



PRESS RELEASE

1 in 2 children and 2 in 3 women worldwide affected by micronutrient deficiencies

Food systems reform is needed to ensure provision of vitamin and minerals globally

Geneva, 11 October 2022 - Research published today in *Lancet Global Health* [link to article] indicates that 1 in 2 preschool-aged children and 2 in 3 women of reproductive age worldwide are affected by vitamin and mineral deficiencies (often referred to as “hidden hunger”). For decades it was widely believed that 2 billion suffer from this hidden hunger. But these new findings on just women and young children—who make up just one third of the total population worldwide—suggest the number is far larger once we include all the school-age children, adolescents, men, and older adults excluded from this analysis due to data gaps.

The research, “Micronutrient deficiencies among preschool-aged children and women of reproductive age worldwide” was a collaborative project led by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), through the USAID Advancing Nutrition project, along with a team of global micronutrient experts, including an Advisory Panel brought together by the Micronutrient Forum. Each step of the analysis was vetted through a formal process and then the paper went through rigorous peer review in a leading global health journal.

[Lynnette Neufeld, Director of Food and Nutrition Division at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\)](#) said, “Diets that don’t provide the right levels of vitamins and minerals can compromise your immune system, impair your cognition and school performance, decrease your work productivity, and may contribute to risks of non-communicable diseases such as heart problems. This is a widespread problem, impacting individuals, families and communities everywhere in the world, although particularly in lower income countries.”

Micronutrient deficiencies are highest in lower income countries because diets often lack a diversity of nutrient-rich foods and tend to rely on a large share of calories from rice, wheat, maize or similar staple foods. In fact, nine in 10 women in several countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are deficient. However, deficiencies are surprisingly high even in high-income countries. In the US and the UK, for example, between one third and one half of women of reproductive age are deficient in one or more micronutrients. In high-income countries this is likely the result of diets high in processed but micronutrient poor foods, rather than reliance on a single staple as in many lower income countries.

[According to Saskia Osendarp, Executive Director, Micronutrient Forum](#), “There are very clear solutions. We need to ensure everyone has access to a variety of micronutrient dense foods, including animal-source foods, dark green leafy vegetables and beans, lentils or peas. Food fortification can help make up the difference when healthy diets are unaffordable or inaccessible. Health programs can provide supplements to those with extra needs, such as pregnant women and malnourished children.”

It might sound simple, but realizing these solutions is not easy because our food systems are not fit for purpose, and increasingly less so. These issues have existed for a long time—and urgently need to be addressed. The issues are now exacerbated by the long-term impact of climate change, the lasting damage to supply chains caused by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and the imminent economic downturn, all coming together to create major challenges. All of us have to work together, now, to implement lasting solutions to ensure everyone has the nutritious and healthy diet they need to reach their potential now and in the future.

Many solutions are already available. Accessibility and affordability can be addressed by prioritizing productivity and diversity of a variety of nutritious crops, improving the sustainability of livestock production, developing crops that are more nutritious and drought-resilient (“biofortification”), reducing trade and transportation costs and improving markets. Those in situations of vulnerability often require direct assistance through social protection programmes such as cash transfers and subsidies for micronutrient dense foods.

And GAIN's Executive Director Lawrence Haddad concluded, “This new paper is a game changer. Hidden hunger is likely to affect nearly half the people on the planet, not a quarter as we had previously and rather complacently assumed. In particular, our failure to nourish the youngest will undermine public health and haunt us socially, economically, environmentally and politically down the generations. All corners of society, led by governments, need to tackle the burden of hidden hunger, via all the channels available. Personally, these findings throw down the gauntlet to GAIN and to all organisations working for a world without malnutrition. We all have to work together and rise to the challenge.”

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