Overview of Opportunities to Reduce the Double Burden of Malnutrition

We hope that these opportunities spark ideas and discussions at different levels and between different actors and sectors on how to better tackle the DBM and prevent it from remaining the reality for many people worldwide. The United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025 provides a unique momentum for stakeholders to join efforts across sectors for intensified and integrated nutrition action including double-duty actions that can address multiple forms of malnutrition.

Double-duty actions address more than one form of malnutrition and provide effective approaches to tackle the DBM within multiple sectors. Key considerations include:

- Double-duty actions have higher potential for impact if multiple sectors are engaged. These include social safety nets, educational institutions, health services and agricultural development. Enhancing awareness of healthy diets and behaviours through school curricula and promoting breastfeeding as part of maternal and child health programmes are examples of such double-duty actions.
- Effectively reducing the DBM is facilitated by government leadership and strong advocacy efforts to support interventions, programmes and policies.
- Regulations on food advertising and food labelling as well as taxing of unhealthy foods and beverages can be useful tools for making the healthy choice an easy choice and creating healthier food environments.
- Cross-border coherence in trade and nutrition policies, e.g. collaboration on marketing of unhealthy foods, can help to improve access to safe and nutritious foods in a region.
- Adapting and tailoring interventions to the local context is important. In addition, while strengthening the health system may be the priority in some areas, social protection systems could be the focus in others.
Malnutrition affects 1 in 3 people globally. It is the result of a combination of factors including suboptimal diet, low physical activity, and the effects of infectious diseases (Fig. 1). The double burden of malnutrition (DBM) is characterized by the coexistence of undernutrition along with overweight, obesity or diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). The DBM has become the reality of millions of people worldwide, impacting individuals, households and entire populations across the life course, resulting in losses of human capital as well as inadequate economic growth. To tackle this steadily increasing epidemic and move the DBM agenda forward, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) organized the International Symposium on ‘Understanding the Double Burden of Malnutrition for Effective Interventions’. The Symposium took place in Vienna from 10-13 December 2018 and was attended by more than 460 representatives from 91 countries and 21 organizations.

The following points provide an overview of the opportunities that were identified during the symposium as key to reducing the DBM. They relate to i) healthy behaviours throughout the life-course, ii) methodological approaches for better data, and iii) implications for programmes and policies.

i) Life-course

An enabling environment is important for good nutrition at each stage of life, from the early beginnings before conception, into old age. Good nutrition is critical for children in their first years of life, as well as for adolescents and young adults. The nutrition of adolescent girls is particularly important because it is linked to the health of future generations. Key considerations include:

- Undernutrition in early childhood is associated with higher risk of overweight, obesity and NCDs later in life. This underlines the importance of promoting interventions for better maternal nutrition and health before and during pregnancy.

- A supportive and enabling environment is key to encouraging the establishment of appropriate infant and young child feeding practices. It is particularly important to enable women to breastfeed according to international recommendations. Collectively, the health, food, education, and social protection systems, the working environment, industry, as well as families can support such an environment.

- Using social networks and understanding physical activity patterns in adolescents are important to maximise reach and impact of interventions targeting them. In addition, since multiple actors influence the dietary habits and subsequently the health of children and adolescents, it is vital that food systems support their dietary needs.
**ii) Data**

Effective indicators are integral for the monitoring and evaluation of interventions, programmes and policies to tackle the DBM, and to assess public health impact. These indicators will also help countries track progress against national nutrition commitments.

Key considerations include:

- Accurate information on breastfeeding practices can provide better guidance for policies and programmes. The deuterium dose-to-mother technique can be used to determine if infants are exclusively breastfed, and to validate data assessed using less accurate maternal recall techniques.

- Body composition, i.e. lean and fat components of body weight, provides information on more than one form of malnutrition and allows an accurate assessment of the DBM. The deuterium dilution technique can be used to validate simpler methods for measuring body composition in population surveys. It can also be used to generate in-depth information from a smaller population, for example:

  - Evaluating interventions for the prevention or reduction of overweight and obesity;
  
  - Identifying predictors of increased body fat during pregnancy as an indicator of higher risk of adverse outcomes in the offspring;
  
  - Evaluating complementary feeding programmes to improve healthy growth.

- Assessing child growth using a multidimensional approach can help to understand the determinants of malnutrition at individual, household and societal level and guide the design of appropriate interventions.

- Implementation science can be used to identify and address bottlenecks, inform the scale-up of innovations, and enhance the utilization of existing knowledge, tools, and frameworks. This can help to improve the quality and impact of nutrition programmes.

- Strengthening the link between research and policy can ensure policy-relevant research orientations and facilitate evidence-based actions.

- Presenting nutrition data with an emphasis on long-term economic consequences at national and regional levels can facilitate discussions with policy makers.

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Programme and policy implications

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