The Costs of Undernutrition
- Over one-third of child deaths are due to undernutrition, mostly from increased severity of disease.1
- Children who are undernourished between conception and age two are at high risk for impaired cognitive development, which adversely affects the country’s productivity and growth.
- Childhood anemia alone is associated with a 2.5% drop in adult wages.5

Where Does Malawi Stand?
- Malawi has the 5th-highest stunting rate in the world.
- 53% of children under the age of five are stunted, 15% are underweight, and 4% are wasted.2
- 13% of infants are born with a low birth weight.2
- Malawi’s progress over the past two decades has not improved to meet MDG 1c (halving 1990 rates of child underweight by 2015) with business as usual.6

Most of the irreversible damage due to malnutrition happens during gestation and in the first 24 months of life.6

As seen in Figure 1, Malawi’s stunting rates are higher than many of its income peers in Africa. While per capita income is very low in Malawi, other countries show that it is possible to reduce stunting with the same or lower GNI.

Vitamin and Mineral Deficiencies Cause Hidden Hunger
- Although they may not be visible to the naked eye, micronutrient deficiencies are widespread in Malawi, as shown in Figure 3.
  - Vitamin A: 60% of preschool aged children, and 14% of pregnant women are deficient in vitamin A.9 Supplementation of young children and dietary diversification can eliminate this deficiency.
  - Iron: Current rates of anemia among preschool aged children and pregnant women are 73% and...
Poor Infant Feeding Practices

- Just over one-half (58%) of all newborns do not receive breast milk within one hour of birth.²
- 43% of infants under six months are not exclusively breastfed.²
- During the important transition period to a mix of breast milk and solid foods between six and nine months of age, 1 in 10 infants are not fed appropriately with both breast milk and other foods.²

Solution: Support women and their families to practice optimal breastfeeding and ensure timely and adequate complementary feeding. Breast milk fulfills all nutritional needs of infants up to six months of age, boosts their immunity, and reduces exposure to infections. In high HIV settings, follow WHO 2009 HIV and infant feeding revised principles and recommendations.¹³

High Disease Burden

- Undernutrition increases the likelihood of falling sick and severity of disease.
- Undernourished children who fall sick are much more likely to die from illness than well-nourished children.
- Parasitic infestation diverts nutrients from the body and can cause blood loss and anemia

Solution: Prevent and treat childhood infection and other disease. Hand-washing, deworming, zinc supplements during and after diarrhea, and continued feeding during illness are important.

Limited Access to Nutritious Food

- Just under 30% of households are food insecure, as defined as per capita access to calories.⁷
- Many more households likely lack access to diverse diets year round.
- Achieving food security means ensuring quality and continuity of food access, in addition to quantity, for all household members.
- Dietary diversity is essential for food security.

Solution: Involve multiple sectors including agriculture, education, transport, gender, the food industry, health and other sectors, to ensure that diverse, nutritious diets are available and accessible to all household members.

References


FIGURE 3 High Rates of Vitamin A and Iron Deficiency Contribute to Lost Lives and Diminished Productivity

- 47% respectively.³ Iron-folic acid supplementation of pregnant women, deworming, provision of multiple micronutrient supplements to infants and young children, and fortification of staple foods are effective strategies to improve the iron status of these vulnerable subgroups.
- Iodine: Only 50% of households consume iodized salt, and 169,000 infants remain unprotected from iodine deficiency disorders.⁴
- Zinc: 34% of the population is at risk for insufficient zinc intake.⁵ Zinc supplementation during diarrheal episodes can reduce diarrhea morbidity by more than 40%.¹¹
- Adequate intake of micronutrients, particularly iron, vitamin A, iodine and zinc, from conception to age 24 months is critical for child growth and mental development.

World Bank Nutrition-Related Activities in Malawi

Projects: The World Bank is supporting the First Education Sector Support Project which includes as one of its components, a school health and nutrition package to all primary schools with the following cost-effective interventions: distribution of vitamin A and iron-folic acid to school children under 10 years old, de-worming, treatment of malaria and fever, and the promotion of good health and nutrition practices. The World Bank is also supporting the US$32 million Agriculture Development Program Support Project which aims to improve the effectiveness of investments aimed at food security and sustainable agricultural growth.

Analytic Work: The World Bank is also completing a sector study on infant and young child feeding practices of which the dissemination is scheduled for April 2010. The planned dissemination will be used to raise the level of policy dialogue towards program scale up. The Country Management Unit has demonstrated strong interest in supporting the nutrition agenda in Malawi.

Addressing undernutrition is cost effective: Costs of core micronutrient interventions are as low as US$0.05–3.60 per person annually. Returns on investment are as high as 8–30 times the costs.¹²