



# The cost of inaction:

## The economic and human capital benefits of investing in nutrition

**AT LEAST USD \$17 BILLION COULD BE SAVED ANNUALLY IN PAKISTAN THROUGH SMART INVESTMENTS IN PROVEN, LOW-COST, HIGH-IMPACT NUTRITION INTERVENTIONS.**

### BACKGROUND

In 2012, the World Health Assembly (WHA) set global nutrition targets to spur action and investment for addressing malnutrition. They are currently being evaluated, reset, and will likely be extended to 2030. These 2030 targets aim to achieve a 50% reduction in the number of stunted children, a 50% reduction of the prevalence of anaemia in women of reproductive age, a 30% reduction of low birthweight among newborns, and an increase in the rate of exclusive breastfeeding to 70% in the first six months. Targets have also been set on overweight and obesity, and on wasting.<sup>1</sup> At present, Pakistan is on course to meet two of the six global nutrition targets (exclusive breastfeeding and overweight and obesity).<sup>2</sup> While some progress has been made on stunting, 34% of children under five are still affected.<sup>3</sup>

In Pakistan, over 10 million children under five are stunted, close to 14 million are anaemic, 1.4 million are born with low birthweight, and more than 1.5 million are being sub-optimally breastfed for the first six months of life. Additionally, there are 24 million cases of anaemia in older adolescent girls and women (15-49).<sup>4</sup>

The interrelated crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and cost of living have put unprecedented pressure on social sector accounts and caused many governments to consider diverting investments from public health and prevention programs to bolster short-term responses to urgent needs.

However, emerging data continues to support the importance of investing in nutrition, and the compounding benefits that can be realized through smart nutrition interventions. The 2024 World Bank Group Investment Framework found that an additional USD \$13 billion is needed each year to scale up nutrition interventions globally from 2025–2034. Every dollar invested was estimated to generate \$23 in return.<sup>5</sup>

Through the development of an online, user-friendly Cost of Inaction Tool, Nutrition International has sought to support policy makers as they weigh their options. The tool provides an analysis of the costs of “inaction” – of allowing limited to no progress on key indicators of undernutrition to

be made – and how doing so affects countries’ income in both the immediate and long term. The new tool demonstrates that investments in nutrition can generate significant economic savings as long as smart investments are made in proven, low-cost and high-impact nutrition interventions.

### THE FINDINGS

Findings from the Cost of Inaction Tool estimate that the total global economic cost of undernutrition is more than USD \$761 billion per year. In Pakistan, at least USD \$17 billion per year could be saved with increased investments in stunting, anaemia in children, anaemia in adolescent girls and women of reproductive age, low birthweight, and protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding.<sup>3</sup> The impacts of poor nutrition are wide-ranging and serious.

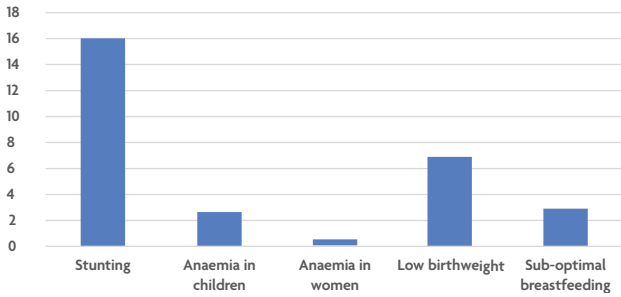
When a population is undernourished, it is more vulnerable to preventable infections and diseases. With adequate nutrition, not only does a population strengthen immune systems against preventable diseases and infections, but healthcare costs and treatment expenses are also reduced. Ensuring proper nutrition for vulnerable groups, such as infants, young children, and pregnant women is key to unlocking their potential. When children are well-nourished, they are more likely to succeed in school which in turn helps them to live a better life, thrive, and contribute to socio-economic development.

Pakistan has demonstrated its commitment to ending malnutrition by putting in place several nutrition policies and strategies, including Vision 2025 (which establishes food and nutrition as central to development), the National Health Vision 2016–2025, the National Vision for Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health and Nutrition (RMNCAH&N) 2016–2025, the Pakistan Multisectoral Nutrition Strategy (PMNS) 2018–2025, the Pakistan Adolescent Nutrition Strategy (PANS), the Pakistan Maternal Nutrition Strategy (2022–2027) and the Pakistan Costed Multisectoral National Nutrition Action Plan (2023–2030). There are also national and provincial laws in place to protect and promote breastfeeding.<sup>6</sup>





### ECONOMIC COST OF INACTION IN PAKISTAN, USD \$BILLION PER YEAR



\* The total economic cost is lower than the sum of each individual cost. This estimate avoids double counting of costs associated with co-occurrence of stunting, anaemia, low birthweight and sub-optimal breastfeeding.

Pakistan has the highest prevalence of stunting in South Asia (out of eight countries), and the 18th highest in the world (out of 175 countries). With a current stunting prevalence of 34%, Pakistan has made progress against the 2012 prevalence of 43.8%, but is not yet on track to achieve the proposed 2030 global nutrition target for stunting of 19.6%.<sup>3</sup>

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF ACHIEVING GLOBAL NUTRITION TARGETS

Here are some of the benefits that Pakistan stands to realize if the proposed extended 2030 global nutrition targets were to be met.

If Pakistan was to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on stunting, an estimated 855,000 cases of stunting would be averted annually, preventing 48,000 deaths, the loss of 8.8M IQ points and 1.4M school years. Overall, this would prevent USD \$6.6 billion in economic losses.

If Pakistan was to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on anaemia, an estimated 11 million cases of anaemia would be averted annually, preventing USD \$287M in economic losses.

If Pakistan was to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on exclusive breastfeeding, 522,000 cases of diarrhoea would be averted annually, preventing 6,000 deaths, the loss of 3.3 million IQ points and 1.2M school years. This would avert USD \$1 billion in economic losses.

### NUTRITION FOR GROWTH

The next edition of the Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit will take place on March 27–28, 2025, in Paris, France. N4G Paris will be a multi-stakeholder summit that provides an opportunity for ambitious policy and financial pledges from different actors from all continents to move the nutrition agenda forward: governments, international organizations, research institutions, civil society organizations, philanthropies, private sector organizations and many more.

As the 2025 N4G Summit approaches, Nutrition International and the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs are partnering to highlight the price of not investing in nutrition and to encourage ambitious commitment-making on nutrition at N4G Paris.

### ABOUT NUTRITION INTERNATIONAL'S TOOLS

The Nutrition International Cost of Inaction Tool was developed in 2023 by Nutrition International, in partnership with Limestone Analytics and with funding from the Government of Canada. The Cost of Not Breastfeeding Tool was created in 2017 by Alive & Thrive, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and it was updated by Nutrition International and Alive & Thrive in partnership with Limestone Analytics in 2022, with funding from Government of Canada. Both tools present results for over 140 countries to see the potential benefits if action is taken now. All estimates included in this brief are as of September 2023. Visit both tools on Nutrition International's website to read about the methodology and data sources and to learn more about Nutrition International.

For further support, including additional analyses, tool demonstrations and technical assistance, you can reach out to Nutrition International at [healthecon@nutritionintl.org](mailto:healthecon@nutritionintl.org).

[Cost of Inaction Tool](#)

[Cost of Not Breastfeeding Tool](#)

### REFERENCES

- 1 [2025-2030 World Health Assembly global maternal, infant and young child nutrition targets and proposal for process indicators \(who.int\)](#)
- 2 [Global Nutrition Report | Country Nutrition Profiles - Global Nutrition Report](#)
- 3 Jain S, Ahsan S, Robb Z, Crowley B, Walters D. (2024). The cost of inaction: A global tool to inform nutrition policy and investment decisions on global nutrition targets. Health Policy and Planning, Jul 17:czae056. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czae056>.
- 4 Country-wise data is not available on anaemia rates in younger adolescent girls (10–14y).
- 5 Shekar, M., Shibata Okamura, K., Vilar-Compte, M., Dell'Aira, C. (Eds.). (2024). Investment framework for nutrition 2024. World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/42164>
- 6 [Nutrition International applauds Government of Pakistan and key stakeholders on declaration to advance maternal nutrition - Nutrition International \(nutritionintl.org\)](#)

