Bangladesh has experienced some remarkable changes over the last few decades with improvements in health, education, the economy, and information and technology.

However, malnutrition in mothers and children continues to impose a staggering cost to Bangladesh. Today, malnutrition contributes to the deaths of an estimated 50,000 children every year—or one out of every three child deaths¹.

Global data from the last twenty years has shown us that there is an association between malnutrition and life expectancy: decreased levels of stunting are associated with longer life expectancy.

Around the world, countries have made progress reducing chronic malnutrition. Bangladesh, for example, has reduced stunting from 67 percent² in 1988 to 41 percent³ in 2011. But Bangladesh and other South Asian countries continue to have higher rates of stunting compared to other regions of the world².
Research and evidence has shown that nutrition is a smart investment. Investments in nutrition: help children survive and reach their full potential; accelerate progress on key national health targets, including accelerating deaths and illnesses in mothers and children; and accelerate progress on key economic development targets for the country.

At the same time, nutrition investments add value to other investments in health, education, and poverty reduction.

There is a 1,000 day window of opportunity between pregnancy and a child’s first two years of life when investments in nutrition are critical to help a child reach his or her full potential.

During pregnancy, mothers need essential vitamins and minerals to support brain, bone, and body development of the fetus. For the first six months of life, early and exclusive breastfeeding helps ensure a healthy baby. And after the first 6 months, adding nutritious solid foods along with continued breastfeeding is absolutely necessary.

The cost of malnutrition during this 1,000 day window is almost always irreversible. It can lead to brain damage and lower IQ, poor growth and development, and an increased risk of developing chronic diseases as an adult.

Another huge challenge is we cannot always see the effects of malnutrition. For instance, these three girls are from the same village and are the same age, but show very different levels of development. The first two girls suffer from stunting due to poor nutrition; it is unlikely they will reach their full height, weight, or potential like their taller playmate on the right.
The effects of malnutrition are often transferred from generation to generation.

A malnourished woman is more likely to give birth to a low birth weight baby that is at higher risk of illness and death; as the baby grows, she is more likely to suffer from growth failure during her early childhood years, which leads to low weight and stunting in the adolescent years. Entering adulthood, she is a malnourished woman, which brings us back to the beginning of the cycle.

Four well-tested sets of interventions can protect mothers and children from malnutrition:

- Ensuring pregnant women receive essential vitamins, minerals and nutrients.
- Putting babies to the breast the first hour after birth and supporting exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life.
- Ensuring that mothers and children have access to the right amount and the right variety of foods after the first six months, along with continued breastfeeding.
- Providing parents and caregivers with information on improved feeding and care practices.

Although the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in Bangladesh stagnated for more than a decade, the latest national survey revealed that 64 percent of infants are now receiving exclusive breastfeeding.

The national benefits of optimal breastfeeding are enormous. A local study shows that it would produce a savings of 210 billion Taka, prevent more than 1.4 million episodes of diarrhea and respiratory infections, and prevent about 20,000 infant deaths every year.
After the sixth month of life, children must be fed a variety of foods to ensure they receive all the nutrients they need; however, in Bangladesh, 3 out of 5 children are not receiving the right foods\textsuperscript{10}. Many are only eating rice and are not receiving vitamin-rich fruits and vegetables or animal source foods like meats and eggs.

Infant and young child feeding practices are critical to help children survive and thrive. A study by Bangladeshi and international researchers shows that reducing malnutrition by 90 percent between 2011 and 2021 could save the lives of more than 300,000 children in Bangladesh\textsuperscript{11}.

Over the past 20 years, countries like the Philippines and Vietnam have made remarkable progress in reducing levels of stunting, with both countries making major investments in policies and programs to reduce malnutrition\textsuperscript{12}. Bangladesh, too, has made progress in reducing stunting, although at a slower pace. In 2000 and 2005, the Government created a series of National Nutrition Programs to reduce malnutrition in some of the poorest districts. Scaling-up successful program interventions is critical to continue to reduce malnutrition.

Research has found that nutrition investments are a “best buy”, producing a lifetime of benefits for families, communities, and nations.

Well-nourished children perform better in school and grow into a more productive labor force, which can add at least 10 percent to lifetime earnings and boost GDP growth by as much as 3 percent annually for the country\textsuperscript{13}. 
Today we have unprecedented opportunities to invest in nutrition.

- A new nutrition strategy initiated through the National Nutrition Services that uses facility and community-based workers to reach communities across Bangladesh; and
- An urban health strategy to refocus on malnutrition in urban areas, especially urban poor areas.

We have new efforts across sectors to help introduce and scale-up key nutrition interventions.

- The Country Investment Plan from the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, which is supporting 17 projects across 3 ministries; and
- Investments in food security and agricultural development programs to reduce food shortages.

Malnutrition is a global problem; finding a solution must be a shared responsibility.

By investing in simple, cost-effective interventions we can ensure that every child reaches his or her full potential, reduce illness and deaths in mothers and children, and ensure stronger economic growth.

With everyone’s effort, malnutrition will become history. It is time to make that happen.
There are several key actions we can take to strengthen commitments to eradicate malnutrition:

- Advocate for reducing malnutrition in your communities and constituencies.
- Integrate nutrition interventions into all development strategies across all sectors.
- Coordinate efforts between different ministries and stakeholders.
- Mobilize additional resources and better align assistance from development partners.


3Preliminary findings: Bangladesh Demographic and Health survey (BDHS) 2011


10National Institute of Population Research and Training, et. al, 2012

