Flagship 4: Supporting Policies, Programs, and Enabling Action through Research (SPEAR)

Highlight 1: Critically Reviewing the Global Focus on Stunting

Over the past decade, reducing the prevalence of stunting (linear growth retardation) has become a global development objective. This focus has undoubtedly done considerable good, helping illustrate and communicate the consequences of undernutrition and providing incentives for policymakers and donors to develop and fund interventions, policies, and programs to fight these challenges. The global attention to stunting is based on the premise that any intervention aimed at improving linear growth will subsequently lead to improvements in stunting. New A4NH research, however, shows that current evidence and understanding of mechanisms does not support this causal thinking. Addressing stunting alone will not automatically reduce the burden of problems like delayed child development, reduced earnings in adulthood, and chronic disease.

The A4NH study, conducted by researchers from IFPRI and the University of South Carolina, provides a critical review of the evidence on this subject and shows two things. First, it demonstrates that stunting does directly contribute to birth complications and poor birth outcomes. Second, it explains that in all other cases stunting should be used as an indicator of a set of problems that needs solving, rather than stunting itself being the problem to solve.

The causal link between stunting and birth complications and poor birth outcomes makes reduced stunting an outcome of intrinsic value, since improving linear growth can reduce the incidence of these negative consequences. Effective and more immediate solutions to these problems exist, however, including improved obstetric care and provision of nutrition supplements to expectant mothers.

The researchers go on to say that stunting does not cause delayed child development, reduced productivity and earnings, higher incidence of chronic diseases, or other commonly cited consequences of stunting. The source of these problems is a deficient environment. A deficient environment is one that can lead to, among other things, children receiving too little food or food without the necessary nutrients, or being plagued by illness. Solving the problems of delays in child development, diminished productivity or earnings, or high susceptibility to chronic disease requires fixing the deficient environment.

The researchers illustrate their findings through an analogy to more easily convey the message: Consider stunting as a smoke alarm in a house. It is, after all, more than anything, a signal of a much larger problem. It follows, then, that to maintain the current momentum on improving global nutrition, the attention of nutrition researchers, donors, and practitioners should not focus on turning off the alarm. We need to extinguish the fire.

Since its publication, the study has been extensively cited, and donors including DFID, USAID, and the World Bank have reported that the research has affected their decisions about which nutrition outcomes to focus on when funding and designing programs. A video was made to summarize the findings and illustrate the analogy to help donors, policymakers, and others find realistic, appropriate pathways to improve global nutrition.

We would like to thank all funders who supported this research through their contributions to the CGIAR Trust Fund. Specific contributions to A4NH come from: Australia, Ireland, The Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.