

IMPROVING NIGERIA'S FOOD SYSTEM TO REDUCE MALNUTRITION

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KEY MESSAGES

In Nigeria, malnutrition poses a significant challenge, costing the country billions of dollars each year in lost productivity alone. A clear link exists between nutrition and food systems, meaning that food systems transformation could help address this.

Nigeria's plan for the transformation of its food systems, presented after the landmark 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit, is proof of its strong political dedication to implementing impactful changes in the country's food systems.

Continued investment by the government of Nigeria in key areas including food security and nutrition and support for value chain and market systems, will be critical for the country's journey towards building sustainable, responsive, and inclusive food systems.

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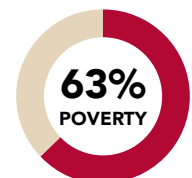


INTRODUCTION

Consuming a healthy diet is vital for people's well-being – to live well, grow, and stay active. Nigeria's vibrant food systems have the critical job of nourishing Africa's largest nation – a growing and youthful population bursting with potential that needs to be fed well.

Unfortunately, for many in Nigeria, healthy foods rich in nutrients, such as fish, nuts, fruits, and vegetables, are often far too expensive, or they are unsafe, inconvenient, unattractive, or simply not available. This lack of readily accessible and desirable healthy diets contributes to the country's burden of malnutrition.

Poverty, which often goes hand-in-hand with malnutrition, affects **63%** of the population – over **133 million** people¹. The need to address malnutrition in Nigeria is urgent, as it poses a significant challenge to the progress and development of the nation.



Malnutrition

happens when a person's body does not get the required nutrients to maintain good health. It can result from a lack of nutrients, an excess of nutrients, or an *imbalance* of nutrients in the diet. It can lead to impaired physical and mental development, weakened immunity, and increased risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer.



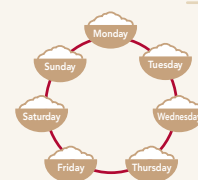
Stunting

(low height for age) results from inadequate nutrition, poor health, and repeated infections early in life, and can have long-term effects on physical and mental development.



Wasting

(low weight for height) results from a sudden and severe food shortage or disease and is a particular concern for young children.



Food systems

refers to the people, places, and activities that bring or allow people to access food. They make food available in diverse ways that shape the choices people make about what to eat, when, and how.

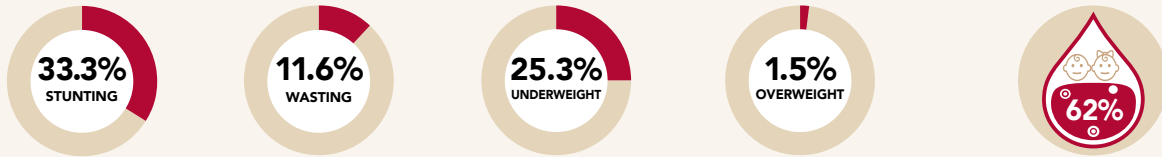
1 Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)

MALNUTRITION IN NIGERIA

Nigeria has one of the highest burdens of malnutrition globally. It is a particular concern for children under the age of five, pregnant and lactating women, and adults living in poverty.

The Preliminary Report of the National Food Consumption and Micronutrient Survey revealed prevalence of **stunting, wasting, underweight, and overweight** in children (aged 6-59 months) nationally² was **33.3, 11.6, 25.3, and 1.5 percent**, respectively².

Moreover, the prevalence of anaemia among children (aged **6-59 months**), was **62 percent** nationally².



Among adults, overweight and obesity are emerging public health concerns, affecting **35%**, raising their risk of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes.³ The number and prevalence of undernourished people in Nigeria has also been rising in recent years – to reach **34 million** over 2020-2022 (Figure 1)⁴.

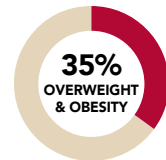
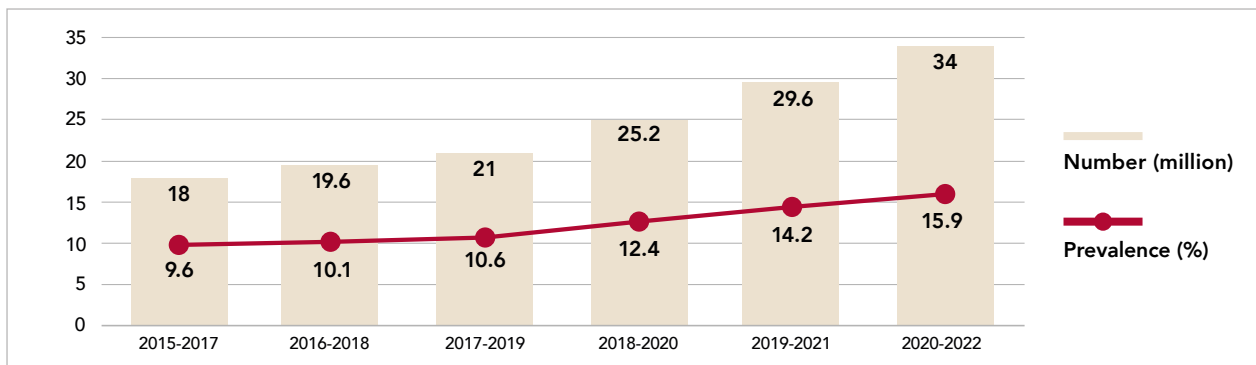


Figure 1: Undernourishment on the rise in Nigeria



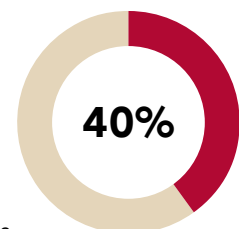
These high levels of malnutrition pose a significant barrier to economic development in Nigeria. On current trends – without additional public investment – Nigeria’s population will continue to see significant levels of hunger, malnutrition, and poverty beyond 2030, with healthy diets remaining unattainable for more than **90%**⁵.



Poor nutrition impacts people’s health, well-being, and productivity, which in turn impact Nigeria’s national economic health and resilience.

Malnourished individuals are more likely to suffer from fatigue, weakness, and illness, which in adults can affect their ability to work or care for their families effectively, and in children can affect the amount of care they need, as well as their learning and development.

Unfortunately, Nigeria has one of the largest numbers of stunted children under five in the world – second only to India⁶. It is also off-track to meet the World Health Assembly goal of reducing levels of stunting by **40%** by 2025 compared to 2012 levels. Analysis suggests, however, that achieving this target would yield Nigeria’s economy over **US\$29 billion** in growth, in addition to the clear benefits for children’s wellbeing⁷.



Malnutrition reduces the ability of communities to recover from natural disasters or other crises.

Malnutrition is holding the nation back, and it is urgent to address it.

Tackling malnutrition in a siloed manner will not resolve its multiple root causes, including poverty, sanitation, care, and access to diverse foods. A food systems approach, enabling stronger policy coherence across agriculture, nutrition, health, trade, climate, and the environment, can help to transform and nourish Nigeria’s population, economy, and future.

2 Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA). 2022. National Food Consumption and Micronutrient Survey 2021. Preliminary Report. Abuja and Ibadan, Nigeria: FGN and IITA <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/125113>.

3 World Health Organization. Malnutrition. <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/malnutrition>. Accessed 23 March 2023.

4 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO 2023) - Prevalence of undernourishment (%) (3-year average). Undernourishment is defined as chronic hunger, a condition where a person has inadequate access to food amounts necessary to provide the energy required for conducting a normal, health and active life, given their individual dietary energy requirements over a period of at least one year.

5 IISD. Ceres2030 Deep Dives into the Nexus of Food Systems, Climate Change, and Diets Achieving Sustainable Food Systems in a Global Crisis: NIGERIA. 2022

6 According to Joint Malnutrition Estimates (2023) of the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) & International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank.

7 Hoddinott, J., The economics of reducing malnutrition in sub-Saharan Africa. Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition Working Paper 2016.

The effects of **malnutrition** – including **undernourishment** as well as **overweight** and **obesity** – can vary depending on the timing, duration, and severity of the condition. Malnutrition can impact an individual in the following ways:

- 1. Infancy and early childhood:** Undernutrition during the first 1,000 days of a child's life can have long-lasting effects on their development. It can cause irreversible damage to the child's growing brain, impacting their cognitive abilities, physical growth, and overall health. This can have significant consequences for their educational attainment and future earning potential.
- 2. Adolescence:** Malnutrition during adolescence can lead to delayed puberty, growth retardation, obesity, and increased risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and osteoporosis (a health condition that weakens bones, making them fragile and more likely to break).
- 3. Adulthood:** Malnutrition can damage physical and mental function, reduce productivity, and increase the risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer. Moreover, undernourishment can intensify the effects of other health conditions, leading to poorer health outcomes.
- 4. Older adulthood:** Malnutrition in older adults can lead to increased risk of falling, impaired movement, reduced quality of life, and higher death rates. Older adults who suffer from malnutrition are also more likely to be hospitalized and require long-term care.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE A STRONGER AND HEALTHIER NIGERIA

Investing in nutrition will reduce healthcare costs, improve educational outcomes, and increase productivity – clear benefits for Nigeria's economy and people. Research shows that every dollar invested in reducing child stunting, for instance, can yield up to \$22 in economic returns⁸.

Nigeria made several nutrition policy commitments at the United Nations Food Systems Summit held in September 2021, including⁹:

- 1. Scaling up nutrition-specific interventions:** Nigeria committed to scaling up evidence-based nutrition-specific interventions such as the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding, micronutrient supplementation, and treatment of severe acute malnutrition (a severe form of wasting) to reach more children and women.
- 2. Improving food systems for better nutrition:** Nigeria pledged to prioritise policies and investments that support food systems for better nutrition, such as promoting diverse diets, reducing food waste, and strengthening food safety measures.
- 3. Strengthening data collection and monitoring:** Nigeria committed to strengthening its data collection and monitoring systems to track progress towards achieving nutrition goals and inform policy and program decisions.
- 4. Mobilizing resources for nutrition:** Nigeria pledged to mobilize domestic and international resources to fund nutrition programs and initiatives, including through public-private partnerships.

Addressing the financing gap is critical, with estimates suggesting that a sustainable food systems transformation for Nigeria over the next decade requires additional public investment of nearly USD 5 billion on average each year⁵. This transformation, moreover, will not be possible without improving agricultural productivity.

Nigeria's agricultural sector is its largest employer, engaging more than **35%** of the workforce in 2019.

Sources: ^{5, 10, 11}



More than **80%** of Nigeria's farmers are smallholders delivering most of the country's production



⁸ World Bank report: "Repositioning Nutrition as Central to Development: A Strategy for Large-Scale Action" <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/2691>

⁹ Nigeria's Food Systems Summit Commitments (<https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/national-dialogues/nigeria>)

¹⁰ World Bank. Data portal. Employment in agriculture (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estimate) – Nigeria. 2022 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=NG>

¹¹ Mgbenka, R. N., & Mbah, E. N. A review of smallholder farming in Nigeria: Need For transformation. International Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development Studies, 3(2), 43–54. (2016)



CALL TO ACTION

Nigeria has recognized the importance of a multisectoral food systems approach, enabling stronger alignment of policies across agriculture, nutrition, health, trade, climate, and the environment. The role of food systems transformation in helping to address multiple challenges including hunger, malnutrition, disease, poverty, livelihoods, unemployment, conflict, violence, and climate change has also been recognized.

Nigeria's presentation of a plan for the transformation of its food systems following the United Nations Food Systems Summit in 2021 demonstrates political commitment. However, the situation remains critical, and decisive action is required to move forward.

Four key measures to undertake now include:

- 1** Investing in tackling food insecurity and malnutrition through well managed and transparent social protection measures, and in knowledge dissemination skills' development.
- 2** Supporting value chain and market systems development to enhance agricultural productivity especially in nutritious food value chains, enhance livelihoods, and reduce poverty – including investing in information management systems (i.e., for marketing, finance and weather) to rapidly enhance agricultural productivity and improve resilience of the food system.
- 3** Strengthening inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms to ensure integrated strategy development, budget planning, and implementation. As a result, there will be an improvement in the coherence and alignment of policy as well as the ability to identify potential tensions, trade-offs, and synergies.
- 4** Enhancing national statistical capacity to produce the disaggregated data required to support evidence-based policy making and interventions, as well as measuring the effects of national policies across all facets of the food system.

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