



## Investing in the First 1,000 Days of Life

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### Maternal and infant and young child nutrition matters

The first 1000 days of life -from conception until a child is aged two-years- is a period of rapid physical, cognitive and social development. The right nutrition during this period is critical for brain development, a strong immune system, healthy growth and regulation of metabolism, and for protection from chronic disease later in life. Any deficits in growth and development by age two-years are largely irreversible.

Poor nutrition during pregnancy, affecting foetal growth, and during the first two years of life is a major determinant of low birth weight (<2500g), stunting of linear growth (chronic malnutrition), wasting (acute undernutrition), diminished capacity to learn, reduced capacity for physical activity, and a greater susceptibility to infection and disease. It also has subsequent long-term consequences of increasing a child's predisposition to obesity and chronic degenerative diseases in adulthood.

## The Maldives is experiencing a double-burden of malnutrition

The nutrition status of the population of the Maldives has not kept pace with other socioeconomic progress in the country. Despite some noteworthy health improvements, the Maldives population is suffering from the coexistence of seemingly contrasting and confounding forms of malnutrition, known as the double burden of malnutrition. It is characterized by the co-existence of under-nutrition (including wasting, stunting,<sup>1</sup> and deficiencies in important micronutrients) among young children along with those associated with excess, shown as increasing rates of child, adolescent, and adult over-weight (BMI  $\geq$  25) and obesity (BMI  $\geq$  30), and diet-related non-communicable diseases (including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers). This double burden is united by shared drivers and solutions -related to dietary knowledge, attitudes, practices, self-efficacy, and the social and policy environment.

Existence of a double burden of malnutrition presents a serious public health challenge for the Maldives. It has potential to stunt the country's economic growth and prosperity through reduced work-force capacity and significantly increased demand for diverse health services and the costs for treatment of nutrition-related non-communicable diseases.

- The financial costs to the national economy in lost productivity and health care costs from malnutrition are almost entirely preventable through deliberate accelerated actions.

## A critical window of opportunity

The period from conception until age two-years provides a window of opportunity to maximise every child's potential health, well-being and success -and the economic prosperity for families and the country.

Deliberate double-duty actions – those that simultaneously reduce undernutrition and overweight/obesity- are urgently needed to accelerate the prevention of malnutrition during the first 1000-days of life -for subsequent long-term positive impacts throughout the life-cycle, including reduced risk of non-communicable diseases in adulthood. These actions include:

- Optimizing maternal nutrition in the preconception, pregnancy and lactation periods.
- Protecting, promoting and supporting appropriate breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Stunting: low height for age. Wasting: low weight for height.

## Investing in nutrition during the first 1000-days of life provides the foundation for development.<sup>2</sup>

Achieving optimal maternal, infant and young child nutrition is integral to the national socio-economic development agenda. It is of critical importance for the Maldives to achieve the ambitions of the Maldives National Child Health Strategy 2016-2020<sup>3</sup>, Health Master Plan 2016-2025<sup>4</sup>, the targets of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>5</sup>, commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>6</sup> -among others.

*Maternal, infant and young child nutrition is highlighted in SDG 2, however of the 17 SDGs, 12 contain indicators that are highly relevant for nutrition, and malnutrition during the first 1000 days of life poses a pernicious impediment to achieving all targets. The SDGs are an opportunity to raise the Government's level of ambition for SMART nutrition commitments.*

### Strong nutrition governance is required

Strong nutrition governance is urgently needed to provide a protective and supportive environment for guiding and enabling optimal nutrition during the first 1000 days of life -for benefit to children, women, society and the economic prosperity and sustainable development of the country.

To promote broad-based growth and prevent human suffering, will, commitment and resources need to be invested in achieving SMART targets for scaled-up nutrition interventions that address all forms of malnutrition -stunting, wasting, micronutrient deficiencies, obesity, overweight, and nutrition-related non-communicable diseases.

- Increase budgetary allocations for high impact interventions that address stunting, wasting, anaemia, and exclusive breastfeeding to meet global targets:
  - Strengthen institutional and professional healthcare capacity to deliver important high quality maternal and young child nutrition support services, such as education and counselling.
  - Increase the Health Protection Agency's financial and human resources to support their capacity to appropriately and adequately deliver important nutrition services.
  - Strengthen reporting and monitoring systems that track the progress of policies, programmes, and funding towards achieving nutrition targets.
- Convert recommendations into legislation, supported by nutrition policies and interventions that are enacted, implemented and monitored:
  - Revitalize the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative+, extending to community-based initiatives, to protect the lives of babies for benefits lasting throughout their lives.
  - Fully implement the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and relevant World Health Assembly resolutions through strong legal measures that are enforced and independently monitored, by a body free from conflicts of interest.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/nutrition/publication/investing-in-nutrition-the-foundation-for-development>

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Health. 2015. National Child Health Strategy -Every Newborn Action Plan (ENAP) Maldives 2016-2020

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Health Maldives. 2016. Health Master Plan 2016-2025

<sup>5</sup> <http://una-gp.org/the-sustainable-development-goals-2015-2030/> (Accessed January 2018)

<sup>6</sup> United Nations General Assembly. 1989. Convention of the Rights of the Child: resolution 44/25

- Enact and enforce regulations on marketing of foods and drinks to young children, including restrictions on advertising “junk food”; sugar-rich fruit & energy drinks, and in accordance with the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes (with addendums) and the Codex Alimentarius standards.
- Increase maternity leave to 18 weeks, in accordance with the ILO recommendation No. 191<sup>7</sup> and support workplace policies and initiatives to protect the appropriate and adequate feeding and caring of babies.

## A sound investment for the future of the country

Improving nutrition for mothers and children during the critical first 1000-days of life is one of the best investments a family and a country can make, yield real pay-outs both in lives saved and in healthier, more stable and productive populations.

- Investing in scaling up nutrition interventions is a high-impact, high-return proposition, with an estimated benefit-cost ratio of 16:1 and a compound rate of return from nutrition investments of more than 10 percent.<sup>8</sup>
- Every 1.0USD invested in breastfeeding generates and estimated 35.0USD in economic returns.<sup>9</sup>
- The costs of neglecting nutrition are high, causing economic losses of an estimated 10% of gross domestic product.<sup>10</sup>



*Sound nutrition governance, shown through will, commitment and resources invested in nutrition, is imperative for the sustainable development of the Republic of Maldives.*

<sup>7</sup> International Labour Organization. 2000. R191 – Maternity Protection Recommendation, 2000 (No. 191)

<sup>8</sup> Global Nutrition Report Stakeholder Group. 2016: Global Nutrition Report: From promise to impact- ending malnutrition by 2030

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF; WHO; et al. 2017. Nurturing the health and wealth of nations: the investment case for breastfeeding

<sup>10</sup> Global Nutrition Report Stakeholder Group. 2016: Global Nutrition Report: From promise to impact- ending malnutrition by 2030