

Nutrition at the heart of international development

ICAN UK RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE FCDO FOR N4G 2025



Photo by Elise Blanchard / Action Against Hunger



Addressing the global malnutrition crisis

The world is facing a malnutrition crisis, the likes of which have no place in the 21st century. The intensification of climate change, conflict, and economic shocks are pushing millions of people into poverty and malnutrition, and risk rolling back decades of progress. 733 million people faced hunger in 2023, 152 million more compared to 2019, while over 2.8 billion people cannot afford a healthy diet¹.

Ensuring adequate nutrition is not only a moral imperative but also a foundational step towards achieving broader health, education and economic outcomes. At least two-thirds, or more than a billion adolescent girls and women suffer from undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and anaemia with devastating consequences for their lives and wellbeing². Nutrition is therefore inextricably linked with gender equality.

Without greater investment in nutrition, the World Bank estimates the economic costs of malnutrition will total \$41 trillion over the next ten years³. The cost in lost lives and lost futures is higher: 6.2 million more child deaths, 27 million more stunted children, 47 million

more episodes of child wasting, and 144 million more cases of maternal anaemia⁴.

In its 2023 Stocktake report⁵, the International Coalition for Advocacy on Nutrition (ICAN) UK highlighted the disproportionate impact of UK ODA cuts on nutrition, with nutrition spending seeing a 60% reduction in 2021, just at the point the world was facing an escalating malnutrition crisis. This has left vulnerable populations at greater risk of hunger and malnutrition, undermined investments in wider human development and greatly hampered the UK's reputation on the world stage.

The 2025 Paris Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit is the crucial moment to change track. Global leaders can make important commitments to tackle the rise in malnutrition, and the UK Government can demonstrate that Britain is back as a key nutrition partner. The UK previously played a leading role in tackling malnutrition by hosting the first ever N4G Summit in 2013, which galvanised commitments for nutrition totalling \$23 billion⁶. By reconnecting with this process and making a strong UK commitment at the 2025 Summit, the UK would not only be investing in life-saving nutrition, it would be accelerating progress across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and demonstrating dedication to global justice and humanitarian principles.



Photo by Moses Sawasawa / Action Against Hunger

The International Coalition for Advocacy on Nutrition (ICAN) UK's recommendations to the UK government for the N4G Summit 2025

Financial asks:

1. Commit to invest at least £500 million in nutrition-specific⁷ programmes between 2025-2030
2. Maximise impact of spending in other key areas, including health, agriculture and climate by ensuring at least £2.5 billion of ODA is nutrition-sensitive between 2025-2030.

Policy asks:

1. Set an ambition to reach at least 50 million children, women and adolescent girls with nutrition related interventions by 2030 and report yearly on how many people are reached with nutrition-specific interventions⁸
2. Integrate nutrition across development sectors, to make meaningful progress in tackling the underlying causes of malnutrition. This includes setting ambitious targets for integrating nutrition across climate, agriculture, health, WASH and social protection; and to increase nutrition-sensitive spending in these sectors in line with previous best practice⁹
3. Put gender equality at the heart of nutrition programmes by ensuring that at least 90% of nutrition spending is gender-sensitive
4. Build on the UK's nutrition policy expertise by partnering with governments and research institutions to fund research in key areas such as preventing malnutrition, child wasting, adolescent nutrition and immunisation-nutrition integration
5. Lead global accountability efforts by funding the Global Nutrition Report to enhance the Nutrition Accountability Framework, a critical tool to ensure governments follow through on their N4G commitments
6. Strengthen partnerships with local civil society organisations so they can advocate for nutrition to their governments. Embed an advocacy component within FCDO nutrition programmes and commit to fund the Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Network.

The case for investment in nutrition

The need for urgent action on nutrition is stark:

- 45% of deaths of children under five are linked to malnutrition¹⁰
- 45 million children suffer from wasting, the most life-threatening form of malnutrition¹¹
- 148 million children are stunted, impacting their long-term health and development¹²
- The rate of anaemia is increasing, affecting 3 in 10 women globally¹³

Each year, the cost of inaction on malnutrition results in an estimated:

- \$4.1 trillion in global economic and social costs¹⁴
- 1.3 million deaths of children under five¹⁵
- 304 million IQ points lost¹⁶

Yet, investment in nutrition offers unparalleled returns:

- Every \$1 invested in addressing malnutrition yields \$23 in returns¹⁷.

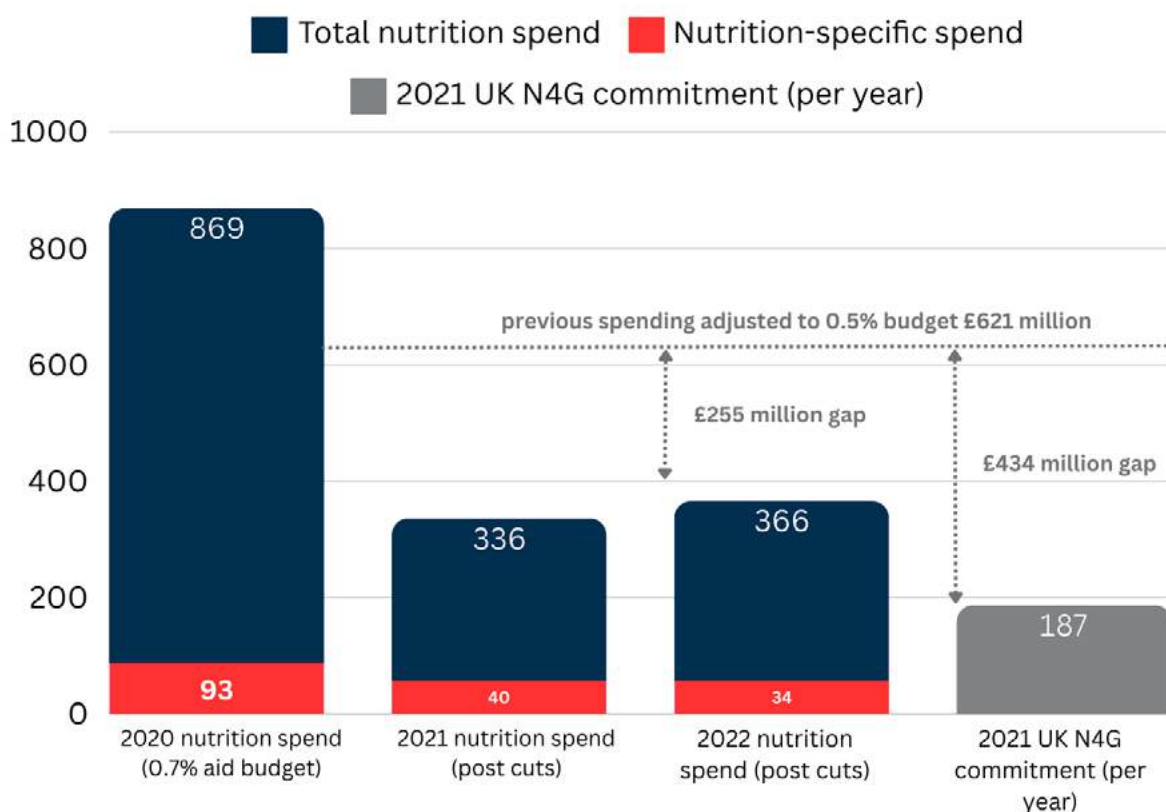
UK aid for nutrition was disproportionately impacted by the UK aid cuts, dropping from a total of £869 million in 2020 to £336 million in 2021; a 60% reduction¹⁸.

If nutrition spend had reduced in line with the overall aid budget then yearly spend should be circa £621 million, exposing a significant shortfall. Further, the UK's N4G commitment to nutrition following the 2021 N4G summit amounts to just £187 million per year, putting the nutrition budget at risk of further cuts in future years.

Nutrition-specific investments: opportunity to save lives through nutrition

Nutrition-specific programmes target the immediate causes of malnutrition and are often delivered through health systems. They are some of the most cost-effective, life-saving interventions, such as treatment for acute malnutrition, provision of micronutrient supplements and support for breastfeeding.

Total UK aid for nutrition pre & post aid cuts (£ millions)



Source: Accounting FCDO's Progress Against its Nutrition Pledges (p12). Available at: https://media.globalnutritionreport.org/documents/Accounting_Progress_Against_FCDOs_Nutrition_Pledges_Final.pdf

FCDO's spending on nutrition-specific interventions has decreased from £144.5 million in 2017 to £34.4 million in 2022, the lowest levels since 2011¹⁹. As a priority, the UK must restore nutrition-specific spending to previous levels, which averaged over £107 million a year between 2015-2020²⁰. Taking into consideration the current ODA budget, ICAN UK believes the UK should budget for £500 million on nutrition-specific spend over the next five years, accounting for £80 million in 2025 and a gradual increase as the ODA budget grows in future years.

Funding should be targeted to the populations most at risk of malnutrition, including women, adolescents and children under five, people with disabilities and communities living in fragile contexts. To ensure sustainability, FCDO should also align behind government-led nutrition plans and work collaboratively with other stakeholders to ensure a joined up approach.

With £500 million focussed on high-impact nutrition-specific interventions, the FCDO could avert:

- 25,000 child deaths
- 105,000 cases of stunting
- 184,000 episodes of child wasting
- 27,000 babies born with low birth weight
- 300,000 cases of anaemia in children under five
- 563,000 cases of maternal anaemia

This would also generate an estimated £11.5 billion in economic benefits via improved global productivity and decreased health and social costs²¹.

Maximising the impact of UK ODA with nutrition-sensitive programmes

By ensuring spending in other departments aligns with nutrition objectives, FCDO can deliver maximal impact for minimal additional investment. Nutrition-sensitive programmes target the underlying causes of malnutrition but can also have a positive impact for the sector they are focused on. For example, making FCDO's investments in agriculture and climate more nutrition-sensitive could lead to healthier diets, lower emissions and more climate resilient food systems.

In 2020, the FCDO made £776 million of its spend in other departments nutrition-sensitive. In 2021 this dropped to £297 million and £332 million in 2022²². In times of a challenging budget, it is imperative to maximise investments. If the UK committed to make approximately £500 million per year nutrition-sensitive (£2.5 billion over five years), this would restore nutrition-sensitive spending to previous levels, proportionate to the current ODA budget.

Table: levels of nutrition-sensitive spend in key sectors, 2019-22

	Health	Agriculture & Food security	WASH	Other social services	ICF
2019	8%	20%	5%	16%	7%
2020	10%	22%	9%	12%	6%
2021	11%	13%	14%	12%	5%
2022	4%	15%	14%	9%	3%
Highpoint	11%	22%	14%	16%	7%

Source: FCDO's aid spending for nutrition reports, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022. Available at: [FCDO's aid spending for nutrition: 2019](#), [FCDO's aid spending for nutrition: 2020 - Development Initiatives](#), [FCDO's aid spending for nutrition: 2021 - Development Initiatives](#), [Accounting FCDO's Progress Against its Nutrition Pledges](#).

The UK adoption of the OECD DAC Nutrition Policy Marker in 2021 has led to progress in integrating nutrition into FCDO programs, but greater integration of nutrition objectives into non-nutrition programmes during design is recommended to improve impact, value for money, and the quality and quantity of nutrition-sensitive spending.

Addressing the malnutrition gender gap

Malnutrition disproportionately affects women and girls. More than 1 billion women experience at least one form of malnutrition, with higher rates of anaemia, overweight and obesity than men. Nutrition is an essential tool to support them to achieve equal health and education outcomes. It means that good nutrition cannot be achieved without tackling gender inequality.

Even though women and girls have specific nutritional needs, they are more likely to eat last and least²³. Pregnant and lactating women have particularly important nutrition needs and yet around 30% of women of reproductive age are anaemic²⁴, which increases risks for maternal deaths and pregnancy complications²⁵. Poor maternal nutrition is a key driver of low birthweight, which in turn can lead to poor growth and cognitive deficits in childhood, and lower productivity and income in adulthood²⁶.

By supporting a gender-sensitive approach to nutrition programming, the FCDO can help break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition for all, and progress the rights of women and girls. This is particularly true if women and girls are included in the design, monitoring and evaluation of nutrition programmes.

Integrating nutrition into health

Achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and building strong health systems are vital to ending malnutrition, and will not be achieved without interventions that effectively address malnutrition. For example, integrating treatment for intestinal worm infections that affect over 1 billion people worldwide can enable health systems to simultaneously address multiple health and nutrition determinants, optimise resource allocation and improve coordinated, holistic care. The integration of nutrition and immunisation is particularly crucial, given

Mary and her daughter Flocy, from Balaka District in Malawi, improved their lives through Save the Children's Maziko project, funded partly by UK Aid via the Power of Nutrition, which combines cash transfers with guidance on nutrition and child development.

Photo by Sam Vox / Save the Children



that malnutrition reduces immune response and increases risk of serious infection and death. There is growing evidence of this being a cost-effective approach and one that can also improve care-seeking behaviours and coverage of both services²⁷. The UK can drive further progress by supporting research into effective ways of integrating nutrition and immunisation services.

Nutrition-sensitive, climate resilient food systems

With 733 million²⁸ people estimated to be undernourished worldwide, it is clear that food systems are not working to deliver healthy and sustainable diets. The agrifood sector causes 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions, with ultra-processed foods responsible for a significant proportion of this. The food system also generates \$12 trillion in hidden costs annually, including \$1.8 trillion from undernutrition and \$2.7 trillion from obesity-related diseases²⁹. Supporting the production and consumption of nutritious diets has benefits across health, nutrition, economic and climate sectors. For instance, when FCDO supports smallholder farmers, particularly women, to grow diverse, nutritious crops, it simultaneously improves household nutrition and income generation, while ensuring lower emissions.

The link between Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and malnutrition

50% of undernutrition is linked to poor WASH conditions³⁰. Poor WASH impacts on nutrition in multiple ways, including directly through biological pathways such as diarrhoea and intestinal worm infections. By integrating nutrition and WASH programming, FCDO can maximise impact on child growth and development while achieving greater cost-effectiveness than through standalone programmes³¹.

The importance of nutrition in humanitarian response

Fragile and conflict affected contexts present some of the highest rates of hunger and malnutrition globally. Up to 21,000 people are

at risk of dying each day from hunger and malnutrition in countries affected by conflict³². In places like Sudan and Gaza, children are especially at risk, due to the deadly combination of malnutrition and disease. Once a child has become severely acutely malnourished, food alone is not enough and they may need specially formulated foods, antibiotics and other medical care. It is critical that child health and nutrition services are included within humanitarian response in order to save lives³³.

Localisation

In addition to ODA investment, the UK can also support governments to increase their fiscal space for nutrition through championing efforts to tackle the debt crisis, creating a fairer global tax system and supporting the reform of multilateral development banks.

However, to secure lasting progress, it's also important to strengthen partnerships with local civil society organisations so they can effectively advocate to their governments for action on nutrition. The Scaling Up Nutrition Civil Society Network (SUN CSN) gathers more than 5,000 civil society organisations operating in over 60 countries and works to empower local actors to drive sustainable, community-led solutions that are culturally relevant and adaptable to local needs³⁴. The UK previously funded the SUN CSN but stopped in 2021. By adequately investing in the SUN CSN (providing at least £755,000 per year) and by embedding local advocacy across FCDO's nutrition programming, FCDO can catalyse sustained progress on nutrition.

Accountability

To support civil society to hold governments accountable for their commitments, FCDO can also play a vital role in funding the Global Nutrition Report (GNR) and advocating for a portion of each financial N4G commitment (including FCDO's) to be dedicated to accountability. The GNR manages the Nutrition Accountability Framework, which is a key tool for monitoring progress against N4G commitments³⁵.

Summary

The Paris N4G Summit 2025 is a crucial opportunity to pledge commitments that will help reverse the rise in malnutrition, with outcomes that will be decisive for the future health, development, and economic potential of millions of people worldwide. A strong UK commitment to tackle malnutrition at the Summit is essential to enhance the returns on the UK's investments in other development

initiatives, leveraging its diplomatic network, research institutions, and civil society partnerships. By championing evidence-based approaches, working with local advocates and civil society organisations, and supporting robust accountability mechanisms, the UK can ensure global nutrition investments deliver maximum impact, reflecting its values and vital role in building a sustainable, equitable, and healthy world.

The MUAC measurement of a young boy is taken by a Community Mobiliser from Action Against Hunger in Nguer-nguer, Senegal.

Photo by Guy Peterson / Action Against Hunger



Endnotes

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- 20** ICAN UK calculations based on figures from the Nutrition Action for Systemic Change (NASC) Technical Assistance Facility, Accounting FCDO's Progress Against its Nutrition Pledges, 2024. Available at: [Accounting FCDO's Progress Against its Nutrition Pledges](#)
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