

# The cost of inaction:

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

**AT LEAST USD \$703 MILLION COULD BE SAVED ANNUALLY IN MALAWI THROUGH SMART INVESTMENTS IN PROVEN, COST-EFFECTIVE, HIGH-IMPACT NUTRITION INTERVENTIONS**

### BACKGROUND

In 2012, the World Health Assembly (WHA) set global nutrition targets to spur action and investment for addressing malnutrition. In May 2025, the targets were reevaluated, reset and extended to 2030. The 2030 targets aim to achieve a 40% reduction in the number of children under five who are stunted, a 50% reduction of anaemia prevalence in women of reproductive age, a 30% reduction of low birthweight among newborns and an increase in the rate of exclusive breastfeeding to 60% in the first six months. Targets have also been set on overweight and obesity, and on wasting.<sup>1</sup> At present, Malawi is on course to meet two of the global nutrition targets (wasting and overweight).<sup>2</sup> While significant progress has been made on stunting, 34% of children under five are still affected.<sup>3</sup>

In Malawi, over one million children under five are stunted, 1.5 million are anaemic, 100,000 are born with low birthweight and more than 260,000 are being sub-optimally breastfed for the first six months of life. Additionally, there are over 1.6 million cases of anaemia in older adolescent girls and women (15–49 years).<sup>4</sup>

The interrelated crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and cost of living increases have put unprecedented pressure on social sector

accounts and caused many governments to consider diverting investments from public health and disease 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 per year is needed to scale up evidence-based nutrition interventions globally from 2025–2034. Every dollar invested in Malawi is estimated to generate USD \$11 in return.<sup>5</sup>

Through the development of an online, user-friendly Cost of Inaction Tool, Nutrition International has sought to support policymakers 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, cost-effective and high-impact nutrition interventions.



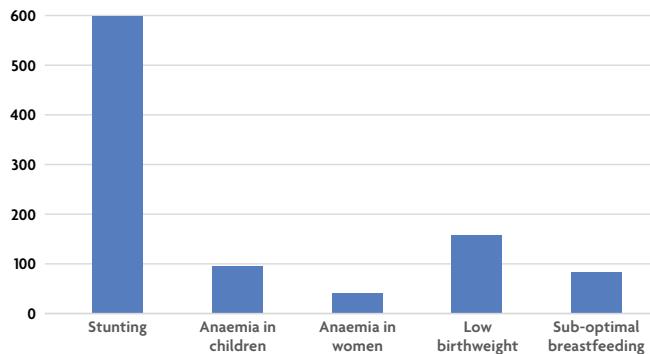
## THE FINDINGS

The impacts of poor nutrition are wide-ranging and serious. 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 Malawi, at least USD \$703 million 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 the protection, promotion and support for breastfeeding.<sup>3</sup>

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, 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.

To address these concerns, the Government of Malawi established the Department of Nutrition, HIV, and AIDS in 2004 to oversee and coordinate the national nutrition response. In 2018, in alignment with the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy, the government launched the National Multi-Sector Nutrition Policy (2018–2022), operationalized through the National Nutrition Strategic Plan.<sup>6,7</sup> The policy aimed to achieve “a well-nourished Malawian population that effectively contributes to the economic growth and prosperity of the country.”<sup>7</sup> Some key priority areas included the prevention of undernutrition; promotion of gender equality, equity, protection, participation, and empowerment for improved nutrition; and the treatment of acute malnutrition, among others. Recently, the Government of Malawi launched the National Multisector Nutrition Policy (2025–2030), operationalized through the National Multisector Strategic Plan (2025–2030).<sup>8</sup> This policy takes a multisectoral approach with some of its key objectives being the prevention of malnutrition among all demographic groups; prevent, treat, and manage nutrition-related disorders to reduce morbidity and mortality; and strengthen an enabling environment for the effective implementation of nutrition programs.<sup>9</sup>

### ECONOMIC COST OF INACTION IN MALAWI, USD \$ MILLION 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.

Malawi ranks 14th out of 47 countries in sub-Saharan Africa for highest low birthweight prevalence and 31st out of 200 countries globally. With a current prevalence of 15.6%, Malawi has made some progress against the 2012 prevalence of 15.8%, but it has not yet met the 2030 global nutrition target for low birthweight of 11.1%.<sup>3</sup>

## KEY FINDINGS

Each year, in Malawi, the current levels of stunting, low birthweight, anaemia, and not protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding result in an estimated:

- **USD \$703 million** in economic costs (or 5.4% of the gross national income) due to cognitive and mortality losses
- **2.2 million** IQ points lost
- **349,000** school years lost
- **7,700** child deaths
- **60** maternal deaths from cancers and type II diabetes



## POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF ACHIEVING GLOBAL NUTRITION TARGETS

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

- If Malawi were to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on stunting, an estimated 80,000 cases of stunting would be averted annually, preventing 3,000 deaths, the loss of 845,000 IQ points and 135,000 school years. Overall, this would prevent USD \$233 million in economic losses.
- If Malawi were to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on anaemia, an estimated 829,000 cases of anaemia would be averted annually, preventing USD \$21 million in economic losses.
- If Malawi were to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on low birthweight, 30,000 cases of low birthweight would be averted annually, preventing 800 deaths, the loss of 294,000 IQ points and USD \$46 million in economic losses.
- Exclusive breastfeeding rate has declined in Malawi from 72% in 2010 to 60% in 2024.<sup>10</sup> If Malawi were to reverse the decline in exclusive breastfeeding rates to achieve 70% exclusive breastfeeding target, 30,000 cases of diarrhoea would be averted annually, preventing 256 deaths, the loss of 177,000 IQ points and 62,000 school years. This will avert USD \$18.6 million in economic losses.

## ABOUT NUTRITION INTERNATIONAL'S TOOLS

The Nutrition International Cost of Inaction Tool was launched in 2024 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 and Thrive, with funding from the Gates Foundation, and it was updated by Nutrition International and Alive & Thrive in partnership with Limestone Analytics in 2022, with funding from the Government of Canada. Both tools present results for over 140 countries using standardized data from global health and development agencies including WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank to see the potential benefits if action is taken now. All estimates included in this brief are as of September 2025. 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](#)

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## REFERENCES

- 1 [2025–2030 World Health Assembly global maternal, infant and young child nutrition targets and proposal for process indicators \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/teams/nutrition/global-nutrition-targets-and-proposal-for-process-indicators)
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