

Half a billion children at risk for malnutrition

By Kate Randall
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Half a billion children around the world could grow up physically and mentally stunted over the next 15 years because they do not have enough to eat. This is among the many staggering statistics on early child nutrition presented in a new report released Wednesday by the charity Save the Children, “A Life Free from Hunger: Tackling Child Nutrition.”

While there is enough food produced on a global basis to provide adequate nutrition to feed the world’s population, hundreds of millions of children grow up malnourished because they lack access to vital nutrients. Save the Children points to volatile food prices, climate change and “economic uncertainty” as major contributing factors to this food crisis.

Clearly, the austerity policies of world economic bodies and governments—and growing social inequality—are creating conditions where the health and lives of the planet’s youngest inhabitants are being increasingly sacrificed in the interest of corporate profit.

Three hundred children die every hour of every day due to a lack of adequate nutrition. Malnutrition accounts for about 2.6 million child deaths annually—more than a third of the yearly total. According to the study, more than 450 million children around the world will be affected by stunted growth in the next 15 years if current trends continue.

For those who do survive, long-term malnutrition, combined with infection and illness, prevents their young bodies and brains from developing properly. Chronic malnutrition results from a poor diet of too few calories, inadequate nutrients, or both.

These children will be too short for their age; they are also less likely to enroll in school on time and will do less well academically. One multi-country study found that stunting at age two led to a reduction in schooling of about a year, and a 16 percent increase in failing at least one grade.

The 10 countries with the largest height differences (at age two and a half) compared to the World Health Organization (WHO) growth standard were Niger, Ethiopia, Timor Leste, Rwanda, Nepal, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Guinea, India and Tanzania. In Niger, the country with the worst stunting, the average two-and-a-half-year-old girl was 8.5 cm (3.35 inches) shorter than her WHO standard counterpart.

According to the report, the most important period of development is the first 1,000 days—from conception, through pregnancy, up to the age of two. Even if diet is improved later, the damage done to a child’s physical and mental development is largely irreversible. Adding to this horrific cycle, stunted girls who grow up to be mothers are far more likely to give birth to underweight children.

Chronic malnutrition weakens a child’s immune system, leaving the child more vulnerable to diseases such as diarrhea, pneumonia and malaria. It leads to three times as many deaths as those caused by acute malnutrition, such as that resulting from the food crisis beginning in 2011 in African Sahel.

About 80 percent of stunted children are concentrated in just 20 countries. In Asia, more than a third of children are stunted, accounting for almost 100 million of the global total. Research by Save the Children indicates that if trends go unchanged, 11.7 million more children in sub-Saharan Africa will be stunted in 2025 compared to 2010.

A 2008 report published in the *Lancet* medical journal identified 13 direct interventions that could make major inroads into tackling global child malnutrition. Among these are providing vitamin A and zinc supplements, as well as iodized salt, and the promotion of healthy behaviors such as hand washing, breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices.

Such interventions could be delivered at relatively low costs, but would prevent the deaths of almost 2

million children under age 5 in the 36 countries that are home to 90 percent of the world's malnourished children. The World Bank estimates that these life-saving solutions could be delivered at a cost of US\$10 billion annually.

The World Bank has also estimated that at a cost of just over US\$1 per person per year, 4 billion people could benefit from access to fortified wheat, iron, complementary food and micronutrient powders. However, in tandem with dictating austerity measures in Greece and other countries, these life-saving resources have not been allocated.

Initiated in 2009, the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative has received pledges of US\$22 billion from countries at G8 and G20 meetings, yet only 3 percent of these, and less than 1 percent of these fulfilled to date, have targeted global nutrition.

Poverty is a leading cause of the child nutrition crisis. "For many families," Save the Children notes, "their children become malnourished and stunted not because there is no nutritious food available, but because they cannot afford to buy it." Research by the charity found that in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Kenya, a significant proportion of families would not be able to feed their families a nutritious diet even if they spent all of their income on food.

The global systems by which food is produced, distributed and consumed fail to meet world nutritional needs, according to the report. While giant agribusinesses produce an abundance of food, it never reaches the vast majority of the world's at-risk children. Three quarters of malnourished children in Africa live on small farms that are ill-equipped to produce enough for families to subsist on, let alone derive adequate nutrition.

Children in countries with high rates of child malnutrition often subsist on diets made up almost entirely of starchy staples such as rice, maize or millet, with few vegetables and little protein. Even if they get enough calories, their diets lack adequate nutrients.

Save the Children found that more than half of children in so-called developing countries have diets comprising three food groups or less—e.g., the staple starch, peas or lentils, and a vegetable (often green leaves).

The study's authors quote nine-year-old Maritu from Ethiopia:

"Today I had a small piece of *injera* [a flatbread made by grinding the seeds of teff grass into a flour and served with a basic sauce] for breakfast—one *injera* shared between four people—and I had the same for lunch.

"We don't eat anything else—I might get egg or meat once a year for special occasions.

"There isn't enough, but my parents give me whatever is available. Sometimes I feel hungry at school."

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