Nutrition funding cuts in the UK context

What is being lost, and what can be rebuilt?

The UK has a strong history of global leadership on action on nutrition. In 2009, DfID's Nutrition Strategy, The Neglected Crisis of Undernutrition, was published, marking the start of a decade of UK leadership on global nutrition. In 2013, the UK initiated Nutrition for Growth (N4G), convening the first N4G Summit in London in 2013 where more than US$4 billion in new nutrition-specific projects and US$19 billion in nutrition-sensitive projects was pledged for low- and middle-income countries, with subsequent N4G summits in Milan, Tokyo and Paris continuing this momentum.

However, the UK's reputation as a trusted partner on global nutrition has been undermined by consecutive reductions in official development assistance (ODA) from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income in 2021 and again to 0.3% by 2027. The ODA reduction in 2021 led to nutrition spending being cut by more than 60%.

This is part of a broader international retreat from aid with similar patterns in countries like the US, Germany, France and Japan.

> ***"Funding for prevention of malnutrition has been deprioritised on a large scale."***

A survey of over 400 stakeholders conducted by the Global Nutrition Report (GNR), examined the impacts of global funding cuts across more than 70 countries. Through the survey, the GNR, the world's leading independent assessment of the state of global nutrition, uncovered what is being lost, the risks if current trends continue and how funders and policymakers can prevent temporary funding reductions from causing lasting damage. Particularly, the survey revealed that:

- **Those most in need are being reached least.** Children under five, pregnant and lactating women, displaced populations, rural communities and hard-to-reach groups are losing contact with screening, counselling, supplementation, treatment and follow-up.
- **Programmes are in survival mode and running on less.** Organisations are cutting activities, geographic coverage, beneficiary numbers, supplies, technical assistance, supervision and monitoring.
- **Prevention is the first thing to go.** Identification of long-term problems will come at a greater cost as resources are concentrating on emergencies and related treatment.
- **The workforce is thinning out.** Layoffs and frozen recruitment are translating into heavier workloads leading to an erosion of delivery capacity and institutional memory that future funding alone cannot restore.
- **Evidence is going dark when it is needed most.** Cuts to surveillance systems, monitoring and evaluation and periodic national health and nutrition surveys mean deterioration may go undetected and scarce resources may be poorly targeted.

> ***"There will be an increase in severely malnourished children and women due to lack of outreach services."***

"The major impact is that we could not reach the vulnerable populations we were supposed to reach."

Recommendations for the UK

The UK could deploy several strategies to once again become a leader in global nutrition efforts:

- **Develop diverse sources of finance:** Instead of relying solely on ODA, the UK should blend public, philanthropic and private capital to multiply the impact of UK Aid. It can do this through match- funded mechanisms and co-financing with the Global Financing Facility and multilateral development banks (MDBs). Whatever the mechanism, additional finance is needed, alongside a commitment to follow national priorities and ensure that both the treatment of malnutrition and prevention actions across multiple sectors (agriculture, food, water and sanitation and health) are targeted to support optimal health and nutrition among vulnerable populations. Platforms, such as the Child Nutrition Fund, provide examples of innovative financing mechanisms, and more such platforms should be developed to address the broader nutrition agenda.
- **Maximise funding for nutrition** through advocacy with MDBs, philanthropic partnerships and domestic resource mobilisation.
- **Use debt relief to protect nutrition investment:** In countries where debt servicing severely constrains public spending, the UK Government should pilot debt-for-nutrition swaps, channelling debt relief directly into proven nutrition interventions. This transforms debt reductions into health gains, ensuring that debt relief translates into better nutrition and stronger communities.
- **Build equitable and accountable partnerships:** The UK is home to world-leading research institutions where knowledge-sharing and international collaboration is critical. Safeguarding and strategically increasing long-term investment in UK and global research and development in food systems and nutrition, and the partnerships that underpin them, will be critical to maintain this globally relevant position.
- **Develop longer funding cycles:** Shifting to multi-year commitments has the potential to provide continuity while allowing periodic adjustment to changing needs and fiscal conditions.
- **Support pre-agreed contingency finance:** establishing bridge-financing mechanisms could be vital to protect essential services, staff and commodities during temporary funding reductions.
- **Publish nutrition objectives:** Inclusion of measurable nutrition outcomes within health, food systems, climate adaptation and social protection investments could increase coherence and make investments across interconnected objectives more effective. The UK should publish an outcomes target for nutrition as pledged at the recent Paris N4G Summit.

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