

Undernutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

“Tackling nutrition requires a multi-sectoral approach. The EU should promote an approach which recognises the need to align policies on rural development, sustainable agriculture, public health, water and sanitation, social protection and education so as to improve food and nutrition security and effectively impact on the nutritional status of women and children.”

European Commission Communication on *‘Enhancing Maternal and Child Nutrition in External Assistance: an EU Policy Framework’* March 2013.



A new ambitious global sustainable development agenda

50% of undernutrition is associated with infections caused by unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and insufficient hygiene.

A new era has begun for sustainable development. It follows the adoption of a series of landmark international agreements including the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change. These agreements have fundamentally reframed the way in which the international community, including the European Union (EU), will work to achieve poverty eradication, inclusive growth and sustainable development.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embody core European values and interests covering economic, environmental and social pillars of sustainable development with a strong focus on equity. The SDGs are indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable. The EU is poised to play a leading role in the implementation of this ambitious, transformative and universal agenda, especially SDG 2 on hunger and nutrition, SDG 3 on health and wellbeing and SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation.

Food and nutrition security, health and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are intrinsically related and have to be recognised as preconditions for and outcomes of sustainable development. With 50% of undernutrition associated with infections caused by unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and insufficient hygiene,¹ WASH must be integrated into the EU's policies and programming on food and nutrition security, with specific WASH indicators and targets. Similarly, the nutrition sensitivity of WASH programmes should be enhanced in WASH programmes to maximise their nutrition impact.

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The global burden of undernutrition

Despite the progress made in tackling undernutrition over the past decade, today, it is estimated that almost half of all deaths of children under the age of five globally each year – about 3 million – are directly or indirectly related to undernutrition.² Defined as an outcome of insufficient food intake or nutrient absorption and repeated infectious diseases, undernutrition results in stunted growth in children (low height-for-age), wasting (low weight-for-age) and deficiencies in essential micronutrients like iron, vitamin A, zinc and iodine. Globally, 159 million children under five are stunted and 50 million wasted,³ while an estimated 2 billion people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies. The highest rates of undernutrition are reported in Africa, Asia and Oceania.

Undernutrition can affect individuals from before they are born and throughout their lives, spanning across generations. For instance, girls suffering from undernutrition are likely to become undernourished mothers. They are in turn more prone to give birth to low birthweight babies, who are more at risk of dying or becoming stunted. Stunting, a consequence of undernutrition during the first 1,000 days from conception to age two years, has long-lasting and irreversible effects on children's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Stunted children have been shown to perform less well in school than their peers and an estimated 20% less as adults later in life.⁴ The economic consequences of undernutrition are enormous, with losses estimated at 11% of GDP every year in Africa and Asia.⁵ Severe anaemia during pregnancy is also known to increase the risk of preterm delivery – a major cause of neonatal morbidity and mortality globally.

WASH essential for tackling undernutrition

“Nutrition specific actions have a potential for reducing up to 20% of the under-five stunting. The remaining 80% should be tackled by nutrition sensitive actions. One of the most important of these ‘nutrition-sensitive’ interventions is WASH – water, sanitation and hygiene.”

European Commission, water and sanitation policy.⁶

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 50% of undernutrition is associated with infections caused by unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and insufficient hygiene.⁷ WASH-related infections such as diarrhoea, intestinal worms and environmental enteric dysfunction (an inflammatory condition of the intestine) are all highly prevalent among children in low- and middle-income countries. These infections severely hinder the body's ability to absorb and use nutrients, resulting in chronic undernutrition in young children. Children commonly become exposed to these infections through contact with water or soil that has been contaminated by human faeces. It is estimated that one in ten children worldwide still lack access to safe water and one in three lack adequate sanitation.⁸ Without access to adequate WASH, these children continue to be at significant risk of infection and associated undernutrition.

Making the case for WASH and nutrition: key stats and evidence

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 50% of undernutrition is associated with infections caused by unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and insufficient hygiene.¹

Approximately 25% of all stunting (short height for age – a sign of malnutrition) can be attributed to five or more episodes of diarrhoea before the age of two.¹

Almost 60% of cases of diarrhoeal deaths are linked to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene¹

According to a study conducted by the World Bank, open defecation accounts for most, if not all, child stunting in India.¹

Open defecation explains 54% of international variation in child height; by contrast, countries' economic status explains only 29%.¹



How the EU can make a difference

The EU is the biggest development actor in food and nutrition security, and it has taken on a strong leadership role in this area over recent years. The EU's policy on food and nutrition security is outlined in a number of key documents such as the Food Security Policy Framework (2010), corollary Communications on Resilience (2012) and Maternal and Child Nutrition (2013).

The EU is committed to building resilience to food crises and helping countries ensure that no one is left hungry. In 2013, at the Nutrition for Growth Summit in London, the EU committed to reducing stunting by at least 7 million by 2025 and pledged €3.5 billion for the 2014–20 period to achieve this target. €3.1 billion was allocated to nutrition-sensitive interventions to address the underlying and structural causes of undernutrition including WASH, as well as food security, gender equality and education. Yet there is no clear commitment on what proportion should go to the WASH sector. Tracking EU investments in cross-cutting nutrition-sensitive interventions such as WASH will also need to be strengthened for greater transparency and accountability.

The Agenda for Change (2011) recognises the interlinkages between food and nutrition security and water. The catalytic role of water for inclusive growth and sustainable development is confirmed by the EU's investment in water and sanitation – standing at US\$2.5 billion a year – which makes it one of the world's largest donors to the sector. Yet this only accounts for 3.5% of EU institutions' total aid budget and it is significantly less than the allocation by some EU member states – for example, the Czech Republic spends 10.1% of its overseas development assistance (ODA) budget on WASH⁹.

Following the adoption of the Agenda for Change in 2011, the European Commission has more than halved the number of countries it supports on water (including WASH and the management of water for agriculture). As a result, water is now a focal sector in just 13 out of more than 157 partner countries according to national indicative plans for 2014–20.¹⁰

With the adoption of the SDGs, within the framework of Agenda 2030, there is an even greater focus on interlinkages between sectors. It is now time for the EU to refine and scale up the integration of WASH, as a key nutrition-sensitive intervention, within its external action. Key upcoming opportunities to further this will be the mid-term revision of the EU's Multi-Annual Financial Framework and the consultation on the future of the partnership between the EU and Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.

Key recommendations

European Commission

Continue to show political leadership:

- Continue to show political leadership on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and prioritise it within the EU's implementation plan for Agenda 2030 and partnership with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.
- Ensure EU external action supports partner countries to deliver and maintain equitable access to WASH by 2030 or their national target dates.

Ensure adequate financing for WASH:

- Increase the proportion of the aid budget allocated to WASH by 1% every year to bring it in line with member state leaders (for example the Czech Republic allocates 10.1%), targeting assistance to those countries most in need.
- Ensure the effective disbursement of the EU's €3.1 billion pledge for nutrition-sensitive interventions by 2025 – with an adequate proportion being allocated to WASH on the basis of countries' needs and priorities.

Strengthen policy:

- Ensure WASH is integrated into all policies, strategies and plans on food and nutrition security programming with WASH targets and indicators to incentivise progress and vice versa.
- Ensure institutional arrangements enable and enhance collaboration between teams and integration across thematic areas, and support policy coherence for development.

EU delegations

- Ensure EU external assistance is integrated and coherent. WASH should be included as a core component of programming on nutrition and food security.

European Parliament

- Ensure WASH is positioned as a core element in an integrated EU response to eradicating poverty, promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development, including food and nutrition security.
- Hold the European Commission to account on the effective disbursement of the €3.1 billion pledge for nutrition-sensitive interventions by 2020 – with an adequate proportion being allocated to WASH based on countries' needs and priorities.
- Protect the aid budget during the Multiannual Financial Framework mid-term review and ensure that WASH receives an adequate proportion on the basis of partner needs and priorities.

Member states

- Progressively increase the proportion of national aid budgets allocated to WASH by 1% each year, bringing it in line with member state leaders (for example the Czech Republic).
- Fulfil the 0.7% of gross national income to ODA promise well in advance of the Agenda 2030 deadline.
- Ensure WASH is integrated into national international development policies, strategies and plans on food and nutrition security programming, with specific WASH targets and indicators.

References

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