

# Childhood Undernutrition

## Its Eradication is possible

Childhood undernutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean must be eradicated. WFP is working with the governments of the region to support the achievement of this attainable and critical goal.

Recognized for its tremendous diversity, richness, and contrasts, the region of Latin America and the Caribbean produces enough food to nourish its 550 million inhabitants. However, almost 53 million people do not have access to sufficient food needed to live an active and healthy life. Throughout the region the two main manifestations of hunger are chronic undernutrition (height for age deficit, otherwise known as stunting) and micronutrient deficiencies.

9 million children under five years of age suffer from chronic undernutrition. For these children, the majority of whom are indigenous or afro-descendent, poverty, hunger, and the loss of opportunities continue to be determining factors in their daily lives. It is estimated that at least another 9 million children are at risk of becoming undernourished.

Chronic undernutrition is the gravest manifestation of hunger in the region, affecting more than 70% of indigenous children in some areas. Chronic undernutrition is an indication of a structural problem. It is the consequence of an accumulation of factors including lack of adequate food and nutrition, inadequate care practices, absence of quality health services and exposure to an unhealthy environment.

Micronutrient deficiencies (the lack of vitamins and minerals) are often referred to as “hidden hunger.” While micronutrient deficiencies may not produce pangs of hunger in the stomach, they do attack health and vitality on the deepest levels by increasing children’s susceptibility to infectious diseases, affecting physical and intellectual development, and increasing the risk of childhood mortality. By reducing children’s capacity to learn, micronutrient deficiencies impact their potential for future productivity in the workforce, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty and hunger.

The most serious micronutrient deficiency in the region is anemia, which still affects 22 million pre-school age children. The precarious nutritional situation of the children worsens as a consequence of living in areas repeatedly impacted by droughts, hurricanes, earthquakes, and frosts. The effects of the food price, oil, and financial crises must be added to these pre-existing conditions. This combination has forced poor families to reduce their daily number of meals and lower the quality of food they consume.



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Although the region produces enough food for its population, almost 16% of children under 5 years of age suffer from chronic undernutrition. This level increases to more than 70% among indigenous populations. **Every 5 minutes a child dies from hunger-related causes in Latin America and the Caribbean.**



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## World Food Programme

# Creating Associations

## Political backing for the initiative "Towards the Eradication of Childhood Undernutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean"

One highly effective strategy for the eradication of childhood undernutrition, it is to guarantee that children under 3 years of age receive adequate nutrition, given that the first three years of life form the most critical period for physical and psychomotor development.

For this reason, the World Food Programme is leading the regional initiative "Towards the Eradication of Childhood Undernutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean" in partnership with the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean and in collaboration with UN agencies and other organizations.

In order to make the theme a priority on the public policy agenda, WFP and its partners have organized and participated in high-level regional fora bringing together governmental authorities with regional and international entities to discuss the importance of reaching children under 3 as well as the critical role of social protection programs in mitigating the effects of the financial crisis and the high price of foods on the nutritional security of poor families.

Through the declarations arising from some 14 intergovernmental fora and regional meetings, among them the General Assembly of the OAS, the Summit of Presidents of SICA, and the Iberoamerican Summit, the governments of the region have requested that WFP lead efforts to strengthen national programs directed towards reducing undernutrition and improving emergency preparedness and response capacities.

Following this mandate from the countries, WFP has supported the governments of Central America and the Dominican Republic to strengthen their national plans for the eradication of childhood undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. In the Andean region, WFP has provided technical assistance to the governments of Bolivia and Peru. WFP has also strongly promoted South-South and triangular cooperation with the objective of facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices between countries.

One of the tools WFP has placed at the disposition of governments and actors involved in the fight against hunger is [www.nutrinet.org](http://www.nutrinet.org), which has become the major regional platform of knowledge management on childhood undernutrition. Nutrinet allows the collection, evaluation and dissemination of information relating to key scientific evidence and best practices in this field.

## The Cost of Hunger

Childhood undernutrition is not solely an abuse of human rights or an attack on the human capital of each affected infant; childhood undernutrition also presents an enormous financial cost to society.

Societies pay to eradicate undernutrition, but they pay infinitely more by not eradicating it. In the countries of the region, approximately 1% of social spending is destined for food-based programs. The investment in promotion, production, and distribution of fortified foods for children in their first years of life is still smaller.

According to the study "The Cost of Hunger: The Social and Economic Impact of Childhood Undernutrition in Central America and the Dominican Republic" (ECLAC-WFP, 2007), the history of childhood undernutrition in recent decades has generated a cost of almost 6.7 billion dollars as of the year 2004, derived from the greater costs for health treatments, inefficiencies in educational processes, and losses in workforce productivity.

Hunger costs our societies much more than its eradication: for this reason sustained investments in the fight against hunger and undernutrition are essential to guarantee that social protection programs have adequate impact.

The economic losses from hunger, according to the study, are equivalent to more than 6% of GDP in the year 2004 for Central America and the Dominican Republic, with a range that varies between 1.7-11.4% of GDP by country. From this data, it is not difficult to demonstrate that a region free from childhood undernutrition would benefit all governments and all sectors of society.



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