

The Early Years: A Critical Window for Nutrition and Development



Photo: Plan International

The Moving Minds Alliance (MMA) is a global advocacy impact network of 40 organisations collaborating to improve care and support for young children and their caregivers in emergencies, displacement, and crises. We focus on the earliest years of life—from pregnancy through age 8—when nutrition interventions have their greatest impact on lifelong development.

Ahead of the 2025 Nutrition for Growth Summit hosted in France, we call for concentrated action on early childhood nutrition in crisis settings:

1. **Donors** to scale up funding specifically targeting nutrition interventions in the first 1,000 days of life for children and their caregivers affected by emergencies, displacement, and crises.

We urge identifying dedicated financing for nutrition interventions in early years, establishing a finance baseline for integrated early childhood initiatives, and doubling related investment by 2030.

2. **Policymakers** to prioritize nutrition in national policies, strategies and guidelines in alignment with the Nurturing Care Framework—supporting the prevention and treatment of wasting; caregiver mental health; and alignment between child-focused and gender-focused approaches.

3. **Implementers** to design and deliver integrated early years services, with a focus on building the capacity of frontline health and nutrition workers. Programs should be locally-led and adapted to meet the specific needs of young children and families in crisis settings.



Photo: World Vision, Bangladesh

Background

The earliest years of life represent both our greatest opportunity and most urgent crisis:

- 45 million children under age five experience acute malnutrition, with the highest rates among children under two.
- The first 1,000 days—from conception to age three—represent the peak period of brain development when nutrition has its greatest impact.
- 90% of brain development occurs before age five, making early nutrition essential for learning and development.
- Children in crisis settings face compounded risks exactly when nutrition matters most for their development.

Nutrition in early childhood is about more than just food—it's a fundamental building block for brain architecture and lifelong development. This is especially crucial in crisis-affected areas where young children face multiple risks during their most rapid period of growth. Children with disabilities are twice as likely to be malnourished during these critical early years, and there are high rates of disability among young children in crisis-affected areas.

The science is clear : nutrition and early childhood development are inextricably linked. Poor nutrition in the early years affects not just physical growth but also brain development, learning capacity, and future economic potential. The Nurturing Care Framework shows us how nutrition interventions must be integrated with responsive caregiving, early learning, health, and protection—especially during the foundational early years.

Evidence and Program Models

- [Reach Up and Learn](#), a longitudinal home visiting program originating in Jamaica designed to improve nutrition and the quality of mother-child interactions to foster cognitive, language, and psycho-social skills for stunted children.
- [Gindegi Goron](#), an initiative to support nutrition, early childhood development, and caregiving outcomes in Cox's Bazar; implemented by the International Rescue Committee, adapting the Reach Up and Learn model in crisis contexts.
- [Mobile health clinics](#) that provide a comprehensive health and nutrition package implemented by World Vision targeting malnourished children as well as pregnant and breastfeeding women and girls.
- [USAID Advancing Nutrition](#) research compendium on early childhood and related recommendations.

Why does it matter?

a. Nearly half of all deaths among children under 5 years of age are linked to undernutrition, mostly occurring in low- and middle-income countries. ([UNICEF](#), 2023). In countries affected by conflict, undernourishment is 27.2%, which is six times higher than in non-conflict countries (4.6%). ([United Nations](#), 2017).

b. Data shows that almost 75% of the world's stunted under-five year olds live in countries affected by conflict. That means an entire generation will likely grow up to face diminished productive capacity, income-earning potential and social skills with far-reaching implications for many communities and countries ([WFP and FAO](#), 2018).

c. The 149 million stunted and 45 million wasted children under 5 in 2022 face more than just immediate health risks. Malnutrition in early childhood can lead to lifelong health burdens such as susceptibility to chronic diseases, weakened immune systems, and impaired cognitive function well into adulthood. ([WHO](#), 2024).

d. Due to the specific nutritional requirements of girls and boys under 5 years and pregnant and lactating women, including adolescent girls, these groups are particularly vulnerable to the effects of poor nutrition and food insecurity, with intergenerational impacts on health, development and wellbeing ([UNICEF and WHO](#), 2023).

e. Science shows that a child's first 1,000 days – from conception to 3 years old – are the most critical time to ensure adequate nutrition to support the accelerated pace of brain growth and development ([UNICEF](#), 2017). Good nutrition is vital fuel for this development and an essential component of nurturing care ([WHO, UNICEF, and World Bank](#), 2018). And over 250 million children under five are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential. ([World Bank](#), 2024).

f. Evidence shows that integrating interventions to support responsive caregiving, psychosocial care, and early learning can have a cumulative impact on nutrition outcomes, with benefits for both the child and the caregiver. ([National Library of Medicine](#), 2016).

g. Nutrition and gender are also deeply interwoven. Addressing gender inequities in nutrition is essential for breaking cycles of poor health and stunted development that can persist across generations. Out of the 820 million people with chronic malnutrition, 60% are women and girls. ([Nutrition Cluster](#)).

h. Malnutrition can lead to or worsen developmental delays and disabilities in young children. However, there are insufficient programs and policies to support the nutrition of children with disabilities, developmental delays, and feeding difficulties, including access to mainstream and targeted services and support for families.



The Opportunity

Alignment with Nutrition for Growth Nutrition and Resilience to Crises Thematic Working Group Recommendations

The Moving Minds Alliance approach directly aligns with and builds upon the core recommendations from the N4G Thematic Working Group on Nutrition and Resilience to Crises:

- 1. Multi-sectoral Prevention and System Strengthening:** Our focus on the early years naturally demands integrated approaches across health, nutrition, education, and social protection. The Nurturing Care Framework provides a tested structure for this multi-sectoral collaboration, particularly crucial in fragile contexts where young children face multiple, overlapping risks. By focusing on the critical window of early childhood, we can prevent not just malnutrition but also its lifelong impacts on development and learning.
- 2. Local Leadership:** Our emphasis on elevating local communities directly supports the Working Group's focus on locally-led initiatives. We recognize that sustainable nutrition outcomes for young children require solutions designed and implemented by those closest to the challenges. This includes ensuring local actors have the resources and authority to implement multi-year, integrated early childhood programs.
- 3. Reaching the most vulnerable:** By focusing on the first years of life, including pregnancy and early childhood, we address the most critical period of human development. Our approach emphasizes including children with disabilities and those affected by emergencies, aligning with the Working Group's commitment to leaving no one behind. We particularly recognize the gender dynamics of early childhood nutrition, emphasizing support for mothers and female caregivers while breaking intergenerational cycles of malnutrition.



Photo: Pexel, Lagos Food Bank

The Moving Minds Alliance and partners call on:

Donors to:

- Establish the investment baseline of nutrition budgets for children ages 0-8 and caregivers in crisis. This funding should be flexible to allow for multisector integration, backed by robust monitoring and evaluation to assess quality and effectiveness.
- Double the overall financing—currently at only 3% of development assistance and humanitarian response—for holistic, inclusive early childhood initiatives that help achieve integrated nutrition outcomes by 2030.
- Direct funding for nutrition and responsive caregiving services to the actors closest to the affected communities of children and caregivers accessed by national, local, and refugee-led organisations.

Policymakers to:

- Update the nutrition guidelines for the prevention and treatment of malnutrition—such as the World Health Assembly Nutrition Targets and Nutrition Accountability Framework—to include child development, in alignment with the Global Action Plan on Wasting and WHO guidelines on prevention and treatment of child wasting by 2026.
- Enact and finance nutrition policies which include caregiver mental health. Related services must be made available to displaced children and their caregivers in 10 countries by 2027.
- Create alignment between children-facing and gender national strategies as well as information management systems which allow for coordinated delivery of pre and post natal support, breastfeeding, responsive feeding, nurturing care, and caregiver mental health support interventions.

Implementers to:

- Ensure 50% of frontline health and nutrition workers in every country are trained in how to provide nurturing care within routine health and nutrition services by 2030.
- Promote social behavior change interventions on positive nutrition and child development practices to 50% of caregivers of young children in every country by 2030.
- Prioritise supporting the rights of local communities by involving them in decision-making processes, and promoting their solutions through improved resources, funding, and reduced bureaucracy.
- Designing and implementing programs that are informed by the specific needs of the children and caregivers within communities, relying on a variety of delivery methods to achieve the most reach at scale with quality, cost effective programs.



Photo: Save the Children



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