

# NUTRITION QUICK TIPS SERIES



## EDUCATION AND NUTRITION

### Introduction

There is clear evidence that a child's nutritional status directly impacts on their cognitive development and learning potential. Furthermore, good nutrition and access to quality education is the basic right of every child as well as achieving the targets of SDG2 and SDG4. The effectiveness of all nutrition-related interventions depends upon **generating awareness** and knowledge of the **importance of nutrition to human**

**development.** It is also about empowering people to make the best possible choices regarding their diet, nutrition and health as well as those of people they care for. This is particularly important for women of reproductive age, adolescents and school-age children who are the principal agents and drivers behind achieving better nutrition outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

### WHY EDUCATION AND NUTRITION?

Because when...



Good nutrition is essential for **the right start in life** especially during pregnancy and infancy. Mothers who have had access to childhood education are more inclined to use maternal health services and apply recommended infant and young child feeding practices. Good nutrition at a young age enables children to benefit from early childhood education and contributes to better school attendance, attention span and cognitive development. This in turn offers better employment, livelihood opportunities and life choices as an adult. Likewise, good education is crucial for social, political and economic empowerment of girls and boys, thereby breaking the cycle of chronic malnutrition<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See introductory Quick Tip

<sup>2</sup> Strengthening Education-Nutrition Links in EU External Assistance: an evidence-based planning resource, European Commission September 2016.



## POOR NUTRITION CAN HAVE A HUGE IMPACT ON BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

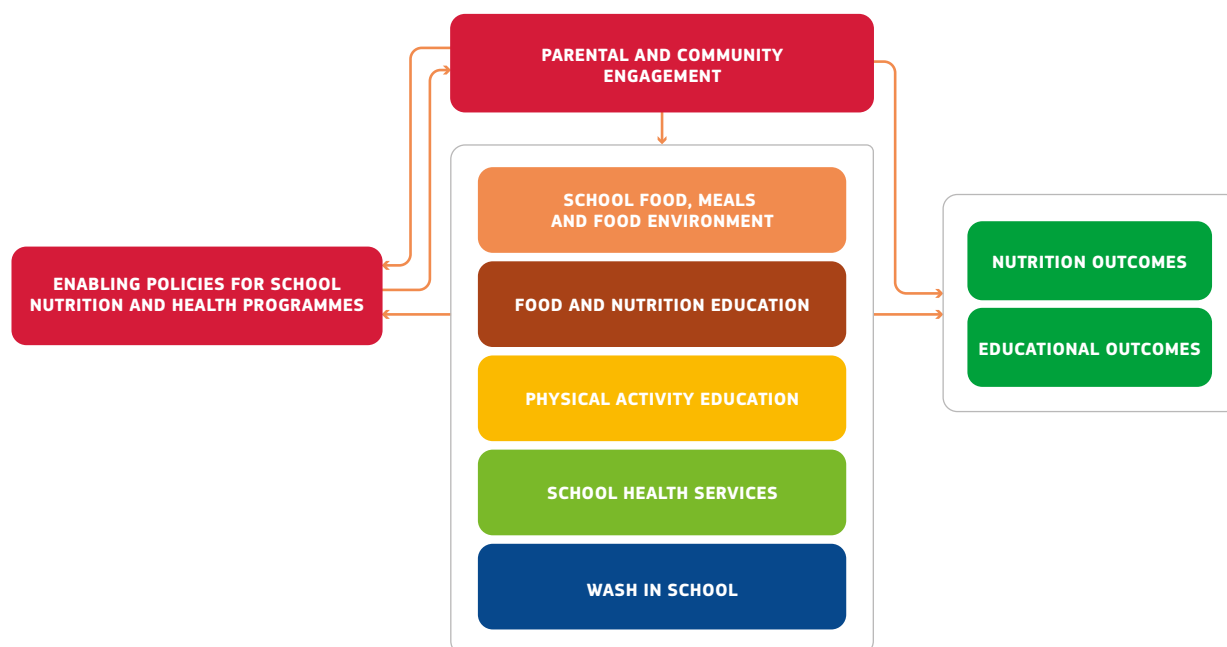


**Cognitive development** describes the process of progressive building of intelligence, conscious thinking and problem-solving abilities. Cognitive development begins in infancy and is particularly key in early childhood when all important domains of the brain develop. Undernutrition in early childhood can affect brain structure and function and can prevent children reaching full cognitive potential<sup>3</sup>.

The correlation between nutrition and children's cognitive development demonstrates how important it is for **education stakeholders** at all levels to be aware and engaged in delivering the agenda on better nutrition. This crucially starts in the years of early childhood development when the impact of good nutrition as well as safe and stimulating childcare can be most significant

and should continue through the progressive school cycles. There is increasing research to suggest that by integrating nutrition into school curricula and building the knowledge and capacity of education staff to deliver on this agenda, the education sector can build the foundation for multi-sectoral efforts to reach key nutrition outcomes<sup>4</sup>.

Schools can be an ideal platform for the delivery of a range of nutrition-related interventions to school-aged children (and their parents) at both primary and secondary levels, which can help improve both nutrition and educational outcomes. The figure below outlines the principal components of a **comprehensive framework for health, nutrition and education**.



Source: Yiru Xu, Y., et al., *Integrating nutrition into the education sector in low and middle-income countries: a framework for a win-win collaboration*, *Maternal & Child Nutrition*, February 2021

<sup>3</sup> Grantham-McGregor, S. Y. Cheung, S. Cueto, P. Glewwe, L. Richter, L. Strupp (2007). Developmental potential in the first 5 years for children in developing countries. *Lancet*, 369 (2007), pp. 60–70.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF (2014a). Multi-sectoral approaches to nutrition. The case for investment by education programmes. UNICEF & EU.

Of particular importance here is **nutrition and health education** including both knowledge-based education on topics of food, nutrition, health and hygiene, and skills-based education through practical experience in the school environment, such as tending school gardens, physical exercise and maintaining good levels of sanitation and hygiene. Such interventions have been shown to improve knowledge, diet quality and nutrition status<sup>5</sup>.

In contrast to comprehensive nutrition and health programmes in schools, providing school meals to children through **school feeding programmes (SFPs)** is now widely implemented. These programmes can be costly and require essential standards of water and sanitation to meet food safety conditions. The strongest evidence of positive outcomes exists regarding enrolment and attendance especially of girls who might not otherwise be in school. However, evidence on impact regarding improved learning outcomes and nutrition status is generally weak<sup>6</sup>.

Also, the scale and quality of SFPs is lowest in countries facing the greatest nutritional challenges and are mostly reliant on external support and not sustainable. This has serious political and resource implications for both national and local government authorities when external assistance is withdrawn.

Evidence indicates that educating future mothers is the most important determinant of children's health, nutritional and educational status. Consequently, there is increasing attention towards achieving better **child and adolescent education and nutrition**, particularly of girls, since this forms the foundation of healthy growth, development and reduces susceptibility to

disease in the next generation<sup>7</sup>. However, it is often the case that those most vulnerable to conflict, poverty and malnutrition are unable to access or continue school and also least likely to benefit from SFPs. Furthermore, girls are more likely to be excluded from schools than boys<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, nutrition in schools must be one component of a broader national commitment and multi-sectoral framework for tackling the range of challenges presented by child malnutrition. Access to higher education (including technical and vocational education and training), especially for young females, is equally important as it contributes to their development, employment opportunities and life choices.

The education sector is also well placed to play a key role in the mitigation and prevention of all forms of malnutrition, including **overweight and obesity**. There are now 38.8 million children under five with overweight globally (an increase of 6 million since 2000)<sup>9</sup>, so school-based interventions need to take account of 'double-duty actions', relating to both undernutrition and overweight<sup>10</sup>. Child overweight is shaped by industry marketing and access to processed foods, along with inadequate physical activity, which can lead to obesity and noncommunicable diseases later in life. Consequently, there is concern about the increasing engagement of the private sector marketing food and drinks within the school food environment which includes vendors close to schools as well as within school facilities. This raises many questions about the most appropriate role of the private sector given that their commercial interests often run counter to government and civil society efforts to promote healthier diets<sup>11</sup>.

## The European Union

The EU and Member States recognise that investments to improve health, nutrition and education strengthen individuals' physical, cognitive and productive capability as well as their wellbeing<sup>12</sup>. Through its Action Plan on Nutrition, the European Commission supports the inclusion/development of nutrition in the objectives of education policies and in core school curricula at both primary and secondary levels. A particular focus of attention is *to improve access to quality education of adolescent girls*. Furthermore, the European Commission supports the introduction of nutrition courses through universities and other tertiary institutions to build a cohort of personnel who can then

work through extension services – such as agriculture, health, social protection and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) – to support improved nutrition amongst vulnerable groups.

The European Commission has recently adopted a Strategy on the Rights of the Child<sup>13</sup> which aims to secure access to basic services such as education and health for vulnerable children. Furthermore, at least ten per cent of the INTPA budget is targeted for the education sector and 10% of the EU humanitarian budget is allocated to education in emergencies.

5 Yiru Xu, Y. et al, Integrating nutrition into the education sector in low and middle-income countries: a framework for a win-win collaboration, February 2021.

6 Strengthening Education-Nutrition Links in EU External Assistance: an evidence-based planning resource, September 2016.

7 Adolescent Nutrition, Current Progress and Looking Ahead, Meeting Report, February 2021.

8 Almost one-third of adolescents of secondary school age in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and West Asia do not attend school (UNFPA, 2013b).

9 UNICEF, WHO, World Bank group, Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates 2021.

10 WHO Policy Brief on Double-duty actions for nutrition: [WHO-NMH-NHD-17.2-eng.pdf](#)

11 Hawkes, C., Promoting healthy diets through nutrition education and changes in the food environment: an international review of actions and their effectiveness, FAO 2013.

12 EU Council Conclusions on the Fourth Progress Report on the Action Plan on Nutrition, 25 November 2019.

13 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en)

# Strategies for building better nutrition education



## Build nutrition knowledge at an early age within the community

- Capitalise on existing knowledge of local and traditional foods and practices conducive to better nutrition and develop appropriate tools and resources for broader dissemination.
- Support social behaviour change and communication (SBCC) at community level including nutrition, infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices (breastfeeding and complementary feeding), health and hygiene.
- Support early childhood development (ECD)<sup>14</sup>: childcare and pre-school programmes focused on early child growth and development (combining health and/or nutrition interventions with stimulating childcare) as well as education and support to parents and caregivers<sup>15</sup>.
- Build knowledge and behaviour-focused capacity across community development and social workers, pre-school teachers and parents on basic nutrition, healthy diets and life skills.



## Integrate nutrition into school and education programmes

- Integrate basic nutrition principles and practices (health and hygiene, childcare, healthy food choices, dietary diversity) into primary and secondary levels.
- Support teacher training and education on nutrition and healthy diets.
- Promote physical education programmes in schools.
- Integrate school-based WASH interventions (access to safe water, sanitation services and promotion of improved hygiene) including suitable and segregated WASH facilities for girls.
- Consider school gardening<sup>16</sup> as an educational and recreational tool and link this to home-grown school feeding programmes where appropriate.
- Make the school environment conducive to safe food, better nutrition and diets through training of support staff, vendors, parents etc.
- Support efforts to reduce the marketing and access to unhealthy foods and drinks to school-age children and to introduce legislation and regulations to limit such practices.
- Enhance nutrition awareness across the school community and link school nutrition education with community and/or household activities to encourage broader application.
- Monitor and evaluate the implementation of nutrition programming in schools to determine the effectiveness of different interventions in achieving long-term nutrition outcomes.



## Integrate nutrition into technical and vocational education and training

- Support the mapping of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes across sectors and identify opportunities for nutrition education that can complement and are relevant to the existing knowledge and skills base.
- Integrate nutrition into relevant TVET curricula and programmes.
- Integrate nutrition modules into tertiary education for extension workers (especially agriculture, health, social protection and WASH).

<sup>14</sup> The evidence base for the effectiveness of ECD programmes on both education and nutrition is strongest (Strengthening Education-Nutrition Links in External EU Assistance: an evidence-based planning resource).

<sup>15</sup> WHO/UNICEF/World Bank, Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development 2018.

<sup>16</sup> There is evidence that school gardens improve livelihood skills, promote wellbeing, education and production for consumption especially in agricultural economies (Strengthening Education-Nutrition Links in External EU Assistance: an evidence-based planning resource).



## Ensure inclusive education integrating nutrition is a fundamental element of multi-sectoral planning, strategies and policies for nutrition

- Support evaluative research to help determine the links between education and nutrition outcomes in different contexts drawing upon disaggregated data by age, gender, wealth etc.
- Support the development of food-based dietary guidelines that represent an important contribution to nutrition education.
- Enter into dialogue on education policy with governments at the highest level and incorporate nutrition objectives and results in policies, strategies and budgets relevant to the education sector (ECD, primary, secondary and tertiary).
- Support the development of policies that promote nutrition-friendly environments in schools and other educational institutions.
- Support the active engagement of the education sector in the development and implementation of multisectoral nutrition policies and plans alongside other sectors: agriculture, health, social protection, WASH as well as including both the private sector and civil society.
- Ensure the integration of nutrition education into broader national development plans, strategies and policies with SMART targets.
- Support effective communication systems to disseminate knowledge and good practice on nutrition education approaches (including public awareness campaigns and the media).
- Support efforts to ensure that the private sector adopts responsible marketing methods that do not conflict with national nutrition standards, labelling requirements and communications.



## Ensure nutrition education is integrated into a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach in crisis contexts

- Identify suitable partnerships for an efficient, effective and innovative education response which leads to learning outcomes that include emphasis on gender and nutrition.
- Promote access, inclusion and equity in the education response to ensure that the most vulnerable children benefit.
- Promote peace and protection through quality education programmes in pursuit of stability conducive to better food and nutrition security.



## Further information and support

- European Commission (2016). Strengthening Education-Nutrition Links in EU External Assistance: an evidence-based planning resource;
- European Commission (2018). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL on Education in Emergencies and Protracted Crises, COM(2018) 304 final;
- European Commission (2019). ECHO Thematic Policy Guidance 10, Education in Emergencies in EU-funded Humanitarian Aid operations;
- WHO/UNICEF/World Bank (2018). Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development, <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272603/9789241514064-eng.pdf>
- WHO (2021). Implementing School Food and Nutrition Policies: a review of contextual factors <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240035072>
- WHO (2020). Nutrition Action in Schools: a review of the evidence related to the nutrition-friendly schools initiative [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241516969#:~:text=Download%20\(5.6%20MB\)-,Overview,of%20the%20Health%20Promoting%20Schools](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241516969#:~:text=Download%20(5.6%20MB)-,Overview,of%20the%20Health%20Promoting%20Schools)
- ENN, UNICEF, Save the Children, Irish Aid (2021), Adolescent Nutrition: current progress and looking ahead, <https://www.ennonline.net/mediahub/video/adonutritionmeeting2021>
- FAO (2013). Hawkes, C., Promoting Healthy Diets through Nutrition Education and Changes in the Food Environment: an international review of actions and their effectiveness <http://www.fao.org/3/i3235e/i3235e.pdf>
- FAO (2013). McNulty, J., Challenges and Issues in Nutrition Education <http://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/4e5e1987-7c4b-50a4-b8e7-8cf1ca17ebeb/>
- Jukes, M.C.H., Drake, L.J., & Bundy, D.A.P. (2008). School health, nutrition and education for all: Levelling the playing field. Wallingford; Cambridge MA: CABI Publishing. Retrieved from: <http://www.cabi.org/cabebooks/ebook/20083132007>

## Relevant EU-funded actions on education and nutrition:

- [EU-Cambodia Education Sector Reform Partnership 2018-2021](#)
- Support to the Lao PDR National Nutrition Strategy and Plan of Action
- Afikepo Nutrition Programme in Malawi
- Zimbabwe Resilience Building and Food and Nutrition Security Programme.

The actions without a link can be found in the annex of the [6th Progress Report on the Action Plan on Nutrition](#) and in the upcoming 7<sup>th</sup> Progress Report.

The new OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) policy marker on nutrition was approved by the DAC for official development assistance reporting in 2019 with the support of the European Commission and Member States. According to this marker, 'a project should be identified as nutrition related when it is intended to address the immediate or underlying determinants of malnutrition'. An [OECD-DAC Nutrition Policy Marker Handbook](#) is available.

The EU is a global leader in promoting gender equality as a key political objective of its external action and common foreign policy, aimed at accelerating progress towards the SDGs. By 2025, 85% of new EU actions should contribute to achieving the objective of gender equality and women's empowerment, with more actions including it as a main objective.

For further information contact INTPA F3 Nutrition and One Health Sector by email: [intpa-f3@ec.europa.eu](mailto:intpa-f3@ec.europa.eu)

© European Union 2022

Published by Directorate-General International Partnerships, Directorate Green Deal, Digital Agenda, February 2022.  
The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Commission.

For further information: [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/home\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/home_en)