

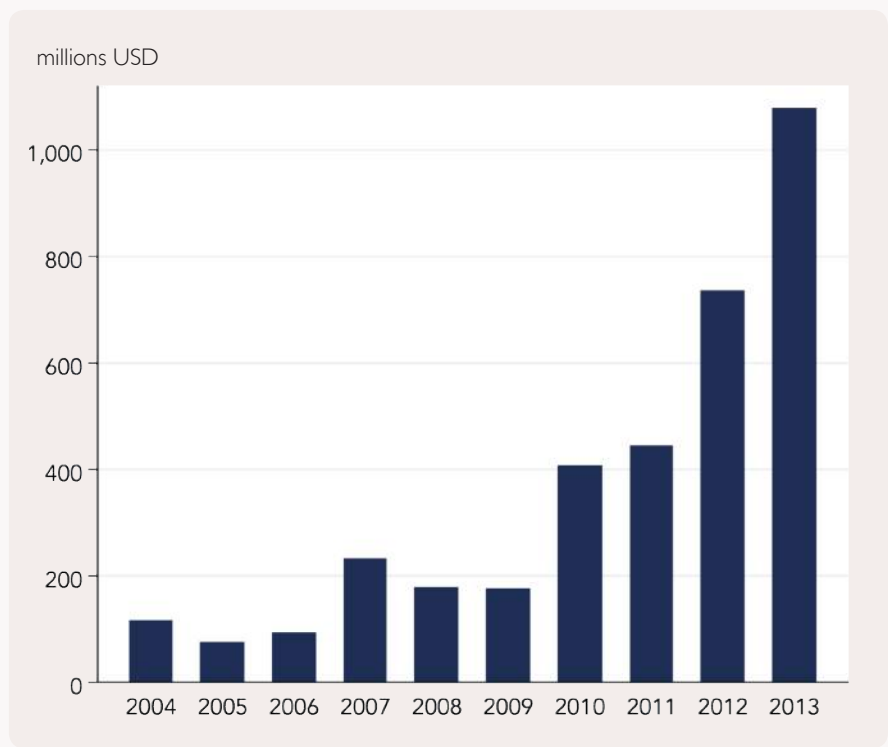
cost/benefit data propels change: the global nutrition movement

data in the past decade, economists and public health researchers have more precisely quantified the costs and benefits of specific nutrition interventions

impact global aid disbursements for basic nutrition programs have increased tenfold since 2006, and many countries have made impressive progress in reducing child stunting

Photo: Elizabeth Whelan
Sana, Mali

In recent years, a network of public health professionals, economists, and activists has amassed a powerful body of evidence arguing that nutrition interventions are among the most cost-effective investments a government can make, not only for the families affected but also for national economies. Their work, publicized especially through the Copenhagen Consensus conference and the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* led to the creation of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, a partnership of 54 countries committed to large-scale interventions against malnutrition.¹ Global aid earmarked for nutrition programs increased from \$108 million in 2006 to \$1.08 billion in 2013.²



Total official development assistance from all donor countries to all recipient countries for basic nutrition programs, in 2013 dollars adjusted for inflation. Source: OECD Creditor Reporting System

the political roots of inaction

Government action against malnutrition has historically been weak. This is partly because the illness is most severe among the children of families with limited political voice: small farmers and landless workers, slum dwellers, ethnic minorities. And because the consequences of malnutrition are indistinguishable from the problems of poverty more generally — for example, recurring illness and poor school performance — communities rarely demand nutrition-specific reforms.

data makes the case for change

In 2008 and 2012, the Copenhagen Consensus conference asked the world's most respected economists to analyze how \$75 billion could be best spent for improving global welfare. Nutrition interventions dominated the list of winning ideas.^{3,4} *The Lancet* published special series on maternal and child undernutrition in 2008 and 2013, commissioning teams of public health researchers to detail the costs and benefits of a wide range of nutrition interventions. Once again, the results were unambiguous: investing in nutrition yields enormous gains for children, families, and societies.^{5,6}

the movement accelerates

Bolstered by data-driven arguments for action, global attention to nutrition continues to grow, with more and more government leaders publicly committing to larger nutrition budgets. To meet the need, donor agencies are greatly increasing international aid disbursements for nutrition (see figure). The causes of malnutrition are complex, and definitely linking higher funding to impact is difficult. In many countries, however, progress is impressive. In India, for example, programs for nutrition are rapidly expanding and about 14 million fewer children are chronically undernourished now as compared to a decade ago.⁷