

# NUTRITION QUICK TIPS SERIES



## EQUALITY, EQUITY AND NUTRITION<sup>1</sup>

**‘I am putting the fight against inequality at the heart of our international cooperation’**  
*Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen, March 2021<sup>2</sup>*

**Equality** can be used to refer to both equality of **outcomes and opportunities**.

**Inequality** is a relational concept that refers to differences between individuals or groups and covers various dimensions. **Economic inequality** mainly refers to differences in economic outcomes, such as income, consumption or wealth. **Social inequality** refers to differences in social outcomes (such as education or employment) or to differences in social status or position. Social and economic inequality are strongly connected<sup>3</sup>.

The **strong association between income inequality and stunting** highlights the way that unequal outcomes play a key role in determining human well-being.

**Equity** refers more narrowly to **equality of opportunities**, such as access to services, as opposed to equality of development outcomes, such as stunting.

**Nutrition and equity work in both directions:** malnutrition is both a ‘manifestation’ and a central driver of inequity; reduction of malnutrition is a prerequisite to the reduction of inequity. Conversely, addressing inequities is key to reducing all forms of malnutrition, ensuring that no one is left behind.

1 Other Quick Tips in the nutrition series provide complementary guidance. It is advisable that this paper is read in conjunction with these, in particular Quick Tips: Nutrition, gender equality and women's empowerment, which provides some practical tips on how nutrition can be mainstreamed as part of gender-transformative approaches and underlines the critical role of improved nutrition and diets in the achievement of the EU's GAP III.

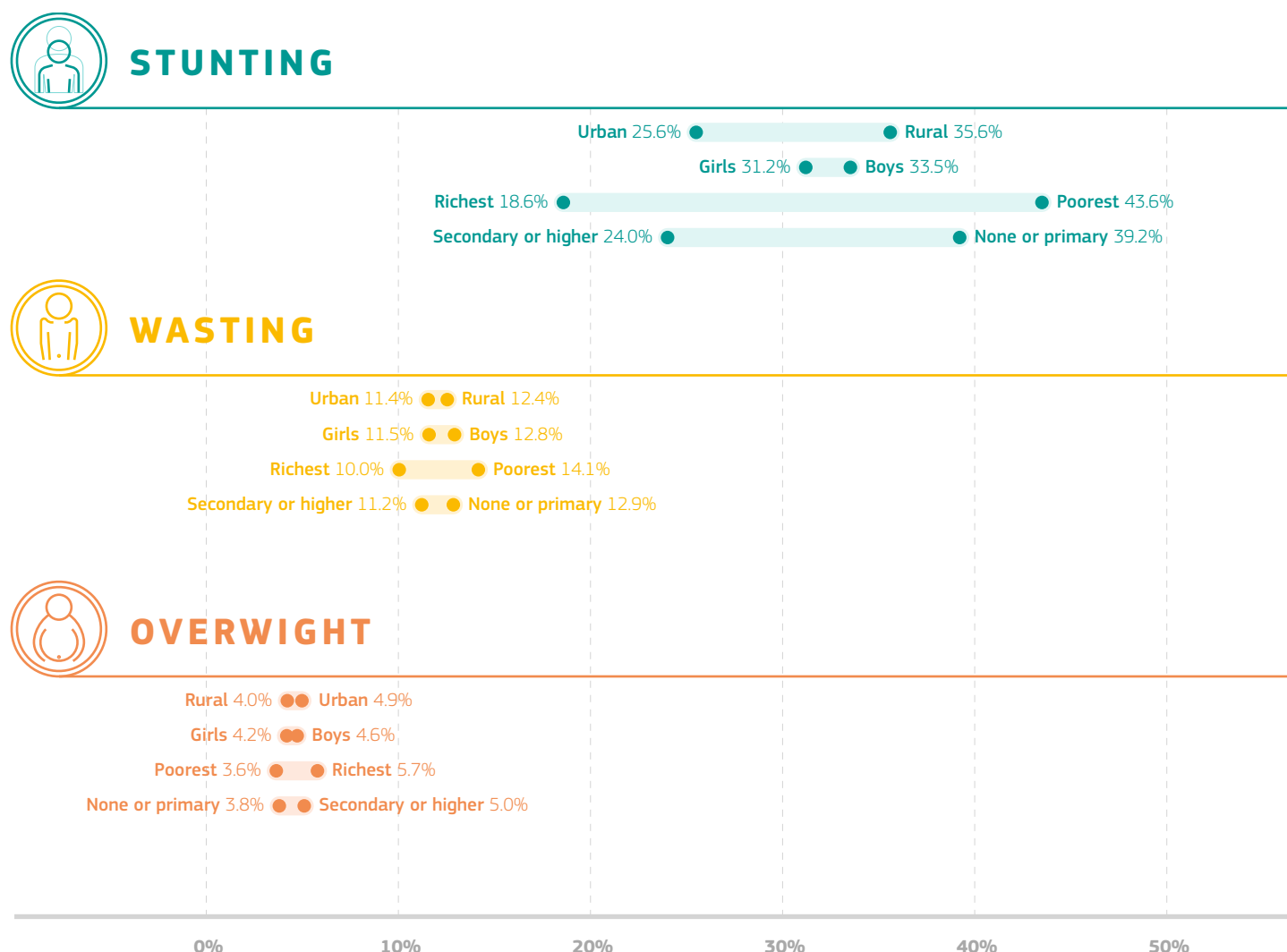
2 High-level plenary of the EU-AFD Ministerial Conference on Inequalities. 22 March 2021.

3 [Commission Staff Working Document – Implementation of the new European Consensus on Development – Addressing inequality in partner countries.](#)

**There are inequalities in the burden of malnutrition, masked by aggregate data on nutrition at both global and national levels. Greater rates of stunting and other forms of malnutrition (including wasting and persistent anaemia in women of reproductive age) are seen in poorer sections of the population and hence improvements in national averages**

are not enough to signify real progress is being made. For populations in low-income countries, overweight and obesity still tends to be relatively higher among the better off rather than the poor (the opposite to high-income countries), as shown in Figure 1, while overweight and obesity is often growing at a faster rate among the poor and rural populations.

Figure 1: Inequalities in stunting, wasting and overweight in children under 5, by urban-rural location, sex, wealth and education<sup>4</sup>



Source: UNICEF/WHO/World Bank Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates Expanded Database: Stunting, Wasting and Overweight. (March 2019. New York).

**Malnutrition is discriminatory in nature, affecting the disadvantaged the hardest** and improving most slowly in the poorest wealth quintiles. Inequality is reinforced across generations in a cyclical process known as the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition, resulting in reduced human development, disadvantage and poverty. This is a difficult cycle to break. In many countries, nutrition disparities between those better and worse off are growing, more often in low- and middle-income countries as well as within subpopulations in high-income countries<sup>5</sup>.

Inequalities exist not only between countries but also within countries.

To achieve progress for all, it is critical to secure improvements in nutrition across all parts of society. For this to be possible, **increased availability of good quality disaggregated national data is essential to distinguish inequalities** by factors such as income, gender, age, geography, education and ethnicity, to **prioritise and target specific and evidence-based actions according to need** and to ensure **equitable distribution of resources and access to services**.

<sup>4</sup> [Global Nutrition Report, 2020](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Perez-Escamilla et al. 2018. Nutrition disparities and the global burden of malnutrition. British Medical Journal 361: k2252.](#)

Disaggregated data serves to elucidate the large disparities in nutrition outcomes such as those between households of different income levels and between rural and urban households, as well as within urban populations (e.g. slum communities) and those arising from inequalities related to gender, race, age and disability among others. Income inequality has been found to be closely associated with other forms of inequality<sup>6</sup>.

**Inequalities in stunting** – the reduction of which the EU remains committed to supporting in partner countries – are declining only in a small number of countries and addressing the root causes of inequities is crucial to its eradication. For instance, ending food poverty remains a significant challenge with at least three billion people globally – and the majority of the population in most low- and middle-income countries – unable to afford a nutritious diet.



## EU commitments

Human rights are at the core of EU action, as enshrined in the Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy and its action plan. The EU Consensus on Development (2017) emphasises that ‘eradicating poverty, tackling discrimination and inequalities and leaving no one behind are at the heart of EU development cooperation policy’ and the European Commission Staff Working Document ‘Addressing Inequality in Partner Countries’ (2019) underscores the requirement for a rights-based approach to this end. The EU Council Conclusions on the UN Food System Summit acknowledges that ‘increased efforts are needed to address the root causes and main drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition worldwide, in particular poverty, inequalities, climate change, biodiversity loss, forced migration and conflicts.’

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has served to **amplify existing vulnerabilities** to economic and gender inequalities, instability and conflict, climate change and biodiversity loss. For the first time in 30 years, there has been a global decline in human development<sup>7</sup>. **The pandemic has underscored the strong causal connection between poverty and malnutrition:** the World Bank estimates that in 2020, COVID-19 induced a rise in the number of people living in extreme poverty of between 119 and 124 million<sup>8</sup>. Reductions in household income have eroded people’s ability to meet their basic needs and threatened to reverse modest global gains in maternal and child nutrition<sup>9</sup>. **Vulnerable groups – particularly women, adolescents and young children – are disproportionately affected.**

The Commission’s commitment to support the efforts of partner countries to reduce child stunting by 7 million by 2025 remains unshaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission’s continued focus on nutrition will be systematically integrated into EU priority areas for international partnership (green alliances; technology, innovation and digitalisation; growth and jobs; migration and mobility; and human development, peace and governance), notably through a number of spending targets including climate change (30%), biodiversity (7-10%), social inclusion and human development (20%)<sup>10</sup> and partnerships to address migration (10%), together with a target on the share of actions related to gender equality (85%).

6 [European Commission Staff Working Document – Implementation of the new European Consensus on Development – Addressing inequality in partner countries, June 2019.](#)

7 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid>

8 [World Bank Global Economic Prospects, January 2021.](#)

9 [IFPRI Global Food Policy Report, 2021.](#)

10 The spending target of 20% for social inclusion and human development includes nutrition-related services (corresponding to OECD-DAC Code 12240, Basic Nutrition) as well as actions addressing health, education, water, sanitation, hygiene, social protection and gender – all of which will play vital roles in the eradication of all forms of malnutrition.

# Strategies for effectively reducing inequalities related to nutrition



## Situational/context analysis, data and information systems

- **Ensure equity-focused situational analysis** to analyse the cause of inequities and their impact on nutrition outcomes, identify the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups, understand differential access to services/impacts for different groups and identify bottlenecks to reaching the most disadvantaged.
- **Support partner countries to strengthen data/information systems at disaggregated level**, promoting a systematic approach to generating, tracking, analysing and using disaggregated data (on diets, anthropometry, micronutrient status and health outcomes) down to local level by sex, age, wealth group, education, location, ethnic group, disability and other context-specific disadvantaged groups.



## Policy and regulatory frameworks

- **Promote multisectoral policy coherence addressing basic structural determinants and drivers of social injustice and marginalisation** (e.g. equitable access to land, education, health, employment and housing) through advocacy and legislative change for marginalised groups, as well as macroeconomic/fiscal policies prioritising decent job creation, income gains for the poor, progressive labour and taxation policies, domestic and care services to support and redistribute unpaid care work, and investment in sectors where poor families are concentrated (e.g. smallholder agriculture, livestock and fisheries)<sup>11</sup>.
- **Promote and support high-level commitment to equity and nutrition**, for example through equity and gender-sensitive national nutrition and/or food policies and plans, and supporting capacity development and awareness raising within government.
- **Promote and support the establishment of legal/regulatory frameworks** across relevant sectors **that favour improved quality of diets and nutritional status** of the most vulnerable and marginalised population groups.
- Consider **strengthening partnerships with civil society organisations around the issue of nutrition and inequality**, for example with respect to social accountability, participation in budget processes and undertaking further research to inform advocacy.



## Programmes and intervention areas

- Strengthen programme design through **recognition of marginalisation, inequities, inequalities and power relations**. When programmes are undertaken jointly with other Member States, joint analysis of nutrition-related inequalities should be undertaken.
- **Increase the use of community-based interventions** and collaboration with civil society organisations.
- Apply an **equity lens to the delivery of actions** to improve nutrition, mobilising and engaging multiple sectors and promoting joint targeting of multisectoral programmes.
- Promote **approaches which concurrently empower women<sup>12</sup> and improve nutrition status**.
- **Use technology innovatively** to reduce the digital divide and include harder-to-reach vulnerable groups.
- **Identify means to include those without access to technology** in surveys to monitor equity-related impacts of COVID-19.

<sup>11</sup> See also Quick Tips: Multisectoral nutrition governance.

<sup>12</sup> See also Quick Tips: Nutrition, gender equality and women's empowerment.

- **Invest in interventions that reduce the burden of unpaid work**, particularly for women and girls, such as by increasing and improving access to clean water and sanitation services.
- Identify and **address power imbalances in the food system**, and promote equitable access to sufficient affordable, diverse, safe and nutritious foods for all, that meet dietary needs and food preferences.
- **Address inequitable food environments** in terms of physical access, availability and affordability of quality foods, advertising and marketing strategies (e.g. marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks to children).
- **Invest in sections of the food system where the poorest are most concentrated**, such as casual labourers, landless farmers, women farmers and street vendors.
- Invest in **equitable integration of preventative and curative nutrition services within universal healthcare**<sup>13</sup> and national health planning.
- Ensure **essential nutrition actions are universally available to all** as part of universal healthcare, addressing inequities in delivery, coverage and access and recognising how different groups are unevenly/simultaneously affected by different forms of malnutrition.
- Ensure **anti-corruption regulation and action** to ensure equitable access to healthcare and other services.
- **Review the design and targeting of social protection interventions** to better address malnutrition, and reach those unable to afford a healthy diet without assistance as well as the most marginalised and vulnerable population groups<sup>14</sup>.
- **Mitigate the potential effects of shocks on nutritionally vulnerable population groups** through social protection mechanisms which can expand and adapt in a timely manner.



## Further information and support

- [EU Action Plan on Nutrition](#)
- [Global Nutrition Report 2020](#) – Action on equity to end malnutrition
- [EU Gender Action Plan III](#)
- [EU Staff Working Document – Addressing Inequality in Partner Countries](#).

The new OECD-DAC policy marker on nutrition was approved by the OECD-DAC for official development assistance reporting in 2019 with the support of the 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 Sustainable Development Goals. 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. Please refer to **Quick Tips: Nutrition, gender equality and women’s empowerment**.

<sup>13</sup> See also Quick Tips: Health and nutrition.

<sup>14</sup> See also Quick Tips: Social protection and nutrition.

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

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