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Exploring a Comprehensive Approach to Nutrition Through Nutrition-Specific and Nutrition-Sensitive Investments

by Jordan Teague



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“Without a comprehensive and responsive approach, we will not end malnutrition by 2030 as the countries of the world have set a goal to do.”

SUMMARY AND HIGHLIGHTS

The multi-sectoral approach to nutrition is becoming better known in international development and global health, but there is still some confusion as to what qualifies as a nutrition-specific intervention, as opposed to what qualifies as nutrition-sensitive. The two types of activities differ in how they approach the problem of malnutrition, and a combination of both is needed to make the greatest possible improvements in maternal and child nutrition and to sustain those gains. The U.S. government funds both types of approaches, but we cannot determine the total funding for nutrition including both approaches with the information that is currently publicly available.

- Nutrition-specific interventions address the immediate causes of undernutrition: inadequate dietary intake, and disease or poor health status.
- Nutrition-sensitive approaches address the underlying determinants or root causes of undernutrition, such as household food insecurity, inadequate care and feeding practices, unhealthy household environments, and poor health services.
- A more detailed budget for nutrition investments is needed to assess the full extent of U.S. global nutrition investments.

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Introduction

In recent years, nutrition has become a more prominent part of global development—both the conversation and the programs. This is largely because of our deepening knowledge of the massive scale of malnutrition; its devastating impacts, particularly in early childhood; and the successful results of identified, cost-effective interventions. (See Box 1)

In 2015, the governments of the United States and 192 other countries committed to ending all forms of malnutrition as part of the 2030 Agenda. Countries with a very high burden of

malnutrition will need outside support to enable them to achieve this goal. Not only do they require assistance in scaling up direct nutrition interventions (or “nutrition specific” interventions), but they also need to take “nutrition sensitive” actions in other sectors. “Nutrition sensitive” actions address the underlying causes of malnutrition and/or improve the nutrition impact of investments in the other sectors.

This multi-sectoral approach to nutrition is becoming better known to many of those working to fund and implement U.S. development assistance programs, but there is still some confusion as to what qualifies as nutrition-sensitive development supported by U.S. foreign assistance and how these efforts relate to and supplement nutrition-

specific investments. This paper seeks to clarify what these investments are, the distinction between them, and how they can complement each other.

BOX 1: Priority package of nutrition-specific interventions⁸

- Vitamin A supplementation for children
- Promotion of good feeding and hygiene practices for infants and young children
- Micronutrient supplementation during pregnancy
- Preventive treatment for malaria during pregnancy
- Iron and folic acid supplementation for adolescent girls
- Staple food fortification
- Pro-breastfeeding policies
- National breastfeeding promotion campaigns
- Treatment of acute malnutrition

Key Global Nutrition Facts

- Stunting is a result of chronic childhood malnutrition in the “1,000 Days” window—the time period from pregnancy to a child’s second birthday.
- Maternal malnutrition and childhood stunting impact the learning capacity, productivity, and lifelong health of entire populations.¹
- Countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia lose as much as 11 to 12 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) each year due to malnutrition’s impact on both productivity and the cost of health care.²
- Each year, nearly half of all preventable deaths of children under 5 years old are linked to malnutrition.³
- Anemia in women, a form of malnutrition, causes one in every five maternal deaths.⁴
- Half a billion women suffer from anemia.⁵
- One in four children are stunted.⁶
- Malnutrition is also a generational cycle: malnourished women are more likely to give birth to malnourished children, who are likely to grow up to be malnourished adults.

Understanding Nutrition

Direct nutrition interventions, also known as nutrition-specific interventions, are now well defined and backed by a rigorous evidence base.⁷ Nutrition-specific interventions address the immediate causes of undernutrition: inadequate dietary intake, and disease or poor health status (see Figure 1). Nutrition-specific programs focus on ensuring that specific populations consume specific nutrients, are educated regarding proper nutritional practices, and/or receive treatment or prevention services for common diseases that are known to worsen nutritional status. Box 1 lists examples of nutrition-specific activities. As a group, the interventions in Box 1 have recently been identified by the World Bank as a priority package of nutrition-specific interventions. They are

high-impact nutrition-specific actions that have been proven to be cost-effective and are ready to be scaled up through existing delivery platforms.

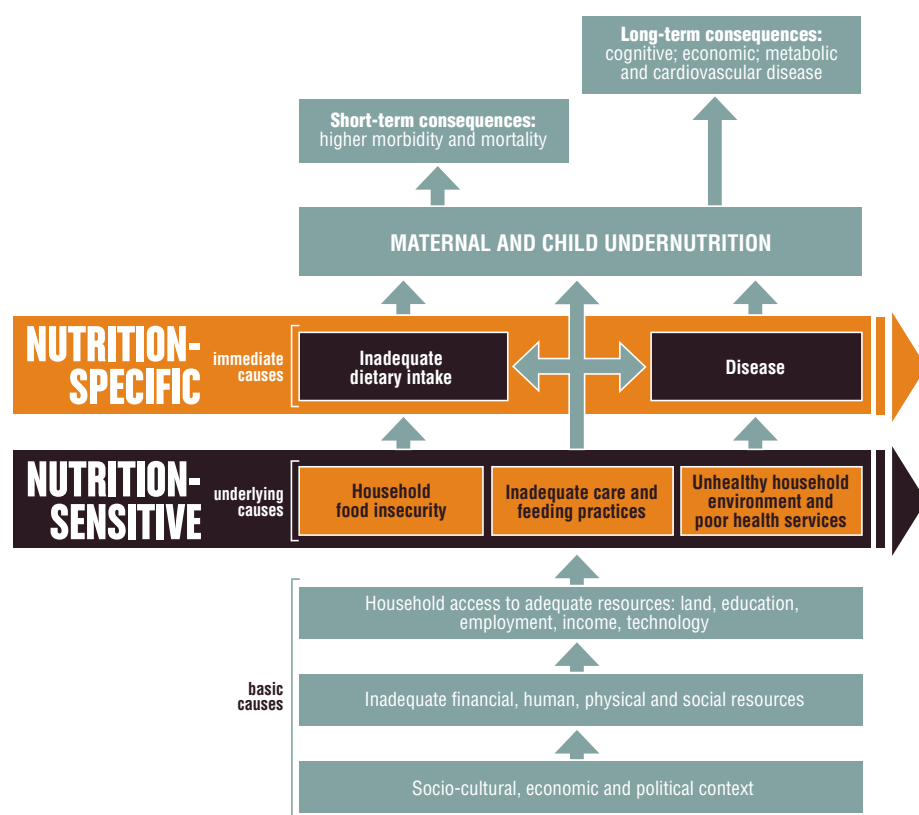
Nutrition-sensitive approaches, in contrast, address the underlying determinants or root causes of undernutrition, and incorporate nutrition goals and actions. These factors, labeled “underlying causes” in Figure 1, are household food insecurity, inadequate care and feeding practices, unhealthy household environments, and inadequate health services. These are broad topics, so it makes sense that nutrition-sensitive programs in a number of sectors can help improve nutrition outcomes. Some of these are agriculture, social protection or social safety net programs, education, health, women’s empowerment, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

There has been some confusion over the fact that programs in agriculture, health, WASH, etc., aren’t inherently nutrition-sensitive—and shouldn’t be automatically categorized as such—just by virtue of being agriculture, health, WASH, etc. programs. This is important because this confusion can lead to the idea that nutrition work is more widespread than it really is. To be classified as nutrition-sensitive, programs must include explicit goals or objectives related to nutrition as well as monitor progress on nutrition. Many nutrition-sensitive interventions are also designed and intended for specific groups that are vulnerable to malnutrition, for example, pregnant women and children in the “1,000 Days” window.

Box 2 lists examples of nutrition-sensitive interventions. Figure 2 illustrates the changes needed to transform a more standard development project into one that qualifies as nutrition-sensitive. The emphasis, as seen here, is on the fact that any nutrition-sensitive activity must be deliberately planned to make an impact on nutrition. This can be done by making nutrition a formal objective of the program or by aiming program services at people in vulnerable groups.

Nutrition-sensitive investments can take on the added task of delivering nutrition-specific interventions as well. Currently, it is mainly global health programs which nutrition-specific programs

FIGURE 1: The Flow of Child Undernutrition Determinants and Where Nutrition-Sensitive and Nutrition-Specific Interventions Fit In



Source: UNICEF with additions by Derek Schwabe/Bread for the World Institute

BOX 2: Examples of nutrition-sensitive activities

- Biofortification (conventional crop breeding to increase the nutrient content of staple foods)
- School feeding programs specifically targeted to adolescent girls
- Home gardens or other agricultural practices that contribute to dietary diversity
- Agriculture programs aimed at increasing women’s incomes
- Conditional cash transfers linked to participating in health and nutrition programs
- WASH services targeted to households with children in the 1,000 Days window
- Monitoring agriculture and other programs to ensure that they do not add to women’s time and labor burdens

“piggyback.” But an increased emphasis on nutrition-sensitive development could enable other sectors, such as agriculture, to deliver an integrated program of both nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific activities. Because the idea isn’t yet mainstreamed within most U.S. foreign assistance programs, it needs further research and discussion of potential ways to implement it.

Since nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions address different determinants of nutrition, a combination of both is needed to make the greatest possible improvements in

maternal and child nutrition and to sustain those gains. A 2013 analysis in *The Lancet*, a respected British medical journal, evaluated the impact of 10 nutrition-specific interventions on stunting. Researchers estimated that scaling these interventions up to reach 90 percent coverage of their intended populations would reduce stunting by approximately 20 percent.⁹ This analysis suggests, therefore, that nutrition-specific interventions alone will not be enough to end malnutrition.

But nutrition-sensitive activities alone are not enough to eliminate stunting, either. Even with crop diversity, or increased household income through conditional cash transfers, or better health because of WASH services, women and children may not consume an adequate amount

of each nutrient necessary for fully improved nutrition. Nutrition-sensitive interventions rely on direct nutrition interventions to fill this gap. As mentioned earlier, nutrition-specific interventions include treating malnutrition, supplementing diets with critical nutrients, and other activities that help meet urgent needs. Nutrition education on healthy and diverse diets from infancy to adulthood is also important since it empowers parents and individuals with the information they need to make the best use of the resources available to them.

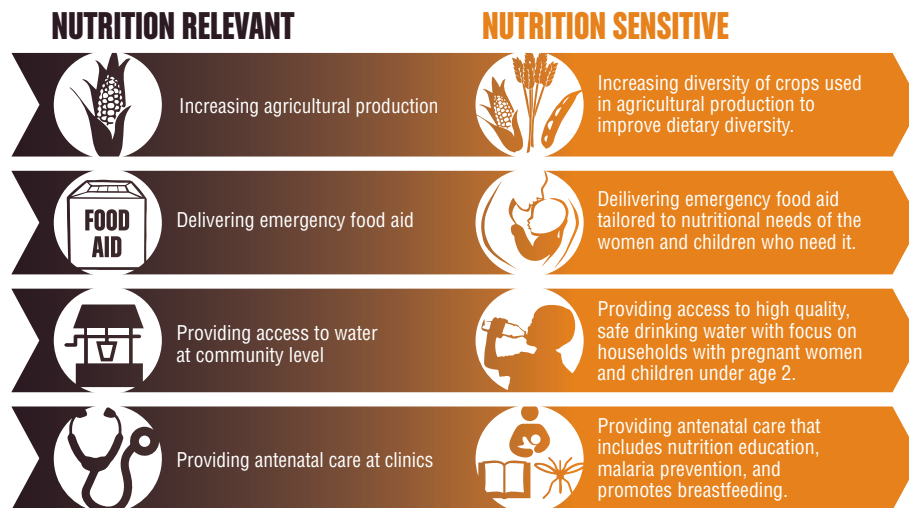
The need for a combination of strategies makes sense because stunting and other forms of malnutrition do not have one single cause. The causes of stunting include inadequate nutrition and multiple infections in early childhood in addition to maternal malnutrition and other problems. As *The Lancet* reported, nutrition-specific interventions can reduce stunting by 20 percent by addressing these immediate causes. Improving nutrition to the fullest possible extent also depends on agriculture that can provide diverse nutritious foods, households’ having enough income to purchase these foods, and people’s health being strengthened through interventions such as better WASH conditions and access to health care. Therefore, a comprehensive nutrition package of both adequate nutrition-specific interventions coupled with nutrition-sensitive programs is the most likely to make a lasting impact on maternal and child nutrition.

The U.S. Global Nutrition Package

How much does the U.S. government spend on global nutrition each year? Unfortunately, the total investments of the U.S. government in global nutrition (including both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive) is difficult to define based on current publicly available information.

The federal government invests in both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive initiatives through its development and food assistance programs. But the information is clearer in regard to nutrition-specific investments. In recent years, the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have released the total amount budgeted for nutrition-specific

FIGURE 2: Moving from Nutrition Relevant to Nutrition Sensitive



Graphic by Derek Schwabe & Doug Puller/Bread for the World Institute

efforts each year. Box 3 lists the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) accounts which, according to the fiscal year 2017 administration budget request, contain nutrition-specific funding.* In fiscal year 2017, these two agencies budgeted a total of \$256 million for nutrition-specific actions—a small amount of resources relative to the health and economic impacts of inadequate maternal and child nutrition.

These accounts fund a variety of nutrition-related activities. Among them are nutrition initiatives targeted to adolescent girls, pregnant women, and children in the 1,000 Days; nutrition education for parents; efforts to improve dietary quality and diversity; preventive nutrition interventions such as micronutrient supplementation; and support for immediate needs, such as specialized feeding for children with acute malnutrition.

In addition to the accounts in Box 3 that support nutrition-specific activities, the U.S. government invests in various programs that could be nutrition-sensitive through a number of other accounts.

Take for example, Feed the Future, the U.S. government’s global hunger and food security initiative. Feed the Future includes agricultural and rural development projects; initiatives to transform food production systems; and market-based innovation, partnerships, technologies, and policies.¹¹ For fiscal year 2017, the administration requested \$978 million for Feed the Future.

Feed the Future’s overall goal is to reduce global poverty and hunger in ways that are sustainable and its activities reflect this goal. Only some Feed the Future initiatives qualify as nutrition-sensitive, however. As mentioned earlier, nutrition-sensitive programs must set specific nutrition goals or objectives and monitor progress on nutrition, and many target populations vulnerable to malnutrition.

We cannot determine the total funding for these nutrition-sensitive programs within Feed the Future or other potential nutrition-sensitive investments with the information that is currently publicly available. No budget breakdown is provided from Feed the Future or others showing what portion of its programs meet the criteria set out in this paper.

Feed the Future efforts do also include nutrition-specific programs. As shown in Figure 3, the Feed the Future account receives separate funding from Global Health Programs for such programs.¹² What we cannot determine from the information that is currently publicly available is the total funding for Feed the Future’s nutrition-specific programs, or if it even does supply resources in addition to the nutrition-specific funding it receives from the Global Health Programs account.

BOX 3: Nutrition-Specific Funding (Department of State and USAID)¹⁰

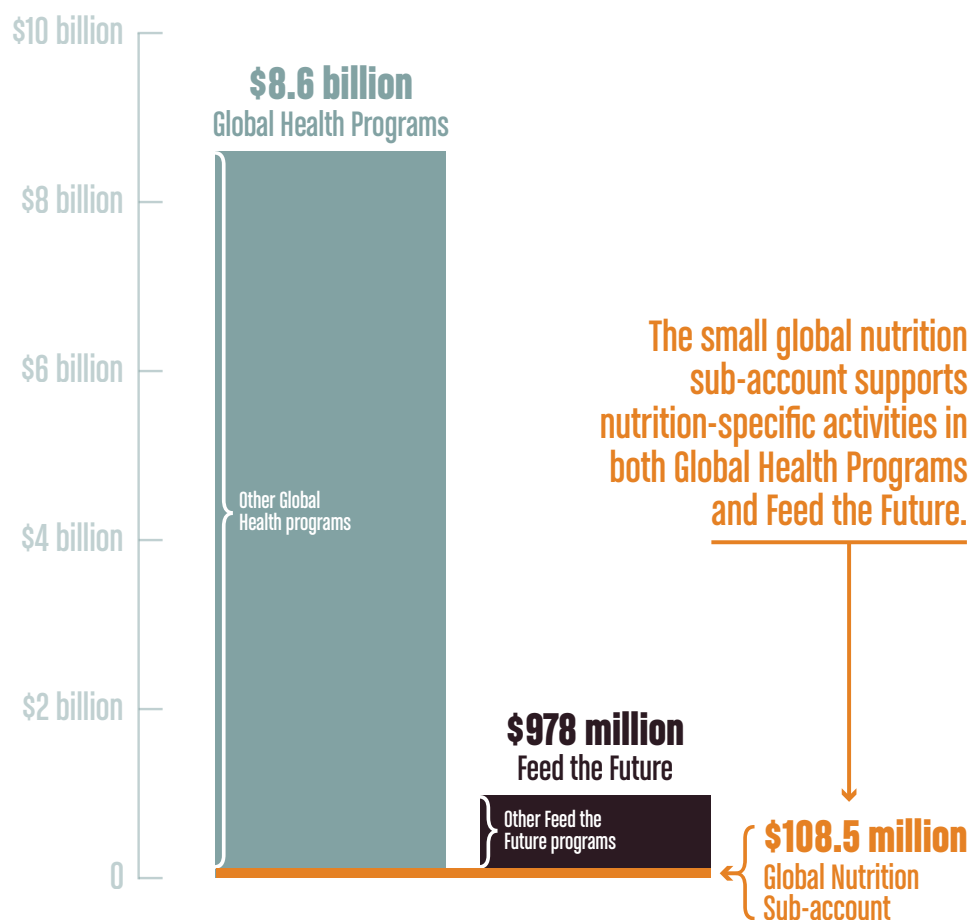
USG Accounts	Amount (USD)
Development Assistance	\$9.9 million
Economic Support Fund	\$500,000
ESF Overseas Contingency Operations	\$36 million
Food for Peace	\$87.6 million
Global Health Programs – State	\$13.5 million
Global Health Programs – USAID	\$108.5 million
Total FY2017	\$256 million

Malnutrition is a contributing factor to preventable maternal and infant mortality rates. In rural Zambia, USAID programs in partnership with the Zambian government are helping equip villagers with knowledge of essential nutrients and the foods that contain them.



* The U.S. government also invests in nutrition through programs outside of the State Department and USAID. For example, the Millennium Challenge Corporation has a \$134.2 million compact in Indonesia, the “Community Based Health and Nutrition to Reduce Stunting Project.” For more information visit <https://www.mcc.gov/where-we-work/program/indonesia-compact>.

FIGURE 3: **The Nutrition-specific Funding in Global Health and Feed the Future Funding**



Source: FY2017 State Department Congressional Budget Justification

U.S. nutrition assistance thus has both nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific investments. They have separate streams of funding. Since the two serve different purposes, they make the most impact when fully resourced and addressed together in a complete package, a package that is tailored to each context. This approach is being taken by a number of developing countries. Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) is a network of countries with a high burden of malnutrition (58 at last count) that have come together to support each other in reducing malnutrition by scaling up successful initiatives.

Many SUN countries have developed (or are developing) their own national multi-sectoral nutrition policies, strategies, or plans. The United States can be most effective by aligning our investments with them. These plans have, after all, been developed with a deep understanding of national and local capacities, resources, and contexts. U.S. sup-

port for national priorities and flexibility in how funds are allocated within projects enables countries and communities to improve their people's nutritional status using strategies that have proven most successful.

A More Detailed Nutrition Budget

A more detailed budget and narrative for nutrition investments—both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive—is needed in order to assess the extent of U.S. investment in global nutrition and ensure that nutrition resources are used effectively. In addition to Feed the Future, a number

BOX 4: Feed the Future Stunting Progress

In 2016, Feed the Future released an initial assessment of its impact, including progress against stunting. Feed the Future reports that childhood stunting has been reduced from the baseline rate in each of 8 focus countries by anywhere from 6 percent to 40 percent, and that a total of 18 million children were reached with U.S.-funded nutrition programs in 19 focus countries in 2015.¹³ This progress is attributed to both nutrition-specific efforts, including those funded by Global Health Programs, and to nutrition-sensitive agricultural investments. The nutrition-sensitive agricultural investments that also contributed to progress on stunting are generally focused on cultivating, storing, processing, and consuming nutrient-dense foods. Two examples of these types of investments are biofortification of staple crops, and training for people to grow nutritious foods in home gardens.¹⁴ Both types of efforts (nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive) are needed to achieve this level of progress on maternal and child nutrition.



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of other U.S. government food security, health, and development programs invest in nutrition-sensitive programs. However, as yet there is no clear, publicly available way of compiling a list of these programs with their annual budgets and details on what they fund in relation to nutrition.

The U.S. Global Nutrition Coordination Plan 2016-2021¹⁵ (GNCP) commits the federal government to gathering and reporting on annual expenditures that support nutrition. Bread for the World Institute welcomes this commitment and offers the following recommendations.

Feed the Future aims to improve nutrition using nutrition-sensitive approaches to agriculture.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD INCLUDE BOTH NUTRITION-SPECIFIC AND NUTRITION-SENSITIVE EXPENDITURES IN ITS ANNUAL REPORT UNDER THE GNCP.

As we have noted, it's clear that ending hunger and all forms of malnutrition will require national and donor investments in both direct nutrition interventions to improve nutrition and nutrition-sensitive programs to respond to the underlying causes of malnutrition. The administration's annual report on nutrition expenditures should include breakdowns of each of the two program types. These will provide a clearer picture of all the ways the U.S. government is investing in nutrition, including through global health accounts and through other sectors. It will help illustrate for stakeholders the multiple ways to make an impact on nutrition, and it will serve as a useful source of data to help assess what is working well and what could be done better.

THE ANNUAL REPORT ON EXPENDITURES SHOULD INCLUDE A NARRATIVE THAT EXPLAINS:

1. *The rationale for categorizing an investment as nutrition-sensitive and how the investment fits the categorization*

There are established criteria now for nutrition-sensitive investments, so programs in sectors such as agriculture and WASH should not be automatically categorized as nutrition-sensitive. Rather, nutrition-sensitive programs are those that include specific nutrition goals or objectives, monitor progress on nutrition, and many times target vulnerable populations (such as those in the 1,000 Days window of opportunity). A narrative accompanying the report on expenditures should identify the rationale within these criteria for labeling each investment as nutrition-sensitive.

2. *Which U.S. agencies are carrying out one or both types of nutrition programs, the countries where they are working, and an indication of whether they are coordinating their work with other U.S. government nutrition stakeholders in these countries.*

Nutrition resource expenditures should be categorized by country and U.S. government agency in the budget breakdown and narrative so that readers can get a clear, comprehensive picture of nutrition efforts in each country. To the extent possible, the narrative should indicate whether any funded programs work in coordination with each other. For example, there may be a country or an area within a country where direct nutrition funds from global health are being used in conjunction with nutrition-sensitive agriculture investments to provide the population with a full nutrition package.

The SUN Donor Network has done some work on developing a methodology to track nutrition-sensitive spending.¹⁶ This entailed identifying potentially nutrition-sensitive investments and assigning portions of these programs as nutrition-sensitive. This approach determines that either 25 percent or 100 percent of the program is nutrition-sensitive. In this way, it is possible to make rough calculations of aggregate nutrition-sensitive spending.¹⁷ However, this level of data is not available from the U.S. as the U.S. government applies the appropriate percentage to entire sectors of investments, rather than at the project level.

The administration did develop a detailed budget breakdown in 2013 that included some of the criteria for nutrition-sensitive expenditures. This was in preparation for the first Nutrition for Growth Summit, held in London in June of that year, and has not been updated with data from the intervening years.

We recommend that these two resources be used as a starting point to produce the required annual nutrition resource expenditure reports, with an additional, more comprehensive, narrative as explained above.

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programs can be made nutrition-sensitive, and all three are necessary to improve maternal and child nutrition.



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Conclusion

It is significant that in recent years, improved nutrition has become a policy priority of the U.S. government. This is reflected in the USAID Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy 2014-2025, in the GNCP, and in the high priority given to nutrition in the wider context of the recently released U.S. Government Global Food Security Strategy FY2017-2021. The priority status of nutrition must be matched by adequate resources to implement both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programs.

It is imperative that the U.S. government continue to provide a comprehensive nutrition investment package in order to fully and sustainably improve the nutrition of women and children around the world. In each context, a variety of both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive activities is needed to address both the immediate and underlying causes of malnutrition (see Figure 1). Without this comprehensive and responsive approach, we will not end malnutrition by 2030 as the countries of the world have set a goal to do.

The U.S. government has a multi-sectoral and whole of government nutrition framework to support investments that address undernutrition appropriately and fully. Mothers and children in the developing world will only realize the full potential benefit of these investments, however, if nutrition-specific initiatives are adequately resourced and provided in conjunction with investments that are nutrition-sensitive according to the established definition of the term.

Endnotes

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