

Governments fail to invest enough to combat malnutrition

Nutrition experts say governments are not investing enough to prevent and treat malnutrition in women and children in poor countries.

DAKAR, 22 February 2008 (IRIN) - Nutrition experts say governments are not investing enough to prevent and treat malnutrition in women and children in poor countries.

"The amount donors have given to combating malnutrition is lamentable," Saul Morris, one of the authors of a series of reports on child survival published recently by The Lancet medical journal, told IRIN in Senegal on 18 February.

"The United States gives its fair share. But where are all the others?"

"The criticism is justified," said Menno Mulder-Sibanda, senior nutrition specialist at the World Bank.

Donor investment in basic nutrition in low and middle income countries was estimated to be US\$250-300 million a year in the first half of the decade.

This is in comparison to US\$2.2 billion that donors are giving to combat HIV/AIDS, which causes the loss of fewer years of life than child malnutrition, according to The Lancet report.

Scorecard

Among the individual donor countries that report their annual assistance to the Development Assistance Committee (the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's, OECD's, aid reporting body), thirteen out of fifteen give under US\$5 million a year to basic nutrition projects, according to the most recent statistics from 2000-2004, The Lancet report said. France and Switzerland give nothing at all.

But not all donors fare so badly. The USA is by far the world's biggest investor in nutrition interventions giving US\$52.8 million a year, or 42 percent of the total.

Partly as a result of this lack of investment, there will be an estimated 5.9 million additional malnourished children living in the world's 10 worst-faring states in 2015 as compared to 2005, according to a recent Save the Children report on global malnutrition entitled Everybody's Business, Nobody's Responsibility, released in January 2008.

Burkina Faso and Niger in West Africa will have an estimated 727,000 additional malnourished children between them by 2015. Other countries with high rates of malnutrition are Yemen (with the highest projected rate), Ethiopia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Uganda, South Africa and Iraq.

Maternal and child malnutrition now contributes to the deaths of 3.5 million children every year, according to The Lancet.

MDG stalled

Morris worries these poor funding efforts are hampering progress on reaching the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) to halve the proportion of people suffering from extreme poverty and hunger by 2015.

When it was first signed in 2000, 29 percent of children in the developing world were malnourished, but as of 2007, halfway to the end-point, the rate has declined by just two percent, said Save the Children.

Governments

Governments often treat malnutrition separately to reducing poverty, according to Morris, so that progress on malnutrition indicators are not used to measure poverty reduction.

Slow progress is partly because governments soon lost interest in achieving the hunger MDG, the World Bank's Mulder-Sibanda said.

"It faded early, despite it being the foundation stone for reaching so many of the other MDGs, such as reducing child mortality and improving maternal health."

But donors cannot shoulder all the blame. "We can only do so much" Mulder-Sibanda told IRIN. "Governments need to help their own people."

"If governments start to lead on the issue, then donors will start wanting to engage with them," he said, suggesting that short-term donor cycles are inappropriate for the long-term systemic change that only governments can implement.

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