

New study shows undernutrition taking a toll on Ghana's economy

The economy of Ghana is losing some GHC4.6 billion (US\$2.6 billion, or 6.4% of GDP) a year to the effects of child undernutrition, according to a new study launched in the capital.



Image by 123RF

'The Cost of Hunger in Africa: the Social and Economic Impact of Child Undernutrition on Ghana's Long-Term Development (COHA)' shows vast amounts being lost through increased healthcare costs, additional burdens on the education system and lower productivity by its workforce.

The consequences of stunting (low height for age) are of particular concern. Stunting occurs when children miss out on critical nutrients -- including proteins, vitamins and minerals - while in the womb and in the first two years of life.

This is compounded by diseases and poor hygiene practices. People affected by stunting face lifelong consequences starting in childhood such as frequent illness, poor school performance, having to repeat classes or dropping out altogether, and low workplace productivity.

Among other findings, the COHA report reveals that:

- 37% of the adult population in Ghana suffered from stunting as children.
- 24% of all child mortality cases in Ghana are associated with undernutrition.
- Child mortality associated with undernutrition has reduced Ghana's workforce by 7.3%.

Ghana has made some progress in improving child nutrition over the past two decades, reducing chronic malnutrition or stunting from 23 to 19%. However, this study highlights the critical need for further progress.

Dr Margaret Agama Nyetei, the African Union Commission's head of health, nutrition and population division, said the issue was vital to the AU's vision and action plan for the next 50 years, known as Agenda 2063. "At the African Union, we believe that the realisation of Agenda 2063 and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be possible without fully harnessing the potential of all sectors of the population and this includes our children," she said.

In the Northern Region of Ghana, 30% of children under five are stunted or chronically malnourished

"The goal of eliminating stunting is key to achieving Zero Hunger, Sustainable Development Goal 2," said Thomas Yanga, director of the World Food Programme Africa Office. "The losses to the economy can be averted through strategic interventions which ensure adequate nutrition for mothers and young children."

Stunting is not just a health issue, it needs to be addressed through a multi-sectoral approach and prioritised in all development programmes from community to national level.

"Ensuring a generation free from malnutrition requires significant investments in nutrition strategies and interventions. There is therefore a need for Ghana to forge strategic partnerships with key stakeholders, particularly the private sector and non-state actors, to combat undernutrition holistically," said Professor Takyiwaa Manuh, director of the social development policy division at the Economic Commission for Africa.

"In the Northern Region of Ghana, 30% of children under five are stunted or chronically malnourished. This not only affects their growth but also their educational development and economic potential, and consequently the future of the country," said Margot van der Velden, WFP deputy regional director for West and Central Africa.

The COHA report is led by the African Union Commission (AUC), in partnership with African governments, the New Partnership for Africa's Development Planning and Coordinating Agency (NPCA); the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA); and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). Studies have so far taken place in Egypt, Ethiopia, Swaziland, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Malawi and Rwanda, and are due to be carried out in Chad, Lesotho, Mozambique, Madagascar and Mauritania.

The COHA National Implementation Team which was responsible for collecting, processing and presenting results from Ghana, was composed of Ministries, Departments and Agencies, UN Agencies, Civil Society Organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations, international organisations concerned with the elimination of child stunting. The launch of the study was under the auspices of the National Development Planning Commission.

The Government of Ghana, the African Development Bank, the French Development Agency, the Office of the United Nations Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Rockefeller Foundation and WFP, all contributed financially to the study.