

# The Double Burden: Tackling Malnutrition in the Global South

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## Opinion

The latest research highlights alarming trends in global malnutrition, revealing that undernutrition and overnutrition, often referred to as the “double burden of malnutrition,” disproportionately impact the Global South. According to the Global Nutrition Report 2023, over 2.3 billion people worldwide are either malnourished or suffer from nutrient deficiencies, with a significant concentration in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). Despite efforts to address these issues, structural and economic challenges persist, with communities across Africa, South Asia, and Latin America facing the brunt of these global health challenges.

### The scope of global malnutrition

The scope of malnutrition worldwide is expansive, impacting vulnerable groups, particularly children and women, in many LMICs. Data from the Lancet Global Health and other sources estimate that nearly 45% of child mortality globally is linked to malnutrition, including undernutrition and specific micronutrient deficiencies. Furthermore, maternal malnutrition remains pervasive, affecting both pregnant and breastfeeding women, leading to long-term impacts on child development and mortality.

In the Global South, these challenges are exacerbated by food insecurity, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and socio-economic constraints. The World Bank report on global nutrition suggests that over 55% of LMICs experience overlapping challenges, including both food scarcity and rising rates of obesity. For instance, in Nigeria, stunting affects over 37% of children under five, while obesity rates continue to climb among adults, signalling the paradoxical nature of malnutrition in these regions.

### Economic disparities and health outcomes

Economic disparities directly influence the severity and nature of malnutrition. The Global South bears a unique set of nutritional challenges because of limited resources to address health infrastructure, education, and poverty alleviation. According to the FAO’s 2022 SOFI Report (State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World), over 50% of people in sub-Saharan Africa cannot afford a healthy diet, often relying on calorie-dense but nutrient-poor foods, leading to both obesity and nutrient deficiencies. Additionally, the same report underscores how food costs are projected to rise, worsening food insecurity and impacting dietary quality in already vulnerable areas.

### The double burden: undernutrition and obesity

The concept of the “double burden of malnutrition” is particularly critical in understanding nutrition challenges in the Global South. Traditionally, malnutrition was primarily associated with undernutrition, but recent studies underscore the role of overnutrition and its complications. Research from Current Nutrition journal indicates that in urban parts of Africa and South Asia, rapid dietary changes and increased consumption of processed foods have led

to an obesity surge, even as undernutrition persists among children and other vulnerable populations.

Countries such as India exemplify this dichotomy. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) in India highlights that 35.5% of children under five are stunted, while 24% of adults are overweight or obese. Al Jazeera and BBC News have reported on this nutritional paradox, revealing how urbanization and income inequality drive poor dietary choices, further straining already burdened healthcare systems.

### Health impacts of malnutrition

The health impacts of malnutrition are significant and multifaceted, influencing a range of chronic conditions and infectious diseases. Undernutrition increases susceptibility to infectious diseases, stunting growth and cognitive development, particularly among children under five. Meanwhile, overnutrition, particularly obesity, contributes to a rise in Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. A PLOS Global Health study found that LMICs are particularly vulnerable to the dual burden of NCDs and infectious diseases, placing immense strain on health systems.

The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights that addressing this issue requires both food security and nutrition-sensitive interventions. WHO experts suggest that tailored policies to address NCDs and bolster immune defenses in undernourished populations will be essential for global health resilience.

### Policy solutions and global health initiatives

Addressing global malnutrition, especially in the Global South, requires targeted, multi-faceted approaches. Recent international efforts, such as the WHO's Global Nutrition Targets 2025, outline a comprehensive framework that aims to reduce stunting, wasting, and anaemia, particularly among vulnerable populations. The Global Nutrition Report underscores the need for policies that focus on maternal and child nutrition, the development of fortified foods, and agricultural reforms to enhance food quality and availability. Regional initiatives are also gaining traction. The African Union's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) aims to bolster food security and nutritional outcomes across the continent. This policy framework encourages sustainable farming practices, nutrition-sensitive agriculture, and equitable food distribution networks. A similar approach is being adopted in South Asia, where India's Poshan Abhiyaan (National

Nutrition Mission) targets malnutrition through community-led interventions, particularly focusing on the nutritional needs of women and children.

However, despite these initiatives, The Guardian and New Indian Express have highlighted persistent challenges, including underfunded health systems and lack of coordination between governments and NGOs. Experts argue that integrating these programs into national healthcare systems and ensuring sustainable financing will be critical to their long-term success.

### Future directions and the role of the global community

The global community plays an essential role in addressing malnutrition through funding, research, and technical support. Think tanks such as the Global Health Council and World Resources Institute have advocated for greater financial investments in global health. Additionally, innovations in agriculture and food technology are needed to mitigate malnutrition. For instance, biofortification-enriching staple crops with essential vitamins and minerals is a promising solution to tackle micronutrient deficiencies in the Global South, as suggested by a recent *Frontiers in Nutrition* study. Moreover, experts from *Current Nutrition* emphasize the need for global food policies that prioritize sustainable agricultural practices, promote diverse diets, and address income disparities. These measures, along with food policy reform, are essential to reducing dependency on processed foods that contribute to the growing rates of obesity and diabetes in LMICs.

### Conclusion

The challenge of malnutrition is multifaceted and requires a concerted global response. While LMICs face unique challenges due to economic constraints and structural inequities, there is growing awareness and action in the form of policies and regional frameworks designed to combat both undernutrition and overnutrition. Tackling this crisis requires the collaboration of global health bodies, local governments, and civil society, with a focus on sustainable, nutrition-sensitive interventions and policies. Addressing malnutrition through health and economic policies that prioritize the most vulnerable populations can reduce the double burden of malnutrition and create healthier, more resilient societies. As the Global Nutrition Report and recent data from journals emphasize, sustainable and inclusive health strategies will be paramount in overcoming the complex, pressing challenges of global malnutrition.