



For a world without hunger



Orientation Paper

NUTRITION – THE FOUNDATION OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Good nutrition is not only the basis for a healthy and active life for all people worldwide. The right to adequate nutrition is foremost an internationally acknowledged human right. And yet, malnutrition levels remain unacceptably high around the globe, with undernutrition particularly affecting countries in the Global South. As a consequence, millions of children are deprived of reaching their full potential resulting in economic losses and heavy burdens on health systems of affected countries. Tackling malnutrition effectively requires multi-sectoral and integrated responses at different levels. At the same time, lasting systemic change can only be achieved when strong nutrition governance ensures integration and prioritization of nutrition in relevant sector programs and coherent policy action.

Introduction

Good **nutrition is vital for human development** and well-being. However, hundreds of millions of people are unable to meet their needs for safe and healthy diets – they are malnourished. While there is no country that does not face the challenge of malnutrition, most of the data points to undernutrition of women and children living in rural areas in the Global South. Thus, overcoming malnutrition remains a key challenge of rural development. However, while there are less food access issues in urban than rural areas, this does not benefit the urban poor, who face disproportionate barriers to accessing healthy food and have an increased risk of malnutrition.

Over the last decade, nutrition has become a **key aspect of development** and has moved to the core of every Welthungerhilfe strategy. Welthungerhilfe has further strengthened the integration of nutrition through the strategic approach Programming towards Improved Nutrition (PtIN) and is engaged in policy work at national and global level.

This orientation paper has been elaborated by drawing from existing Welthungerhilfe papers and publications, program experience, and relevant recent evidence. It is based on a consultation process involving many experienced Welthungerhilfe staff members from Germany and our country programs in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as external experts. It serves three functions:

1. To provide guidance to Welthungerhilfe staff and partners on their program and advocacy work related to nutrition;
2. To communicate Welthungerhilfe's work and policy direction on nutrition to development partners and the interested public in Germany and abroad;
3. To raise demands to political decision-makers and development actors on actions that need to be taken to overcome malnutrition at different levels – local, national, and global.



The role of nutrition in human development and as a fundamental human right

Malnutrition in all its forms includes , caloric and micronutrient deficiencies. People affected by the last suffer from so called hidden hunger – they consume enough calories but lack important micronutrients, especially Vitamin A, iron, iodine, or zinc. Malnutrition can have severe effects on bodily functions and impairs cognitive and mental development during childhood, work performance in adults, and the economic performance of an entire country. The cost of malnutrition in low-income countries due to productivity losses has been estimated to be 3–16% of their GDP, whereas the socio-economic gains of investing in nutrition are significant and lasting. Every dollar spent on nutrition interventions can generate a return of up to 16 USD.

Above all, adequate nutrition is a **human right**. Every human has the right to adequate, sufficient, and healthy food – this is stated in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. To date, 171 countries have committed under international law to respect, protect, and ensure the human right to food.

Factors influencing healthy diets

Whether people consume **healthy diets** depends on what kinds and amounts of food are available and accessible, the quantities of essential nutrients the foods contain, their knowledge on nutritious diets, traditions and cultural beliefs, as well as personal taste preferences. Combining different foods appropriately ensures a balanced nutrient supply. Depending on regions, climate zones, and cultural practices, meal compositions can look very different. Food must be accessible and affordable for everyone and free of contaminations which may occur during cultivation, storage, or processing. A safe and hygienic environment when preparing and eating food is crucial for preventing diseases. At the same time, a weakened immune system due to lack of dietary energy, vitamins, and minerals is the indirect cause of death for many children who die from infectious diseases in low- and middle-income countries. This emphasizes the importance of coupling health and nutrition interventions.

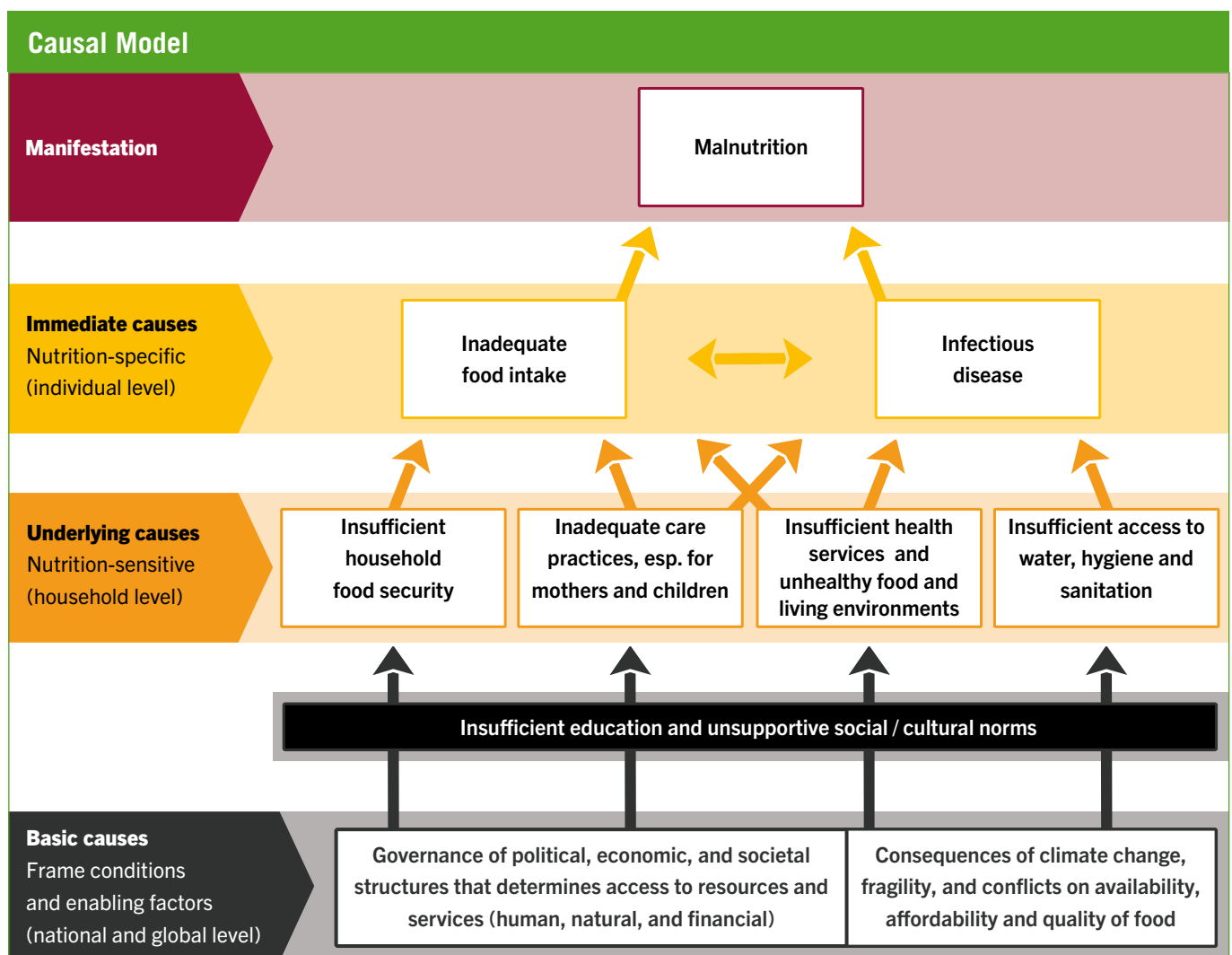
Today, a considerable number of face a phenomenon known as the “**triple burden of malnutrition**” – acute and chronic undernutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies, co-existing with rising rates of overweight and obesity. One underlying global development is the **nutrition transition**, which refers to the rapid shift in dietary patterns from traditional diets of whole and minimally processed food to a growing consumption of unhealthy and increasingly affordable ultra-processed foods and drinks that are high in sugar, salt, and fat. By means of significant market penetration with “unhealthy calories”, transnational corporations are the main drivers of accelerating change towards unhealthy diets, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Food manufacturers’ commercialization strategies have also changed food environments – how food is marketed and advertized, and whether healthy food choices are accessible and affordable. As a result, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension, stroke, and certain cancers, have proliferated. Strategies to promote consumption patterns and food culture based on healthy, diverse and sustainable, and, where possible locally sourced food are getting more attention, including in the Global South. However, they require more structural and financial support to grow to scale. Taxing of food and drinks high in unhealthy calories (e.g. sugary drinks or highly processed foods) and a ban on marketing such products particularly to children could enhance the capacity for healthy food policies in income poor countries.



Why reducing malnutrition remains a challenge

The **reasons behind the global burden of malnutrition are complex**. Welthungerhilfe applies the conceptual framework for nutrition security originally developed by Unicef. It highlights the manifold and intertwined drivers of malnutrition at different levels (immediate, underlying, and basic), and the corresponding types of sectoral responses that are required to prevent or respond effectively to malnutrition.

Immediate causes of malnutrition are inadequate dietary intake as well as diseases. **Underlying causes** include a combination of determinants concerning food security, income and gender inequality, inadequate care practices, health services, water sanitation and hygiene (WASH), social protection, and education. **Basic causes** are systemic, multifaceted, and interdependent. They include the economic and societal structures that limit or deny access to resources and services for adequate nutrition, thereby perpetuating poverty and deepening existing inequalities and power imbalances (i.e. unequal access to education for women). These structures are shaped by political framework conditions and policies. Furthermore, conflict and climate change negatively affect food availability and accessibility, and loss of biodiversity reduces nutrition-rich varieties, both with knock-on effects on nutrition status.



Source: Welthungerhilfe, adapted from Unicef

Any form of malnutrition constitutes a **violation of the human right to food**. The human rights approach, especially the **right to adequate food**, must always be the overarching principle for agricultural, food, and other sector policies affecting nutrition.



Tackling malnutrition requires a multisectoral response at different levels

Acute malnutrition (wasting) is treatable, but while treatment is sometimes essential and lifesaving, it is better to prevent the onset of acute malnutrition before it occurs. Addressing acute malnutrition is crucial during critical situations after conflicts, disasters, or economic shocks. Yet, it also persists in more stable situations or in so-called chronic nutrition emergencies. In these contexts, targeted interventions like early detection of acute malnutrition in communities via screening and referral to health centers, or a period of treatment with “ready-to-use therapeutic food” (RUTF) and supplementation of specific or a mixture of specialized nutrition products are used to manage wasting, address specific micronutrient deficiencies, and ensure adequate food consumption with the goal of preventing malnutrition related deaths. In emergencies, food aid is the most important immediate intervention to avoid malnutrition.

Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) programs are often part of national health systems and are largely supported by the humanitarian community, also in settings that are chronically affected by high levels of acute malnutrition. However, intervention coverage of nutrition by health systems is inequitable within certain regions, and population subgroups are being left behind. This makes addressing system-wide challenges to equitable delivery and extending the reach of health systems through community-based delivery platforms important for more effective interventions.

Controlling micronutrient deficiencies is based on a variety of approaches, such as dietary diversity, supplementation, food-to-food fortification, industrialized fortification, and bio- or agronomic fortification. Meeting micronutrient needs is particularly important during the first 1,000 days (from conception through the first two years of life) for pregnant and lactating women, children, and adolescent girls both as a preventative and a curative measure. However, administering micronutrients does not address the structural causes of malnutrition, and should therefore be embedded in comprehensive national, regional, and local nutrition strategies.

Programs that focus on acute malnutrition should be entry points that support rather than replace longer-term actions seeking to address underlying causes of poor nutrition. **Chronic malnutrition** (stunting), a consequence of a mixture of these causes, can be irreversible if not treated adequately, and should therefore be prevented in the first 1,000 days of life through multisectoral interventions. This requires the promotion of optimal maternal, adolescent, infant, and young child feeding (MAIYCF) practices, linking nutrition and related health behaviors throughout the lifecycle. For such interventions, effective, long term, and contextualized **social behavior change (SBC)** programming is essential. It should be based on the core messages of national standard packages, but can be strengthened by delivering interactive and context-specific sessions that consider cultural connections to locally available food.

Simply knowing what constitutes a healthy diet is not enough to overcome chronic malnutrition. Many factors have an impact on the variety of food people have on their plates and how they feed and care for their children. This includes among others cultural preferences and taboos, personal tastes, time constraints, and gender roles. **SBC** encompassing all these aspects must therefore **be at the core of nutrition interventions and integrated into other relevant sectors**. It works well in group-based settings, for example through established mother or father groups using the positive deviance approach, or by integrating nutrition-related content in farmer group trainings, school education, or community health clubs. It can shift patterns on food consumption and proper child feeding practices, adequate care, sanitation and hygiene, and empower adolescents, women, and men to make better choices for themselves and their families.

The potential to improve access to food and increase food diversity for poor, rural households arises directly from their own and from commercial **agricultural production** of smallholder farmers. Welthungerhilfe promotes investments in site-specific strategies to increase yields and stabilize incomes, while protecting or regenerating natural resources. Higher farm production diversity can contribute to dietary diversity, but careful targeting is necessary. In cases where production diversity is already high, improving small farmers' access to markets might be a more effective strategy to secure a balanced diet. Key aspects to enhancing the nutritional impact of agriculture are pathways that empower women and include nutrition-related SBC. Programs focusing on home gardens and homestead food production, including small livestock rearing or fishponds, responsible use of wild or underutilized food, and application of indigenous knowledge have also proven effective to improve access to micronutrient-rich diets especially for vulnerable households.



Biofortified crops are crops which are rich in certain nutrients, mostly identified from biodiversity. The majority of biofortified crops result from plant breeding, while sometimes the nutrient content is enriched by using natural or chemical fertilizers. These crops can contribute to the provision of micronutrients to rural farming families with limited access to healthier foods, provided that the seeds are available and accessible, and that the produce is accepted by the consumers. However, placing a strong emphasis on biofortified staples in agriculture policies and programs might bear the risk of neglecting diversified and sustainable agricultural production. Therefore, their use should always come as a part of interventions to promote diversified and sustainable agricultural production and a balanced diet. Welthungerhilfe does not allow the use of biofortified seeds that are genetically modified.

Supporting **income-generating activities (IGAs)** can increase households' cash resources and thus their purchasing power and ability to invest in nutrition-enhancing goods and services. Although more research is needed analyzing the pathway between (maternal) IGAs and (child) nutrition, income generated by women is more likely spent on family nutrition and health. Maternal IGAs may also increase women's access to resources to procure food, decision-making power, and control of income.

Agriculture, natural resource management, and rural economy are obviously key sectors to sustainably improve household food security. However, they do not automatically lead to improved nutrition. It is important to understand **interactions with other interventions** such as WASH, gender, and social protection to deliver for nutritional outcomes.

WASH-related, preventable infections such as diarrhea, environmental enteropathy, and intestinal worms result in decreased dietary intake and malabsorption of nutrients. This leads to undernutrition, which itself reduces resistance to infection, increasing the likelihood of repeated infection. Contextualized transformative WASH programs that reflect population-specific disease burdens and consider the multi-faceted pathways for environmental pathogen exposure (e.g., through human feces, wastewater irrigation, or livestock at the homestead) are required. Furthermore, there is good evidence that a lack of access to water significantly impacts women, as they carry two-thirds of the burden for water collection. Significant time savings are associated with WASH improvements – time that can be used for adequate childcare and nutrition.

Commonly, women are the main caregivers for the family, especially for young children. They also play a major role in agricultural production, food processing, and food preparation. Furthermore, it is well documented that women have poorer access to land, as well as to financial and other productive resources while carrying a heavy workload. Women's education and status, which are often influenced by cultural, social, and religious norms, strongly correlate with malnutrition levels. In regions where women have better socio-economic positions (education, access to resources, income, political representation, legal status), they eat healthier and can provide better for their families, which is reflected by lower levels of malnutrition in their children. Reducing **gender** disparities in key areas particularly in education, health, and the women's status and role in society are essential to combat malnutrition. Empowerment measures should include adolescent girls in their roles as future mothers to prevent early marriages and additional maternal and child malnutrition. Working towards a transformed understanding of gender roles with regard to caregiving and economic decision making must involve women and men, and it is important to ensure that gender empowerment does not come at the expense of an increased work burden for women.

Social security systems are a powerful means of reducing poverty, and have been shown to improve household food availability and dietary quality among the chronically poor and/or conflict affected populations. They can also protect the nutrition and health of poor farming households as these struggle with seasonality, climate shocks, or other crises. The likelihood of social protection programs to deliver for nutrition outcomes can be increased if nutrition objectives are deliberately included, e.g. by providing vouchers for nutritious foods, targeting nutritionally vulnerable groups with meaningful amounts of cash transfers, or promoting school feeding programs with healthy – if possible home-grown – meals.

As demonstrated above, malnutrition is the outcome of a multitude of interplaying factors and systems, most importantly the health and food systems. Hence, nutrition strategies and programs must be **multisectoral**, looking at the underlying drivers. However, fostering an enabling environment through coherent policy action is equally important.



Strong nutrition governance is a prerequisite to coherent policy action

In many countries, **governance of nutrition** has improved with the creation of nutrition coordination mechanisms in high government offices. This reflects the growing importance of the nutrition agenda. At the same time, the health sector remains the most common location for cross-sector nutrition coordination efforts, and a major challenge to providing universal coverage of essential nutrition actions is the insufficient numbers of trained front-line workers to deliver these services. Functioning local and regional governmental institutions are a precondition to ensure that horizontal (cross-sectoral) and vertical (national to community) coordination is given attention and that there is coherence in planning and action. Lack of funding and improper budget allocation for multi-sectoral nutrition strategies remain as major challenges to delivering relevant nutrition interventions. In settings where governance or implementation is weak, there is a role for civil society actors and NGOs, such as Welthungerhilfe and its national partners, to strengthen or even support the setup of nutrition coordination processes (e.g. by engaging through the Scaling Up Nutrition [SUN] Movement), to ensure representation of most affected groups, or to train frontline workers in relevant sectors. Also, civil society actors and community bodies should actively engage in nutrition networks and platforms to advocate for strong political leadership to ensure that commitments on nutrition are reflected in real-world action and that delivery is regularly monitored.

Since the Green Revolution, many countries in the Global South have mainly focused on high-yielding staples to combat undernutrition. Due to the focus on calories alone as opposed to nutrient content and diversity, pulses, fruits, and vegetables have long been marginalized in agricultural policies. Today just three crops – rice, maize, wheat – provide up to two-thirds of energy intake. On average, healthy diets cost almost five times as much as diets that meet only the dietary energy needs through a starchy staple. There is a need for **food policies** to go beyond a narrow focus on energy intake and increase the availability, accessibility and affordability of healthy foods. This also requires investing more in research on production of locally adapted nutrient-rich food crops, best done by making use of the knowledge and concerns of smallholder farmers.

An enabling environment also includes **secure access to land and use of communal natural resources**. If investment policies undermine access to land, water, or forests, the food and nutrition security of rural, particularly indigenous populations are instantly at risk.

The global challenges of climate change, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss threaten all the dimensions of nutrition security with significant implications for the availability of food, adequate care, and access to healthy diets. At the same time, the current global food system is a major contributor to those challenges. This calls for a **transformation towards equitable, socially inclusive, sustainable, and resilient food systems**. Such systems offer food security with proper nutritional levels, while limiting the negative environmental impact. Being part of such food systems would equip communities to respond well to challenges such as climate change, extreme weather events, economic shocks, and the risk of violent conflict. It is only then that sustainable healthy that reduce pressure on natural resources while being socio-culturally acceptable and economically accessible to all can be ensured for future generations.





Welthungerhilfe's involvement in practice

Promoting **Programming towards Improved Nutrition (PtIN)** as an integrated, multisectoral approach within all programs to address the multiple interrelated causes of malnutrition and identify the enabling factors to prevent malnutrition in all its forms. The alignment of sectoral interventions towards improved nutrition is ensured by adhering to six key during the planning process, which includes a thorough nutrition assessment, and can comprise the following interventions:

- Promoting **optimal nutrition behaviours** relevant to the first 1,000 days as the “window of opportunity” and as late as during adolescence (**maternal, adolescent, infant & young child feeding (MAIYCF) with optimal breastfeeding at its core, health, hygiene, and care practices**) via the promotion of an environment conducive to nutrition and **Social Behaviour Change (SBC)** interventions.
- Linking SBC activities to measures **increasing availability of diverse nutrient-rich foods at household level**, such as promotion of homestead gardens, sustainable use of locally available, wild or underutilized foods, small animal rearing (e.g. livestock, poultry, fish) as well as nutrient-saving and hygienic food preparation, preservation, and processing, **WASH** interventions, and challenging **gender roles**.
- Promoting **nutrition-sensitive agriculture** by orienting cultivation methods towards a diversity of nutrient-rich plants and varieties (including biofortified crops) while ensuring sustainability (sustainable use of soil, water, biodiversity, energy; replicability of seeds).
- Providing skills and supporting entrepreneurship in particular for women and adolescents as well as strengthening nutrition-sensitive value chains and market linkages to **improve income** at household level.
- **Identifying and treating acute malnutrition** in both humanitarian and development settings in collaboration with local government structures and other relevant partners (e.g. WFP) by: applying **mass screening and referral support** and developing innovative tools (e.g. **Child Growth Monitor**), delivering **supplementary feeding programs** and **supplementation of specific micronutrients**, supporting local government structures and extension workers to improve effectiveness and efficiency of existing service systems, or providing **community-based interventions** (e.g. nutrition camps).
- Supporting (homegrown) **school meal programs** where communities take an active role in providing food for school children through individual food and cash contributions and the production of food by parents.

Promoting specific, **complex multisectoral approaches** to address causes at various levels:

- **Linking Agriculture and Natural Resource Management plus WASH towards Nutrition Security (LANN+)** by investing in sustainable agriculture, sustainable management of natural resources, promoting the responsible use of underutilized and/or wild foods, WASH interventions, and income generation linked to a modular nutrition education.
- Establishing **Nutrition-Smart Communities** as an approach that combines four interlocking strategies:
 1. foster behavior change at household level;
 2. strengthen and support community-based institutions;
 3. activate and improve nutrition-relevant services at community level;
 4. promote community-based advocacy for the progressive realization of the Right to adequate Food.

Collaborating with **local partners** to support the **Right to adequate Food**:

- Building **capacities of communities** in nutrition-sensitive participatory community planning, informing them on their **Right to adequate Food**, and empowering them to **claim better delivery of public services and to advocate for improved policy frameworks**, thus ensuring long-term systemic changes.
- Promoting and supporting the **integration of nutrition and health programs** with governmental institutions (e.g. through engagement in the SUN movement).



Policy Asks

- Governments as duty bearers must work consistently for the **realization of the Right to adequate Food**, supporting the implementation of the UN Voluntary Guidelines for the Right to Food through national laws, policies, and programs.
- To overcome all forms of malnutrition, all actors must focus on improving the **quality of nutrition by promoting sustainable healthy diets and prioritizing children during their first 1,000 days**. This should happen not only through nutrition education measures but also as an integral part of programs in the field of agriculture and value chains.
- Governments and donors must **establish funding mechanisms** which ensure that sufficient budgets are allocated for nutrition through **multisectoral costed action plans** that include high coverage of quality SBC interventions and are thoroughly monitored by transparent and **data-driven accountability mechanisms**. **Long-term projects** of a minimum of four years are needed to ensure sustainable change.
- Governments and donors must ensure **multisectoral programming which includes strengthening of health systems** and integrating nutrition-essential services to be able to provide quality, safe, and dignified health care, in particular to women and girls. Nutrition must be an explicit objective also in non-nutrition-specific sectors as otherwise nutritional outcomes may be counteracted by a broader unsupportive policy environment.
- Governments must ensure that **food policies** – from rural development and agriculture to food assistance and fiscal policies – increase the **availability and affordability** of healthy foods, and must accelerate their implementation.
- Governments and donors should scale up **social protection programmes** to reduce inequality and prevent poor households from falling into a food and nutrition crisis because of external shocks. They should employ a nutrition-sensitive approach in their design and implementation and involve civil society actors to ensure that programs are context-specific with ownership by participants.
- All actors should ensure that nutrition security programs take a **gender-responsive approach** and address women's and girls' empowerment and the causes and drivers of gender inequality.

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Imprint

Published by:

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We would like to thank all colleagues and external experts who have contributed to this orientation paper with their expertise during the consultation process and beyond.

Editor:

Silvia Richter

Graphic design:

Anja Weingarten

Cover Photograph:

Ethiopia, Amhara; Henrik Wiards

Published:

June 2022

Welthungerhilfe, IBAN DE15 3705 0198 0000 0011 15, BIC COLSDE33

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