



UNITED NATIONS
LESOTHO



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FILL THE NUTRIENT GAP POLICY BRIEF

NUTRITION MATTERS IN LESOTHO

Malnutrition is too expensive to ignore. Malnutrition results in an annual loss of USD 200m to the economy of Lesotho, equivalent to more than 7% of its GDP (COHA 2016).

Nutrition remains highly relevant. The number of deaths as related to nearly all health risk indicators decreased in Lesotho between 2007-2017, but a larger share is now attributable to diabetes (of which the number increased), heart disease and stroke (GBD 2018). These non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are linked to poor nutrition both in early life and during adulthood.

Nutrition is a good investment. For every USD 1 invested in nutrition interventions there is a USD 16 return on investment. Nutrition is uniquely positioned to positively impact a country's development through its impact on human capacity in the form of better health, learning in school and productivity as adults (SAL 2016).

FILL THE NUTRIENT GAP ANALYSIS – ASSISTING LESOTHO PLACE NUTRITION AT THE CENTRE OF MULTI-SECTOR INTERVENTIONS

Malnutrition has two direct causes: inadequate nutrient intake and disease. The Fill the Nutrient Gap assessment focuses on identifying nutrition gaps to inform a country's national policies. It identifies actions across sectors that can positively impact nutrition, with a focus on the most vulnerable. It considers the availability, physical access, affordability and choice of nutritious foods as prerequisites for a country's development.

FILL THE NUTRIENT GAP LESOTHO KEY FINDINGS

The economic barrier to adequate nutrition is high. Over half of the population in Lesotho cannot afford a healthy, nutritious diet. Almost one in ten households cannot even afford meeting energy requirements.

Individual vulnerabilities require targeted interventions. It is more difficult and more expensive to ensure a healthy diet for those most vulnerable to malnutrition – children under two years of age, adolescent girls and pregnant and breastfeeding women. Meeting their nutrition needs is more expensive because they need a larger share of nutritious foods such as animal-source foods, vegetables and fruits. It is also particularly problematic for people living with HIV and tuberculosis patients, who have higher energy and nutrient requirements. To decrease that cost, targeted interventions, such as micronutrient supplementation, are essential.

Demand and supply of nutritious foods can be increased through investments in agriculture. More than 90% of fields in Lesotho are used for subsistence farming. Since own production is not diversified, it needs to be supplemented by purchased commodities. Crop diversification, water harvesting, post-harvest loss reduction and use of agricultural inputs show potential for improving nutrition across all household members. All wealth quintiles consume mainly staples with a low content of essential nutrients. Recent economic growth has not led to notable increase of consumption of animal source foods, vegetables or fruits necessary for adequate nutrition. This indicates that in addition to facing affordability issues, people are not choosing enough of the foods they need for improved health.

School meals are a strategic entry point for quick wins. The universal primary school meal coverage offers the potential for improving nutrition during a critical stage of life by ensuring that school meals are nutritious. Currently, school meals meet 50% of the children's energy needs, but less than 30% of other essential nutrient needs (protein, vitamins, minerals). Improving the nutritional content of the meals and expanding interventions to young children and adolescents through pre-schools and secondary schools would improve nutrition for a wider group of children.



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NOW IS THE TIME TO PRIORITIZE NUTRITION

Action is required from all sectors to solve Lesotho's malnutrition problem. No single intervention can adequately respond to the multi-faceted challenges of inadequate dietary intake. Co-ordination and integrated programming, however, can. The engagement and commitment to prioritize nutrition by stakeholders across different sectors, including those that play a role in the food system and social safety nets, will better enable Lesotho to meet SDG 2 – zero hunger.

Without action now, current trends will continue to worsen the situation in Lesotho. Prolonged droughts and extreme weather patterns will further decrease farmers' resilience, and they will increasingly rely on social safety nets. Seasonality, which has particularly high impact in the rural areas, is likely to continue to increase food prices in the lean season, when farmers have no stock of their own production left.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MULTI-SECTORAL STAKE HOLDER GROUP

Health:

- Attain universal coverage of iron and folic acid supplementation for women and girls of reproductive age.
- Target pregnant and breastfeeding women to improve infant and young child feeding practices, particularly around protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding.
- Establish and train community health workers and recruit nutritionists in clinics.

Education:

- Review the menus for school feeding to ensure they better meet children's nutrition needs.
- Use community and school gardens to supplement school meals and as an opportunity for nutrition education.

- Purchase locally produced foods for the school feeding programme to stimulate supply and production of nutritious foods by commercial farmers and household gardens, also for other customers

Agriculture:

- Expand the market for agricultural inputs, professionalising national production.
- Strengthen short cycle animal farming, both to diversify diets and to increase income, as well as keyhole gardens at household level through extension services and education on post-harvest management of products.
- Create incentives to expand private investment and business growth along the agricultural value chain, such as fiscal incentives for the provision of credit to agriculture.
- Improve monitoring and evaluation of agricultural programmes to better understand impact on consumption of nutritious foods, including among specific target groups.

Social Protection:

- Extend the school meals programme to include infants and young children through early childhood development centres, as well as adolescents through secondary schools.
- Identify how to better address shortfalls in targeting of social safety nets, particularly with birth registration of the most vulnerable population, to provide them with access to programmes.

Livelihoods:

- Identify alternative livelihoods to small holder farming.
- Improve understanding on how to incentivise that money earned through alternative livelihoods also translates into the consumption and increased demand of more nutritious foods.