Vietnam Nutritional Glance

The Costs of Undernutrition

- Over one-third of child deaths are due to undernutrition, mostly from increased severity of disease.²
- Children who are undernourished between conception and age two are at high risk for impaired cognitive development, which adversely affects the country’s productivity and growth.
- The economic costs of undernutrition include direct costs such as the increased burden on the health care system, and indirect costs of lost productivity.
- Childhood anemia alone is associated with a 2.5% drop in adult wages.³

Where Does Vietnam Stand?

- 36% of children under the age of five are stunted, 5% are severely underweight, and 8% are wasted.²
- 7% of infants are born with a low birth weight.²
- Vietnam has achieved high rates of vitamin A supplementation: 98% of children 6–59 months of age receive the recommended two doses of vitamin A approximately six months apart.²

As shown in Figure 1, the overall prevalence of stunting and underweight has been decreasing over the past two decades, and Vietnam is on track to meet MDG 1c (halving 1990 rates of child underweight by 2015).⁶

Most of the irreversible damage due to malnutrition in Vietnam happens during gestation and in the first 24 months of life.⁶

Annually, Vietnam loses over US$544 million in GDP to vitamin and mineral deficiencies.³,⁴ Scaling up core micronutrient interventions would cost less than US$33 million per year.

(See Technical Notes for more information)

Key Actions to Address Malnutrition:

| Action                                      | Approximate Return on Investment (%) | ≈ 10%
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------
| Improve infant and young child feeding through effective education and counseling services. | 1400 | 5%
| Invest in vitamin A Supplementation.        | 1700 | 5%
| Achieve universal salt iodization.          | 3000 | 5%
| Fortify commonly consumed foods with iron. | 800  | 5%
| Ensure an adequate supply of zinc supplements for the treatment of diarrhea. | 1370 | 5%

Country Context

HDI ranking: 116th out of 182 countries¹
Life expectancy: 74 years²
Lifetime risk of maternal death: 1 in 280²
Under-five mortality rate: 14 per 1,000 live births²
Global ranking of stunting prevalence: 43rd highest out of 136 countries²

Technical Notes

- Stunting is low height for age.
- Underweight is low weight for age.
- Wasting is low weight for height.
- Current stunting, underweight, and wasting estimates are based on comparison of the most recent survey data with the WHO Child Growth Standards, released in 2006. They are not directly comparable to the trend data shown in Figure 1, which are calculated according to the previously-used NCHS/WHO reference population.
- Low birth weight is a birth weight less than 2500g.

As seen in Figure 2, while Vietnam performs better than some of its neighbors, some countries with lower incomes in the Africa region, such as Ghana and Togo exhibit lower rates of child stunting.

Undernutrition is not just a problem of poverty. As Figure 3 shows, children are undernourished in over one-fifth of even the richest households. This is not an issue of food access, but of caring practices and disease.

FIGURE 1 Vietnam is on Track To Meet MDG 1

Prevalence Among Children Under 5 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Stunting</th>
<th>Underweight</th>
<th>2015 MDG Underweight Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: WHO Global Database on Child Growth and Malnutrition

FIGURE 2 Vietnam has Higher Rates of Stunting than Some of its Neighbors and Income Peers

Prevalence of Stunting Among Children Under 5 (%)

Source: Stunting rates were obtained from the WHO Global Database on Child Growth and Malnutrition. GNI data were obtained from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators

Most of the irreversible damage due to malnutrition in Vietnam happens during gestation and in the first 24 months of life.⁶
Poor Infant Feeding Practices
• 58% of all newborns receive breast milk within one hour of birth.¹
• Less than one-fifth (17%) of infants under six months are exclusively breastfed.²
• During the important transition period to a mix of breast milk and solid foods between six and nine months of age, 30% of infants are not fed appropriately with both breast milk and other foods.²

Solution: Support women and their families to practice optimal breastfeeding and ensure timely and adequate complementary feeding. Breast milk fulfills all nutritional needs of infants up to six months of age, boosts their immunity, and reduces exposure to infections.

High Disease Burden
• 13% of deaths of children under 5 are due to diarrhea.³
• Undernourished children have an increased risk of falling sick and greater severity of disease.
• Undernourished children who fall sick are much more likely to die from illness than well-nourished children.
• Parasitic infestation diverts nutrients from the body and can cause blood loss and anemia.

Solution: Prevent and treat childhood infection and other disease. Hand-washing, deworming, zinc supplements during and after diarrhea, and continued feeding during illness are important.

Limited Access to Nutritious Food
• 13% of households are food insecure.⁷
• Achieving food security means ensuring quality and continuity of food access, in addition to quantity, for all household members.
• Dietary diversity is essential for food security.

Solution: Involve multiple sectors including agriculture, education, transport, gender, the food industry, health and other sectors, to ensure that diverse, nutritious diets are available and accessible to all household members.

Vitamin and Mineral Deficiencies Cause Hidden Hunger
Although they may not be visible to the naked eye, vitamin and mineral deficiencies impact wellbeing and are prevalent in Vietnam, as indicated in Figure 4.

• Vitamin A: About one-tenth of preschool aged children and one-fifth of pregnant women are deficient in vitamin A.⁶
• Iron: Anemia is found in about one-third of school aged children and pregnant women.⁹ Iron-folic acid supplementation of pregnant women, deworming, provision of multiple micronutrient supplements to infants and young children, and fortification of staple foods are effective strategies to improve the iron status of these vulnerable subgroups.

World Bank Nutrition-Related Activities in Vietnam
Currently, there are no specific World Bank projects that deal directly with nutrition. Through the World Bank-administered Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition Trust Fund, an iron fortified fish sauce project was implemented from 2005–2008. The grant assisted the Government to address iron deficiency by making affordable iron-fortified fish sauce available to the population at risk.

References