Commitment within developing countries and internationally to address the problem of child undernutrition has never been higher. Answers to the question of how to reduce undernutrition are thus in great demand. Over the last decade, much attention has been given to identifying appropriate nutrition-specific interventions, such as micronutrient supplementation and breastfeeding promotion, and ways of making development programs more nutrition sensitive. This research aimed to contribute to the growing evidence base needed for prioritizing action to inform the post-MDG development agenda by investigating the roles of the underlying and basic determinants of child stunting. Interventions directed at these determinants are not necessarily nutrition-focused, yet may nevertheless be powerful drivers of stunting reductions because they address its root causes.

Research findings
The research gives clear guidance to governments and international development agencies regarding which underlying determinants of child undernutrition should be considered in policy strategies to accelerate reductions in stunting in the coming decades. Such strategies should focus on:

- Increasing food security by ensuring adequate availability of food at the national level and sufficient nutritional quality of that food;
- Improving health environments through increasing access to safe water and sanitation;
- Improving the quality of caring practices for children through increasing women’s education and promoting gender equality.

A rough ranking of these six determinants in terms of their future potency in reducing stunting is: the nutritional quality of food available in countries (greatest), followed by access to sanitation and women’s education. Access to

Safe water access, sanitation, women’s education, gender equity, and the quantity and quality of food available in countries have been key drivers of past reductions in stunting.

As the post-MDG era approaches in 2016, reducing child undernutrition is gaining high priority on the international development agenda, both as a maker and marker of development. This research brief summarises a 2015 paper published in World Development, which used data from 1970-2012 for 116 countries to investigate the factors that have contributed to past reductions in child undernutrition and identify priorities for the future. The research finds that safe water and sanitation, women’s education, gender equity, and the quantity and quality of food available in countries have been key drivers of past reductions in stunting. Income growth and governance played essential facilitating roles. Complementary to nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programmes and policies, accelerating reductions in undernutrition in the future will require increased investment in these priority areas.

Health Worker, Durgesh (right), interacts with 6 months old Sonakshi in Bengali Basti.
The six underlying determinants identified are powerful drivers of stunting reduction. Complementary to nutrition-focused interventions, they need to be accelerated rapidly; Continued income growth and strong governance are vital components of an enabling environment for nutrition improvements. The nutrition and broader development communities must not lose their focus on these factors as key forces for preventing the deaths, squandering of human potential, and impeded development stemming from child undernutrition.

Overall conclusion

Further reading


Credits
This research brief is based on a paper funded by Transform Nutrition and published in World Development Reducing Child Undernutrition: Past Drivers and Priorities for the Post-MDG Era by Lisa Smith from TANGO International and Lawrence Haddad from IFPRI, April 2015.