensured access to essential vitamins, minerals, and nutrients.
- Raise awareness about Nigeria's silent crisis of malnutrition.
- Reach out to colleagues in other sectors, such as health, agriculture, finance, education, and women affairs; and work together to fight malnutrition.
- Take every opportunity to integrate nutrition into national policies.
- Advocate for an adequate and dedicated budget line for nutrition at the national, state, and local government area (LGA) levels in all sectors.
- Just do it! Fund or implement programmes that use proven strategies to reduce malnutrition.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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