

The cost of inaction:

The economic and human capital benefits of investing in nutrition

AT LEAST USD \$856 MILLION COULD BE SAVED ANNUALLY IN SENEGAL 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 in 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.¹ At present, Senegal is off course to meet all the global nutrition targets.² Some progress has been made on stunting, but 17% of children are still affected.

In Senegal, over 440,000 children under five are stunted, 1.5 million are anaemic, 97,000 are born with low birthweight and more than 324,000 are being sub-optimally breastfed for the first six months of life. Additionally, there are over two million cases of anaemia in older adolescent girls and women (15-49 years).⁴

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 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 annually to scale up evidence-based nutrition interventions globally from 2025-2034. Every dollar invested in Senegal is estimated to generate USD \$5.4 in return.⁵

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 Senegal, at least USD \$856 million per year could be saved with increased investments in stunting, anaemia in children, adolescent girls and women of reproductive age, low birthweight, and the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding.³

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.

With malnutrition posing a significant public health concern, Senegal has taken proactive steps to address this challenge. In 2015, the government launched the National Nutrition Development Policy (PNDN), which promotes a multisector approach to nutrition. This policy was operationalized through the 2018-2022 Multisectoral Strategic Plan for Nutrition, *Plan Stratégique Multisectoriel de la Nutrition du Sénégal (PSMN)*.⁶ The plan focused on key areas, including the prevention and management of malnutrition and non-communicable diseases, the reduction of micronutrient deficiencies, the promotion of diversified, safe, and nutritious food across the entire value chain, as well as investment in training, research and innovation, and nutrition governance.⁷ To support the development of the next phase, a comprehensive assessment of the 2018-2022 PSMN was conducted to inform policy recommendations for the effective implementation and sustainable financing of the 2024-2028 PSMN plan.⁸ This plan has now been finalized and has the contributions from 20 different sectors. The 2024-2028 PSMN takes a gender-sensitive approach to nutrition and aims to reduce the prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies (iron, folic acid, vitamin A, iodine and zinc) in women of childbearing age, adolescents, and children under 5 years of age by the end of 2028.⁹

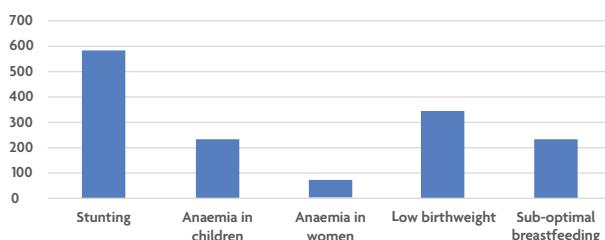


KEY FINDINGS

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

- **USD \$856 million** in economic costs (or 3.2% of the gross national income)
due to cognitive and mortality losses
- **919,000 IQ points lost**
- **297,000** school years lost
- **3,500** child deaths
- **177** maternal deaths from cancers and type II diabetes

ECONOMIC COST OF INACTION IN SENEGAL, 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.

Senegal ranks fourth out of 48 countries in sub-Saharan Africa for the highest anaemia prevalence among adolescent girls and women, and sixth out of 201 countries globally. With a current prevalence of 52.7%, Senegal has made some progress against the 2012 prevalence of 55.9%, but it has not yet met the 2030 global nutrition target for anaemia in adolescent girls and women of 27.9%.³

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 & 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 Government of Canada. Both tools present results for over 140 countries using standardized data from global health and development agencies including World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the World Bank to see the potential benefits if action is taken now. All estimates included in this brief are as of June 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.

[Cost of Inaction Tool](#)

[Cost of Not Breastfeeding Tool](#)

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF ACHIEVING GLOBAL NUTRITION TARGETS

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

- If Senegal were to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on stunting, an estimated 44,000 cases of stunting would be averted annually, preventing 1,800 deaths, the loss of 465,000 IQ points and 74,000 school years. Overall, this would prevent USD \$299 million in economic losses.
- If Senegal were to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on anaemia, an estimated 1 million cases of anaemia would be averted annually, preventing USD \$33 million in economic losses.
- If Senegal were to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on low birthweight, 21,000 cases of low birthweight would be averted annually, preventing 621 deaths, the loss of 208,000 IQ points and USD \$79 million in economic losses.
- If Senegal were to meet the proposed 2030 WHA global nutrition target on exclusive breastfeeding, approximately 48,000 cases of diarrhoea would be averted annually, preventing 329 deaths, the loss of 274,000 IQ points and 96,000 school years. This will avert USD \$68 million in economic losses.

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- 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>
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- 9) Conseil National de Développement de la Nutrition. (2024) Plan Stratégique Multisectoriel de la Nutrition 2024-2028.