



Nutrition International

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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19: AN UNPRECEDENTED GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS

The spread of COVID-19, an unprecedented health emergency, has triggered an economic crisis touching nearly every corner of the world. Global economic shutdowns and disrupted supply chains have devastated incomes. In turn, reduced purchasing power has further limited access to nutritious food for millions of the world's most vulnerable people.

Governments have diverted limited health and nutrition resources to treating immediate medical needs, to the detriment of essential routine care. Fear and misinformation are keeping those who need it from seeking the preventive or curative care they need, putting millions of lives at risk. Combined, these factors have put the world on the brink of a malnutrition crisis which has the potential to be even more devastating than COVID-19 itself.

Recent studies from Johns Hopkins University forecast that COVID-19 disruptions could increase child mortality by as much as 45 percent and maternal mortality by nearly 40 percent. Without immediate action to support basic health and nutrition services, up to 1.2 million additional children and nearly 60,000 mothers could die from preventable causes in the next 6 months alone. Despite these being early findings, the researchers had a clear message: "If routine health care is disrupted and access to food is decreased the increase in child and maternal deaths will be devastating."

What is also clear is that this is not a problem that we can afford to ignore because it is 'out of sight and out of mind.' The spread of COVID-19 has shown that we live in a borderless world where global health is a local issue affecting all of us. Additional waves of infection pose a serious threat to not only the health but also the economic prosperity of all Canadians. Continued disruption of supply chains, trade and global tourism will exact a steep toll until the virus is defeated – everywhere.

COVID-19 compels an immediate response to protect the most vulnerable, namely pregnant women, children, adolescents and frontline health workers. It is also an opportunity. It is a finite window to change the way we approach development, to build towards more modern and equitable health systems that bring services closer to the people that need them, and to accelerate evidence-backed action in key areas that will have the largest impacts. Canada is a global leader in nutrition for women and girls, a position it can elevate and leverage into concrete results.

The following brief outlines how COVID-19 has exacerbated global rates of malnutrition, how Canada is responding to the pandemic through both programmatic and political action, and where Canada needs to lead moving forward, rooted in our strengths, to prevent an acute pandemic from becoming a prolonged emergency.



Impact of COVID on malnutrition

The severity of the coronavirus, strain on health services, devastation of international trade and implications of social distancing measures are causing ripple effects across economies, and introducing new threats to health and wellbeing, particularly for the world's most vulnerable. Millions of people living in poverty are heavily impacted by the pandemic and its aftershocks, not only because of crowded conditions where handwashing and social distancing are a challenge, but also because so many are immunocompromised or more vulnerable due to underlying conditions, often caused by malnutrition.

Good nutrition is the foundation of good health and immunity, educational attainment, women's empowerment and human capital. Children who are adequately nourished in the first 1,000 days between conception and the age of two are more resilient to disease, do better in school, earn 20 percent more in the labour market, and are 33 percent less likely to live in poverty as adults. By contrast, malnutrition threatens lives, compromises immunity, weakens cognitive and physical development, and hampers social and economic development. Nowhere has this been more true than during the COVID-19 crisis.

Access to life-saving vitamin A supplementation at risk

Nearly 30 years ago, Canada recognized the devastating effects of malnutrition on women and children around the world. In response, Canada created Nutrition International, with an initial mandate to save children's lives through global vitamin A distribution, which boosts childhood immunity to disease and decreases child mortality by up to 28%. 30 years on, and Canada through Nutrition International provides 75% of the global supply of Vitamin A annually to over 60 countries, reaching 150M children per year.

COVID-19 has caused as many as 100 million children under 5 to miss their first of two annual rounds of vitamin A supplementation due to lockdowns and reallocations of resources. 60 million children are at risk of missing their second. Without the significant immunity boost provided by vitamin A, many of these children will be risk of dying from preventable causes such as measles, pneumonia or diarrhoea. Others will suffer repeated illnesses, stunting their growth and development and putting them off track for life. These children are already at risk of death, disease and disability, their immune systems compromised precisely when they need them at their strongest.



Women and children will bear the brunt of the crisis for years to come.

One billion women and girls were malnourished prior to the crisis; COVID-19 is exacerbating and deepening the health risks they face. Lockdowns, job losses, lower income and shifting power dynamics within the household are placing women at even higher risk of malnutrition, even as the burden of caregiving for sick family and children not at school increases.

Overwhelmed health services, diverted funding, reduced mobility and fear are hampering women's and children's access to health services, with long-term repercussions:

For all women, adolescent girls, and children worldwide, COVID-19 is compounding a pre-existing malnutrition rates, and driving increased rates of maternal, child and adolescent anaemia. Anaemia is a leading cause of death for pregnant teenagers and the leading cause of disability for adolescent girls. Anaemia during pregnancy, for all women, threatens the health and in severe cases survival of both mother and infant, and impacts their long-term capacity to learn and earn.

For expecting mothers, poor quality diets coupled with lack of access to antenatal health and nutrition care are placing women at risk for life-threatening pregnancy complications, and will threaten their babies' survival, cognitive development and immunity.

For infants and children, poor quality diets and lack of access to critical nutrition services is reducing their ability to fight diseases like measles, diarrhoea and pneumonia, and impede their cognitive development, which will stunt their ability to learn in school and limit their opportunities – for life.

For frontline health workers, 70% of whom are women, working in healthcare situations without proper Personal Protective Equipment means greater risk of exposure while the systems built to support them are failing.

For all women, increased levels of gender-based violence, reduced access to education due to school closures and basic sexual and reproductive health services, such as for contraception, will set back gains in gender equality for many years to come.

NUTRITION INTERNATIONAL: A GLOBAL NUTRITION ORGANIZATION

Headquartered in Canada, since 1992 we have focused on delivering low-cost, high-impact, nutrition interventions to people in need. Working alongside governments as an expert ally, we combine deep technical expertise with a flexible approach, increasing impact without increasing complexity or cost. We serve as a force multiplier across the development ecosystem, using our unique combination of capabilities to help countries overcome barriers to scaling up nutrition, domestic resource mobilization as well as local government capacity and ownership.

Many development activities are siloed by competitive institutional mandates, the availability of financing, donor preferences or sectoral boundaries – rather than driven by the best interests of the people they are meant to serve. NI seeks to break these silos in pursuit of a “no missed opportunities approach.”



CANADA'S NUTRITION RESPONSE TO COVID-19: Political and Programmatic Leadership


Past crises have taught us, in some cases at great cost, that nutrition cannot wait. Vulnerable people – pregnant and lactating women, and children under five in particular – need the right nutrition at the right time, and more than can be provided through diet alone. Without it, their health, their education, their life-long development, and their lives are at risk.

Canada has a multi-decade bipartisan legacy of global nutrition results and leadership, having invested in low-cost, high impact, proven, scalable interventions that save lives and secure futures. It is using that leadership now, programmatically, and diplomatically, to lead by example and rally others to act. To meet the global need, however, and save lives, protect development gains, and ensure the next generation of children have the nutrition they need to survive and thrive, more investment and action is required.

Nutrition International: **Actions to date**

Canada has taken action to address global malnutrition through Nutrition International, and the adaptations we have made to existing programming funded through the Global Affairs Canada's Institutional Support Grant. With Canada's support, Nutrition International continues to:

- **Protect maternal survival:** Adapting current programming to ensure that pregnant women continue to receive critical health check-ups, nutrition counselling and micronutrient supplements they need to have a healthy pregnancy and birth
- **Ensure child survival:** Adapting current programming to ensure children under five receive lifesaving nutrition services such as Vitamin A Supplementation (VAS) and zinc and Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) to combat diarrhoea
- **Support Frontline Health Workers:** Improving the capacity of frontline health workers, including birth attendants, to deliver home-based and community-based care through innovative approaches, additional training and updated guidance
- **Adapt Nutrition and Food Security Responses:** Ensuring nutrition interventions are integrated into food security response and COVID-19 health messages are integrated into existing nutrition interventions

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- **Inform Government Decision Making:** Improve access to real-time data to support country-level and global decision making to get the most impact out of limited resources
 - **Improve Resilience and Preparedness:** Generate evidence and guidance on the effect of emergency responses on nutritional and health outcomes to inform preparedness and future pandemic and emergency response

CANADIAN LEADERSHIP IN ACTION: N4G SPRINGBOARD 2020

Canada has also stepped up to provide critical global leadership and diplomacy to ensure other donors and countries continue to prioritize nutrition, especially in the wake of the postponement of the Nutrition for Growth Summit (N4G) – a key moment for renewing global commitments to nutrition that were sunsetting this year. In response, Canada has stepped up to host an N4G Year of Mobilization launch event in December 2020 to underscore the importance of nutrition for COVID recovery, kickstart a year of global nutrition commitment making, and put women, adolescent girls and children at the heart of the nutrition agenda.

The Springboard represents an opportunity for Canada to cast a clear vision of Canada's nutrition priorities and rally like-minded partners around them. Doing so will help drive progress on women, adolescent girls and children, produce increased leverage for every Canadian dollar invested, and demonstrate visible global leadership to Canadians at home and our allies abroad.

Canada's leadership comes at a crucial time for global nutrition. Prioritization of nutrition is slipping just as malnutrition rates are rising, exacerbated by COVID-19 and its pressure on health budgets. By leading at the outset of a year of mobilization for Nutrition for Growth, as donors and countries alike turn their attention to recovery efforts with the emergence of viable vaccines, Canada's leadership will not only ensure nutrition remains high on the agenda, but also shape and influence the investments of others, leveraging its longstanding, bi-partisan commitment for global political impact.

There is still much to be done.

Canadians should be proud of the strategic global leadership role that Canada is playing as part of the Canada's global response. However, there is still much to be done to address urgent nutrition needs and pave the way for a just and equitable recovery from COVID-19.



Canada should therefore:

1. **Concentrate action where Canada can translate track record into influence and limited resources into high impact results - anaemia.**

Anaemia is a serious global public health problem that disproportionately affects women, adolescent girls and young children. COVID-19 has exacerbated its rates, severity and impact. Addressing anaemia is essential to ensuring an acute crisis does not become a prolonged emergency. It is anemic pregnant women, their children and adolescent girls who will experience the feared rollback in development gains across multiple dimensions of their lives – their health, their capacity to learn, their capacity to earn, and their capacity to lead. If we can get anemia under control globally, we will protect against such losses, put countries back on track, and make all of our other investments – in vaccines, in education, in health systems, in gender equality – more effective.

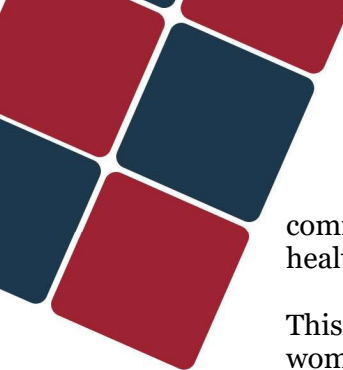
2. **Invest to close the gap on vitamin A.** Canada's Global Vitamin A Supplementation Program is one of the most successful public health interventions ever brought to global scale – **saving the lives of over five million children to date**. Canada, through Nutrition International, has been the largest procurer of vitamin A capsules for the past 25 years, with up to 75 percent of the world's global supply being produced by two Canadian businesses in Ontario.

Even before COVID-19 took its toll, many countries were struggling to maintain high two-dose coverage of vitamin A supplementation (VAS). The scale of the systems disruption caused by the pandemic, and the immediate result it has had on increasing the vulnerability of children across Africa and South Asia has taught us that resilience in essential life-saving programs such as VAS is urgently needed. The time is now to begin the road toward closing the gap, and preventing the repeat need for emergency response tactics.

As Nutrition International has learned by chairing and hosting the Global Alliance for Vitamin A, if you want to drive progress, avoid duplication, and address bottlenecks and barriers as they arise – it is critical to have a global coordination mechanism that is fueled by good data, technical knowledge, the capacity to translate data and evidence into investment-ready and prioritized plans, and strong partnerships across leading agencies.

Towards a Global Recovery

Canada is *the* global leader on nutrition for women, children and adolescent girls. COVID-19 provides an opportunity to solidify that position by leading a fundamental shift in how the world delivers development – supporting stronger, healthier people,



communities, and countries better able to withstand future shocks – be they economic, health or environmental.

This is a moment to build towards more modern, equitable health systems that put women and children at the center and bring services closer to the people they exist to serve – particularly in remote or fragile environments. It is an opportunity to improve country-level decision making and support evidence-based planning, reducing the impact of this crisis and better preparing countries for the future. Most importantly, it is a unique opportunity for Canadian leadership to accelerate action on the two global nutrition challenges that have the greatest impact on women and children worldwide: vitamin A deficiency and anaemia.

In the midst of ongoing global health uncertainty, COVID-19 has united the world against a common enemy and towards a common purpose. Trusted partners and committed multilateralists like Canada have a significant leadership role to play. Canada has already taken critical strides forward in addressing the crisis; now is the time for vital leadership to stem the tide of preventable death, and ensure that the new post COVID world is one in which all people are truly able to survive and thrive.