AFRICA NUTRITION CHARTBOOKS

NUTRITION OF INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN IN MALAWI

Findings from the 1992 Malawi DHS Survey

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years, Malawi</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Undernutrition among Children Age 3 to 36 Months in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Undernutrition by Age, Malawi</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Feeding Practices for Infants under 4 Months, Malawi</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Infants under 4 Months Who Are Exclusively Breastfed and Those Who Receive Supplemental Bottles, in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Feeding Practices for Infants Age 6 to 9 Months, Malawi</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Infants 6 to 9 Months not Receiving Food in Addition to Breast Milk in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Region, Malawi</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Residence, Malawi</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Mother's Education, Malawi</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Source of Water, Malawi</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Type of Toilet, Malawi</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>Age-related Pattern of Diarrhoea among Children 1 to 24 Months, Malawi</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14</td>
<td>Prevalence of Diarrhoea, Fever, and Cough among Children Age 1 to 24 Months in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15</td>
<td>Fertility and Under-five Mortality in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Undernutrition\(^1\) is one of the most important health and welfare problems among infants and young children in Malawi. It is a result of both inadequate intake of food and poor environmental sanitation. An inadequate intake of food is a consequence of improper feeding practices and/or insufficient food at the household level. Improper feeding practices include both the quality and quantity of foods offered to young children as well as the timing of their introduction. Poor sanitation puts young children at risk of increased illness, in particular diarrhoeal disease, which adversely affects a child's nutritional status. Both inadequate food intake and poor environmental sanitation reflect underlying social and economic conditions.

Undernutrition has significant health and economic consequences. The most serious of these is the increased risk of dying. Other outcomes include increased risk of illness and a lower level of cognitive development, which results in lower educational attainment. In adulthood, the accumulated effect of long-term undernutrition can be a reduction in worker productivity and increased absenteeism in the workplace, both of which may reduce individual and national lifetime earning potential. Furthermore, undernutrition can result in adverse pregnancy outcomes.

The Malawi data presented here are from the 1992 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey (MDHS), a nationally representative survey conducted by the National Statistical Office, Zomba, with technical assistance from Macro International Inc. The data presented for other sub-Saharan African countries are from Demographic and Health Surveys carried out in those countries.

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\(^1\) The technical definitions for undernutrition as defined by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and the World Health Organization (WHO) are presented in the Appendix.
Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years, Malawi

In Malawi:

- **One in two children under 5 years is chronically undernourished.** In other words, they are too short for their age or *stunted.*\(^1\) The proportion of children stunted is over 20 times the level expected in a healthy, well-nourished population.

- More than **one in four children is underweight**\(^2\) for his or her age. This is 11 times the level in a healthy, well-nourished population.

- **One in 20 children suffers from acute undernutrition.** This is manifested by the child being too thin for his or her height or *wasted.*\(^3\) The proportion of children who are wasted is 2 times the level expected in a healthy, well-nourished population.

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\(^1\) A *stunted* child has a height-for-age Z-score that is below -2 SD based on the NCHS/CDC/WHO international reference population. Chronic undernutrition is the result of an inadequate intake of food over a period of time and could also be affected by chronic illness.

\(^2\) An *underweight* child has a weight-for-age Z-score that is below -2 SD based on the NCHS/CDC/WHO international reference population. This condition can result from either chronic or acute undernutrition.

\(^3\) A *wasted* child has a weight-for-height Z-score that is below -2 SD based on the NCHS/CDC/WHO international reference population. Acute undernutrition is the result of a recent failure to receive adequate nutrition and may be affected by acute illness, in particular diarrhoea.
Undernutrition among Children Age 3 to 36 Months\(^1\) in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993

Among children age 3 to 36 months in the sub-Saharan countries surveyed:

- Malawi has the third highest proportion of children who are stunted.

- At over three times the level in a well-nourished population, acute undernutrition in Malawi is similar to the level found in many other sub-Saharan countries.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Unlike Malawi, in some countries data were collected only for children age 3 to 36 months. For comparative purposes data for this age range are presented.

\(^2\) It is important to note that these data come from surveys carried out in different seasons between 1986 and 1993, which could affect the comparability of the results.
Undernutrition by Age, Malawi

In Malawi, the time between 1 and 18 months of age is the vulnerable age:

- **Stunting**, indicating chronic malnutrition, begins early in life and increases until 18 months of age when it affects three in five children.

- The proportion of children **underweight** increases to over one in three by the age of 12 months.

- **Wasting**, indicating acute malnutrition, increases between 6 and 12 months of age and stays high through 18 months of age; between the ages of 12 and 18 months more than one in ten children is affected.
Feeding Practices for Infants under 4 Months, Malawi

Feeding patterns, as well as diarrhoeal disease, are important determinants of undernutrition.\(^1\) The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that all infants be exclusively breastfed from birth to 4 to 6 months of age. In other words they should be fed only breast milk.

In Malawi, the introduction of liquids, such as water, sugared water, teas, commercial formulae, and solid foods takes place far too early in life. This practice has a deleterious effect on nutritional status for a number of reasons. First, the liquids and solid foods offered are nutritionally inferior to breast milk. Second, the intake of liquids and solid foods results in lower breast milk intake which, in turn, reduces the mother's supply of milk because breast milk production is determined, in part, by both the frequency and intensity of suckling. Third, feeding young infants liquids and solid foods increases their exposure to pathogens and consequently puts them at greater risk of diarrhoeal disease.

- **Only three in one hundred** Malawian children under the age of 4 months are *exclusively breastfed*, as recommended by WHO.

- More than **one in two** infants under 4 months is given some form of supplemental feeding, **contrary to recommendations**.

- To a large extent, the failure to exclusively breastfeed for the first 4 to 6 months of life accounts for the rapid increase in undernutrition among young infants.

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\(^1\) Information on feeding practices is based on the 24 hours preceding the survey.
Infants under 4 Months Who Are Exclusively Breastfed and those Who Receive Supplemental Bottles, in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993

Not breastfeeding exclusively and introducing liquids and solid foods prematurely both increase the risk of diarrhoeal disease, a highly important cause of mortality in Africa.

- In the majority of sub-Saharan countries surveyed, including Malawi, few mothers of infants under 4 months follow the recommended practice of exclusive breastfeeding. In contrast, almost all infants are exclusively breastfed in Rwanda and Burundi.

- Bottle feeding, a non-recommended practice, is used by only one in twenty-five Malawian mothers of infants under 4 months.
Feeding Practices for Infants Age 6 to 9 Months, Malawi

The World Health Organization also recommends that solid foods be introduced to infants between the ages of 4 to 6 months because breast milk, on its own, is no longer sufficient to maintain optimal child growth. Thus, all infants over 6 months of age should be receiving solid foods along with breast milk.

- Nearly nine out of ten Malawian infants age 6 to 9 months are fed solid food in addition to breast milk. In other words, only about one in ten of the infants between the ages of 6 and 9 months is not fed according to the recommended practice.

- Six percent of infants age 6 to 9 months are either exclusively or fully breastfed; 6 percent are fed liquids in addition to breast milk; and 1 percent are fully weaned from the breast.
Infants 6 to 9 Months Not Receiving Food in Addition to Breast Milk in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993

- In Malawi just over 10 percent of the infants age 6 to 9 months are not fed according to the World Health Organization recommendations. This is the third lowest proportion of infants that receive neither breast milk nor solid foods among the sub-Saharan countries for which DHS data are available.
Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Region, Malawi

In Malawi:

- **One in two children in the Central region is stunted.** Stunting is slightly lower in both the Northern and Southern regions.

- **Underweight** is prevalent in all areas of Malawi, but more so in the **Southern and Central regions**.

- **Wasting is higher in the Southern regions** than in the other regions. This situation may be associated with the survey being conducted during the 1992 drought.
Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Residence, Malawi

In Malawi:

- **Stunting is about 45 percent higher in rural areas**, where about 90 percent of the Malawian population lives, than in urban areas.

- **Underweight is 85 percent greater in rural areas** than in urban areas.

- The level of **wasting in rural areas is more than twice that in urban areas**.
Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Mother's Education, Malawi

Maternal education is related to both a knowledge of good child-care practices and household wealth. One in two Malawian mothers has never attended school but there are regional differences. One-half or more mothers in the Central and Southern regions have never been to school, whereas one-quarter of mothers in the Northern region have not been to school.

- About one in two children of mothers with no education or only primary education is stunted whereas about one in five children of mothers with secondary or higher education is stunted.

- Underweight is between two and three times higher among children of mothers with no education or only primary education than it is among children whose mothers have attended secondary school or higher education.

- The levels of wasting are similar among mothers with different educational levels.

Undernutrition is high even among the children of educated women, suggesting that traditional infant and child feeding practices are inadequate for good nutrition and may have serious adverse effects on children's growth.
Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Source of Water, Malawi

The source of water is representative of both household wealth and environmental sanitation. Poor households are more likely to obtain water from a river/lake. Where water is not readily available, food hygiene is often inadequate thus increasing the risk of food contamination, which can result in increased risk of diarrhoeal disease and undernutrition.

- More than one-third of Malawian households obtain water from an unprotected well, about 20 percent use a protected well, 20 percent use a public tap, 15 percent use open-air sources, and 5 percent have water piped to their home.

Infants and children from households that do not have ready access to tap water are at greater risk of being undernourished than those from households with this amenity. This reflects not only the association between environmental sanitation (and thus the risk of diarrhoeal disease) and nutritional status, but also household wealth. Wealth determines a household's food supply and the ability to have better access to tap water. Although easy access to tap water may be associated with a reduced risk of a child being undernourished, it does not ensure that a child will be well-nourished.

- Even among households using tap water, more than one in four children is too short for his or her age.

- About one in seven children from households with a private supply of water is underweight.

- Wasting is five times more prevalent among children from households without piped water to the home.
Undernutrition among Children under 5 Years by Type of Toilet, Malawi

The type of toilet is also representative of both household wealth and environmental sanitation. Poor households are less likely to have toilet facilities. Poor sanitation results in an increased number of insects (particularly flies) thus increasing the risk of food contamination thereby increasing the risk of diarrhoeal disease, which can result in undernutrition.

- More than one-quarter of households in Malawi have no toilet facilities, and among those with toilet facilities most have a traditional pit latrine.

Infants and children from households that do not have ready access to a flush toilet are at greater risk of being undernourished than those from households with this amenity. As with source of water, this reflects not only the association between environmental sanitation and nutritional status, but also household wealth. While easy access to a flush toilet may be associated with a reduced risk of a child being undernourished, it does not ensure that a child will be well-nourished.

- Even among households having a flush toilet one in five children is stunted.

- Nearly one in ten children from households with a flush toilet is underweight.

- Children from households that do not have any toilet facilities are nearly 10 times more likely to be wasted than children from households with a flush toilet.
Age-related Pattern of Diarrhoea among Children Age 1 to 24 Months, Malawi

In Malawi:

- **The prevalence of diarrhoea increases rapidly and dramatically among infants under 9 months of age** before levelling off, and then declining somewhat after the age of 15 months.

- **The age-related pattern of diarrhoeal disease is not dissimilar to that for acute undernutrition.** This is not surprising given that *diarrhoea is a major determinant of acute undernutrition.*

The age-related pattern of diarrhoea reflects the increased risk of pathogen contamination associated with the early introduction of water, other liquids, and solid foods. In addition, once young children begin to crawl and move around, they tend to put objects into their mouths, increasing the risk of pathogen contamination.
Prevalence of Diarrhoea, Fever, and Cough among Children Age 1 to 24 Months\(^1\) in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993

- **One in three Malawian children under 24 months had diarrhoea** in the two weeks preceding the survey. This is the middle range of countries for the proportion of children with diarrhoea among the countries surveyed.

  It must be borne in mind that a mother's perception of diarrhoea may differ by country and this could influence these findings.

- **One in two Malawian children was reported to have had fever** in the preceding two weeks. This is the third highest proportion of the countries surveyed.

- **One in two Malawian children was also reported to have had a cough or rapid breathing** in the preceding two weeks. Again, this is among the highest of the countries surveyed.

  There are seasonal patterns in the prevalence of diarrhoea, fever, and respiratory illness which must be taken into account when comparing the results of the various surveys.

\(^1\) Data are presented only for children under 2 years because this age group is the most vulnerable to diarrhoeal disease.
Fertility and Under-five Mortality in Malawi and other sub-Saharan Countries, DHS 1986-1993

- The rate of childbearing in Malawi is high. At current levels, Malawian women have an average of 6.7 children by the end of their childbearing years (total fertility rate for women age 15 to 49 years), which is higher than the value for many other sub-Saharan countries surveyed.

- About one in four Malawian children die before their fifth birthday. Malawi has an under-five mortality rate of 234 deaths per 1000 births, which is the third highest for the countries surveyed.
The assessment of nutritional status is based on the concept that in a well-nourished population the distributions of children's height and weight, for a given age, will approximate a normal distribution. This means that about 68 percent of children will have a weight within 1 standard deviation of the mean for children of that age or height, and a height within 1 standard deviation of the mean for children of that age. About 14 percent of children will be between 1 and 2 standard deviations above the mean; these are considered relatively tall or overweight for their age or fat for their height. Another 14 percent will be between 1 and 2 standard deviations below the mean; these are considered relatively short or underweight for their age or thin for their height. Of the remainder, 2 percent will be very tall or very overweight for their age or very fat for their height, and 2 percent will be very short (stunted) or very underweight for their age or very thin (wasted) for their height, i.e., these categories are more than 2 standard deviations above or below the mean.

For comparative purposes nutritional status has been determined using the International Reference Population defined by the United States National Center for Health Statistics and the Centers for Disease Control and recommended by the World Health Organization.