



**Theme: Health,
Early Childhood Development**

**Action Dialogue on Childhood Nutrition and
Stunting in South Africa
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Sinikiwe Mqadi¹

Childhood undernutrition – particularly in the critical window of the first 1 000 days – should be a matter of the utmost national and international concern. It can result in irreversible stunting, which has severe consequences on both physical health and brain development. Impaired cognitive development leads to poor achievement at school, decreased productivity later in life and diminished chances of escaping the circle of poverty. Undernourished infants are also at greater risk of becoming obese children and adults, and of suffering from diabetes and other cardio-metabolic diseases later in life.

Stunting starts before birth and is caused by poor maternal nutrition, poor feeding practices, poor food nutritional quality, and frequent infections and diseases that can slow growth.

Government has developed various interventions for children's health, including; Diagnostic/Implementation Evaluation of Nutrition Interventions for Children from Conception to Age 5 (2014); Draft National

About this brief

This brief was commissioned by the Mandela Initiative to help inform a synthesis report on its work since the 2012 national conference, *Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality*, organised by the University of Cape Town. The MI provides a multi-sectoral platform to investigate and develop strategies to overcome poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa. While the Nelson Mandela Foundation is a key partner, the Initiative has relied on collaborations between academics and researchers, government, business leaders, civil society, the church and unions.

The synthesis report serves as a framework for reporting on the work of the MI at a national gathering on 12 – 14 February 2018 at the University of Cape Town. The MI *Think Tank* has identified the objectives for the gathering as:

- to anchor the contributions of the MI within an analysis of the current South African political and economic context;
- to share the recommendations emanating from the MI-related work streams at a policy/strategic level to advance the goal of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality;
- to critically engage with the potential impact of the recommendations on eliminating structural poverty and inequality; and
- to discuss ways of promoting popular conversations and debate about what needs to be done to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, beyond the MI.

The synthesis report aims to assist participants to prepare for the national gathering. The report drew on findings from the sectoral research projects of Think Tank members; the MI's *Action Dialogues*; a report on an MI *Community of Practice workshop* with research chairs from different universities to identify cross-cutting themes emerging from the MI's *research programme*; and the work programmes of others who have expressed an interest in contributing to the goals of the MI.

¹ DG Murray Trust



Food and Nutrition Security Plan for South Africa 2017-2022 (2017); ECD Diagnostic Evaluation (2012); National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2015); and the Draft Integrated National Early Childhood Development Plan.

However, South Africa has made limited progress in improving child nutrition since 1999, and compares unfavorably to five other countries with similar economic characteristics, with both under nutrition and over nutrition (obesity) found in children under five years. While most health services have the necessary equipment, guidelines and protocols to address nutrition in under-five children, some areas still have inadequate resources.

The ECD Evaluation Report² found unequal commitment to nutrition across departments. The underlying premise of most interventions is that people do not have enough to eat. Thus, they have focused on the quantity, rather than the quality of food. Interventions have not been responsive to the growing problem of obesity, which impacts many more. Senior policy-makers need a better understand stunting, and its causes and consequences.

A broader approach is needed – one that addresses the underlying causes of malnutrition, including clean water and good sanitation; access to high-quality health care; maternal health before conception, during pregnancy, and during lactation and post-lactation period; education about best feeding practices and, of course food security – which itself depends on many factors including improvements in sustainable agriculture, economic justice and access to water, climate change and many other factors.

In response to this need for a more comprehensive multi-sectoral approach, in 2013 *The Lancet* described a new conceptual framework for working towards optimal fetal and child growth and development. The new conceptual framework, also requires a life-cycle approach – with support for adolescents, mothers and children at every stage.

South Africa's nutrition efforts should be consolidated towards a single goal of reducing stunting, with a prioritisation of interventions targeting women of reproductive age and the first 1 000s days of children's lives.

For more information on the Mandela Initiative:



² Department of Health, Department of Social Development & Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation (2014) *Diagnostic/ Implementation Evaluation of Nutrition Interventions for Children from Conception to Age 5*. Pretoria.