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South Africa's burden of child malnutrition remains unacceptably high – Child Gauge 2020 report

The nutritional status of South Africa's children is deteriorating. One in four children under the age of five are stunted, a sign of chronic undernutrition that has remained stubbornly unchanged for 20 years. Over the same period, South Africa has seen a steady increase in childhood overweight and obesity (one in eight children under the age of five) which is now double the global average. This was shared in the 2020 *South African Child Gauge*[®] published annually by the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town (UCT) to review the status of children in South Africa and inform evidence-based policy and programming.

This double burden of malnutrition can occur in the same household or even the same individual. For example, children who are stunted early in life are at greater risk of becoming obese – with prevalence rising across the life course especially amongst adolescent girls (28%) and adult women (64%). This increases their risk of developing non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers – and severe COVID-19 infection.

The high-profile launch event was opened by the First Lady of South Africa, Dr Tshepo Motsepe, who calls on all South Africans to take action: "Let us become that society that ensures that no child goes to bed hungry."

South Africa's burden of child malnutrition remains unacceptably high for a middle-income country, placing it as an outlier among countries of similar wealth. The roots of the problem lie in our apartheid past and our on-going failure to uproot poverty and inequality. Twenty-five years since the advent of democracy, South Africa remains the most unequal country in the world. Poverty has a profoundly damaging effect on children's care, health and development – with young children in the poorest of households three times more likely to be stunted than those in the richest 20% of households.

UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, says: "Children who manage to survive malnutrition continue carrying the harm in their bodies, minds and spirits for the rest of their lives. And it doesn't stop there: by attacking our children, malnutrition erodes our national development. The nation that starves its children is also starving itself."

Thirty percent of South Africa's children live below the food poverty line in households with a per capita income of less than R571 per month. These households do not have enough money to meet the nutritional needs of children. While frequent infections caused by overcrowding and poor access to water, sanitation and health care services further compromise children's nutritional status. It is therefore not surprising that, according to the National Department of Health Ministerial Committee for the Morbidity and Mortality of Children under 5 years, severe acute malnutrition is one of three leading causes of child deaths in South Africa.

"There is much that we can do as individuals to protect and promote our own health and nutrition and that of our children, but we cannot do this in isolation," says Lori Lake, Communication and Education Specialist at the Children's Institute, UCT.

"Safeguarding children's health and nutrition requires intervention at every stage in the life course and collective action from a range of government departments, civil society and the private sector."

The National Food and Nutrition Security Council first gazetted in 2014 needs to be established as a matter of urgency to provide political leadership at the highest level in the Presidency with the authority to hold government departments accountable and to drive concerted and consolidated action for children across a range of sectors from Health, Education and Social Development to Trade and Industry.

But malnutrition is not simply a threat to child survival. It robs them of health and development. The 2020 issue of the *South African Child Gauge*[®] focuses attention on and identifies points of leverage to improve children's nutrition outcomes, calling for the strong leadership and concerted action from government, civil society and the private sector to ensure children's rights are upheld.

"But all is not lost," says Professor Shanaaz Mathews, Director of UCT's Children's Institute. "There is much that the state can and must do, and the 2020 South African Child Gauge *South African Child Gauge*[®] outlines a range of opportunities for double-duty actions to address the double burden of malnutrition – starting early during the antenatal period and extending across the life course."

The fifteenth issue of the *South African Child Gauge*[®] was developed in partnership with the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the Standard Bank Tutuwa Community Foundation, DG Murray Trust and UNICEF South Africa.

[View the report.](#)

Some of the findings and recommendations

The slow violence of malnutrition

"Child malnutrition is a slow form of violence that lingers largely unseen until the child's health is seriously compromised. It slowly eats away at children's potential, eroding their physical health and cognitive development and undermining their education and economic prospects – and it drives an intergenerational cycle of poverty, malnutrition and ill-health that comes at a huge cost for individual children, their families and the South African economy," says lead editor Professor Julian May, the director of the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security.

The devastating impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 has intensified these challenges– with rising unemployment and food prices driving a dramatic increase in child hunger and disrupting children's access to essential safety nets such as school feeding, early childhood development programmes and health services.

Food prices rose dramatically – before, during and post-lockdown – with the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Project reporting a 14.4% annual increase in the cost of basic Household Food Basket in November 2020.

Three million jobs were lost between February and June 2020 - with women accounting for 60% of jobs lost during the first wave. Yet they are less likely than men to benefit from UIF and the COVID-19 relief grant.

The introduction of the COVID-19 relief grants, and top ups to the old age pension and Child Support Grant (CSG) provided welcome relief for poor households. Yet the removal of the caregiver and top-up grants at the end of October precipitated a dramatic rise in child hunger with 1 in 6 households reporting that a child went hungry in November/December 2020 - with CSG beneficiaries most likely to run out of money to buy food.

While the physical environment in which food is obtained and prepared has an impact on the nutritional status of children, as do their feeding patterns and access to health care, research has shown that the driving factor behind both stunting and obesity is income. Poor households deal with the loss of income by eating less and eating less nutritious food. Although mothers buffer children at the cost of their own health, the implication is that children will go hungry and their risk of stunting increases, as will the likelihood that their consumption of cheap, but empty calories, and their propensity to become overweight or obese. The withdrawal of a lifeline grant such as the COVID-19 top-up grant and reduced incomes due to job and livelihood losses have served to exacerbate South Africa's already excessive double burden.

These challenges were compounded by the closure of schools and early childhood development programmes that made it more difficult for women to return to work and prevented children from accessing school meals. While the disruption of routine maternal and child health services and delays in care-seeking behaviour have made it harder to prevent, identify and treat children at risk of severe acute malnutrition.

Global estimates by a multidisciplinary consortium of nutrition, economics, food, and health systems researchers projected a 14.3% increase in the global prevalence of severe acute malnutrition during the first 12 months of the pandemic with 80% of the burden concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa.

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