

ENGAGING THE WORLD BANK

Securing Investments in Nutrition and
Implications for Childhood Development



ACTION GLOBAL HEALTH
ADVOCACY PARTNERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Almost half of all child deaths before the age of five can be attributed to malnutrition, which affects one in three children globally. In the fight against malnutrition, the World Bank is a primary target of advocacy, as it is the world's largest source of development financing and has committed itself to investing in early childhood development and human capital.

This case study aims to document how the ACTION Global Health Advocacy Partnership (ACTION) has influenced the World Bank's prioritization of nutrition, with a focus on stunting, resulting in greater investment and better World Bank policies. It also highlights the key role parliamentarians have to play in advancing the World Bank's impact on reducing malnutrition around the globe.

Because of its long history of advocacy at the World Bank, parliamentarians and civil-society partners view ACTION as a valuable resource. By arranging for advocates and members of parliament (MPs) to attend key World Bank meetings, ACTION has facilitated important connections that have led to the commitment of funds for nutrition initiatives. ACTION's work has also directly benefited the World Bank, by tracking the Bank's nutrition investments and analyzing their impact. This work has led to improvements in the World Bank's own internal tracking system and has informed programmatic decisions in the nutrition arena.

There have been some challenges to ACTION's advocacy with MPs and the World Bank. On the parliamentary front, the relative frequency of elections and corresponding changes in government can make it difficult for MPs to engage in multi-year nutrition projects. In addition, while MPs can influence World Bank decisions, they are not directly involved in the same way as executive branch leaders. The World Bank is an enormous organization with fairly opaque structures and processes. Consequently, advocates often struggle to reach decision-makers and to track the precise flow of money to various initiatives.

Despite progress in recent years, malnutrition and stunting remain significant problems worldwide, and the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to further exacerbate the situation through its disruption of food supply chains, economic activity, and development assistance. Through the pandemic and beyond, sustained advocacy will be necessary to ensure that nutrition and the early years receive sufficient World Bank funding.

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BACKGROUND

MALNUTRITION AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILD MORTALITY AND CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

In 2019, the latest year for which numbers are available, an estimated 5.2 million children under the age of five died. The deaths were heavily concentrated in two regions: sub-Saharan African and Central and Southern Asia. These two regions are home to 52 percent of the global under-five population but account for more than 80 percent of global under-five deaths. Indeed, five countries accounted for nearly 50 percent of under-five deaths in 2019: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan.¹

ALMOST HALF OF ALL UNDER-FIVE DEATHS CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO MALNUTRITION²

Almost half of all under-five deaths can be attributed to malnutrition.² One in three children globally suffers from one or more forms of malnutrition: undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, or obesity. One consequence of undernutrition is stunting, where a child's height is at least two standard deviations below the median for their age.³ According to the *2020 Global Nutrition Report*, nearly 151 million children under the age of five are stunted.⁴ Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the world was making headway in reducing stunting in the under-fives, from nearly 33 percent globally in 2000 to 22 percent in 2020.⁵ However,

progress has varied from region to region, with the highest stunting rates to be found in those areas seeing the highest under-five death rates: South Asia and Africa.

In July 2020, a United Nations report predicted that the COVID-19 pandemic and its disruption of food systems and nutrition services had probably made the problem of child malnutrition worse, with acute malnutrition likely to rise 14 percent in 2020.⁶ At the same time, the pandemic has temporarily shifted the funder landscape, with nutrition advocates raising concerns that global donors have prioritized COVID-19-related funds that may jeopardize investments in nutrition.⁷

Stunting, like other forms of undernutrition, has a profound impact on childhood development. By age three, a child's brain has developed to 80 percent of its adult size.⁸ This makes the early years the most critical period for brain development, with long-term impacts on physical, intellectual, and social health.

Healthy brain development is fueled by proper nutrition, the prevention of illness, and a nurturing and stimulating caretaking environment. A lack of these things can lead to serious and irreversible delays in children's growth, learning, and future economic prospects. For example, a World Bank analysis found that children who were well-nourished during their early years were likely to earn 20 percent more than their malnourished peers.⁹ This impact of malnutrition is felt across the global economy, with losses totaling US\$3.5 trillion a year. The World Bank has estimated that for every \$1 invested in nutrition, a country would see a \$16 return¹⁰ — a cost-benefit analysis that has fueled the Bank's recent prioritization of early childhood development investments, particularly for nutrition initiatives.

STUNTING, LIKE OTHER FORMS OF UNDERNUTRITION, HAS A PROFOUND IMPACT ON CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

5 COUNTRIES

accounted for nearly 50 percent of under-five deaths in 2019¹

14%

acute malnutrition likely to rise⁶



+ 20%

amount more than their malnourished peers that children who were well-nourished during their early years were likely to earn⁹

\$3.5 TRILLION

annual losses to global economy due to the impact of malnutrition

WORLD BANK LEADERSHIP ON INVESTING IN THE EARLY YEARS AND NUTRITION

The World Bank is a vital source of financial and technical assistance to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Indeed, it is the single largest development financing source globally, disbursing more than \$54 billion to partner countries in 2020, including \$21 billion through the International Development Association (IDA).¹¹

In 2016, the World Bank announced a new initiative with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), “Investing in the Early Years,” with the goal of ending childhood stunting.¹² The World Bank frames the initiative as part of its efforts to build “human capital” and drive future growth and development globally.¹³ At the “Human Capital Summit” in October 2016,

MALNUTRITION REMAINS A SIGNIFICANT BARRIER TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, AND THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 THREATEN TO EXACERBATE THE PROBLEM. INCREASED FOCUS ON NUTRITION FINANCING WILL BE NECESSARY TO SUSTAIN PROGRESS ON ENDING STUNTING WORLDWIDE

finance ministers from LMICs pledged to “dramatically reduce childhood stunting and equip tens of millions of children with the abilities they need to succeed in a fast-changing world.”¹⁴

In 2018, the World Bank launched the Human Capital Project, a multi-billion dollar initiative to advance more and better investments in health and education, with a primary focus on investments in early childhood development, often referred to as “the early years” or “the first 1,000 days” (from conception to two years of age).¹⁵

ACTION¹⁶ recognized that the Early Years initiative and this new, significant source of funding presented advocates with a major opportunity to leverage World Bank resources for nutrition. To achieve this goal, ACTION focused on putting stunting high on the World Bank’s agenda and building the capacity of MPs to champion the Early Years pillar.

Recognizing the enormous importance of the World Bank’s expanded leadership on nutrition, ACTION partners set to

work growing the Bank’s nutrition investments and programmatic commitments and holding the Bank to those commitments through a series of campaigns.

Malnutrition remains a significant barrier to human development, and the impacts of COVID-19 threaten to exacerbate the problem. Increased focus on nutrition financing will be necessary to sustain progress on ending stunting worldwide. This case study is meant to document the impact of ACTION’s advocacy and accountability campaigns on the World Bank’s nutrition programming and financing. It combines insights from public and internal documents, insider knowledge, and key stakeholder interviews to evaluate impact to date and offer future recommendations for World Bank nutrition advocacy.



ENCOURAGING THE WORLD BANK TO PRIORITIZE NUTRITION

ACTION'S APPROACH

ACTION has long recognized the centrality of the World Bank to development funding, both in addressing nutrition needs and in influencing the policies of member states. As far back as the late 1980s, RESULTS Educational Fund, a founding member of ACTION, worked with civil-society allies to influence the World Bank.

The Bank has made several changes in response to sustained advocacy by ACTION and its partners, such as adopting stronger language to emphasize poverty reduction, increasing funding for basic health and education programs, and improving reporting on the impact of investments. The 2018 World Bank Human Capital Project created an even bigger opportunity for ACTION advocacy on the goal of ending stunting and other forms of malnutrition.

ACTION also focuses its advocacy efforts on parliamentarians in key markets. MPs are crucial allies and champions, as they have a direct influence on national policy and nutrition-relevant legislation, as well as the potential to influence international funders (such as the World Bank). ACTION has mobilized MPs in campaigns to end tuberculosis (TB) and polio, to lobby for increased funding at the national and international levels, and to hold funders accountable to their commitments.

ACTION'S KEY ACTIVITIES

Advocating for more World Bank-affiliated funding for early-years programs and tracking the results

The evolution of the World Bank's leadership on nutrition investments was partly influenced by ACTION's advocacy on the cost-benefit aspect of nutrition funding for human growth and development. At numerous meetings with World Bank leadership over the years, ACTION presented the case for greater World Bank nutrition investment, citing both the importance of the early years in lifelong human development and the high return on investment of nutrition programs. Nutrition increasingly featured as a key topic at the World Bank's semi-annual meetings, leading to the World Bank's own cost-benefit analysis of nutrition investments, greater World Bank commitments to nutrition development, and the creation of the Human Capital Project.

Although the World Bank's commitment to advancing nutrition was clear, ACTION knew it was important for nutrition advocacy groups to press the World Bank to ensure those commitments translated into actual investments. Tracking IDA nutrition investments would provide ACTION with a key metric by which to measure the World Bank's progress against its nutrition pledges.

The IDA is the segment of the World Bank serving the world's poorest countries.¹⁷ It provides zero-interest and low-interest loans, as well as grants to 74 (currently) eligible countries; it is the largest source of donor funds for social services in these countries. The IDA is replenished in three-year cycles and, from the IDA17 replenishment period (July 2014–June 2017) to IDA18 (July 2017–June 2020), the World Bank increased the overall amount of IDA financing available by 44 percent (from \$52 billion to \$75 billion).¹⁸

ALTHOUGH THE WORLD BANK'S COMMITMENT TO ADVANCING NUTRITION WAS CLEAR, ACTION KNEW IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR NUTRITION ADVOCACY GROUPS TO PRESS THE WORLD BANK TO ENSURE THOSE COMMITMENTS TRANSLATED INTO ACTUAL INVESTMENTS

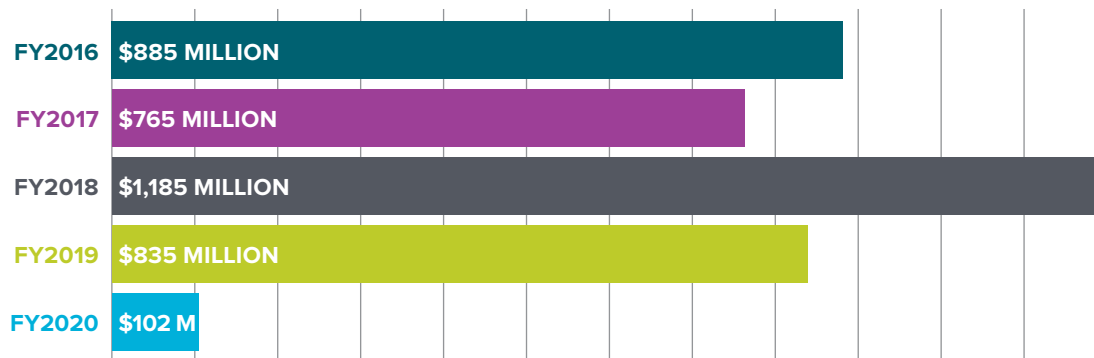
As the replenishment coincided with the World Bank's growing prioritization of nutrition investments, ACTION expected, at a minimum, to see a proportional 44 percent increase in IDA18-funded nutrition initiatives and framed its advocacy push around this estimate. ACTION's review in 2020 of publicly available information on the World Bank's project database found that, overall, there had been progress on nutrition financing under IDA18, though data from the last

two fiscal years show a significant decrease in funding (though this could be due to data collection and reporting inconsistencies within the World Bank's public database).

As of June 1, 2020, the World Bank had \$5,428 million invested in active projects for "nutrition & food security" through the IDA and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) — \$4,202 million through the IDA (38 projects) and \$1,225 million through the IBRD (6 projects). Additional grant co-financing from the Power of Nutrition, Global Financing Facility, and Japan Trust Fund totaled nearly \$197 million. Three additional

projects in the IDA pipeline totaled \$383 million. Under IDA17, the World Bank committed \$3,413 million in IDA/IBRD resources for nutrition and food security. Under IDA18, it committed \$2,014 million. This is in line with the Bank’s 2017 Nutrition for Growth (N4G) commitment in Milan of least \$1,700 million in nutrition financing from mid-2017 to mid-2019.

Nutrition commitments fluctuated greatly between FY2016 and FY2020 (see figure):



While hard to pinpoint, about 56 percent of this spending is on nutrition-specific interventions and 44 percent on nutrition-sensitive interventions, such as agriculture, social protection, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and education.

In high-level meetings with World Bank leadership, ACTION’s analysis formed the basis on which the partnership held the World Bank accountable on its nutrition commitments. ACTION’s arduous efforts to track IDA18 funds aimed to impress upon the World Bank the importance of being transparent in how it tracked its investments. In the past, ACTION’s work with the World Bank’s code reform process resulted in the creation of a separate code to track nutrition investments (which were formerly included within and indistinguishable from the broader “nutrition & food security” code).

Recent updates of the World Bank’s public database have finally disaggregated nutrition and food security theme coding, but this information is only available on a project-by-project basis. It is not yet possible to download a full project database that breaks down total spending by code, as ACTION previously used in its analysis. In addition, the theme codes do not have to add up to 100 percent, so in some instances, there may be some double counting of the investment impact of projects. It is, therefore, still more difficult than necessary to precisely measure the World Bank’s nutrition investments.

According to ACTION tracking, using the World Bank’s public database, no new nutrition or food security investments have been approved to date under IDA19 (July 2020–June 2022).¹⁹ In fact, almost all project approvals in the health sector have focused primarily on responding to COVID-19. This is not entirely surprising, but it does suggest the possibility of a growing funding gap in nutrition programming in the coming years. An opportunity exists to integrate nutrition-specific investments, along with primary healthcare overall, into robust COVID-19 response and recovery plans in a way that has not been seen to date.

ACTION has also pushed the Bank to integrate nutrition investments into existing funding streams beyond the IDA. For example, the World Bank made nutrition a funding priority for the Global Financing Facility (GFF) for Women, Children and Adolescents, a multi-stakeholder fund housed at the World Bank that provides financial and technical support to 36 LMICs to improve reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health and nutrition (RMNCAH+N).

Establishing stunting as a development indicator in the Human Capital Index

As part of the World Bank's Human Capital Project, it created a tool called the Human Capital Index (HCI).²⁰ Launched in 2018, the HCI incorporates data points on child development to compare the risks posed to children born today in 103 countries. As the World Bank developed the HCI, ACTION and its partners met with Bank leadership to successfully advocate for the inclusion of stunting as a high priority indicator in the HCI ("the rate of stunting of children under age 5"). The central importance of stunting indicators to the HCI allows policymakers and advocates to track stunting rates in index countries and boosts the importance of reducing stunting to advance human capital.

Mobilizing MPs within the World Bank's Parliamentary Network

The World Bank and MPs have long recognized the importance of their mutually beneficial relationship.²¹ For MPs, engaging with the World Bank is vital, given how much money the Bank provides in development assistance and its role and expertise in achieving positive

FOR MPs, ENGAGING WITH THE WORLD BANK IS VITAL, GIVEN HOW MUCH MONEY THE BANK PROVIDES IN DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE AND ITS ROLE AND EXPERTISE IN ACHIEVING POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT RESULTS

development results. In donor countries, MPs look to the World Bank as a vehicle for disseminating funding and ensuring that dollars are going to the most effective interventions. In recipient countries, MPs engage with the World Bank to influence how funds are allocated and how funded programs are implemented on the ground. For the World Bank, MPs play an essential role in shaping in-country development policies and relevant legislation, approving foreign aid budgets and loans, and conducting oversight of World Bank-financed programs.

Given MPs' direct influence on in-country public-health decisions and their ability to influence international funders, ACTION has frequently mobilized them in advocacy campaigns, including through the Global TB Caucus and One Last Push, the campaign to eradicate polio. The Global TB Caucus, for example, consists of MPs in 150 countries who, both collectively and individually, champion tuberculosis (TB) as an issue.²² This has helped to keep TB high on the national, regional, and global political agendas and served as a bridge between changes in government.

ACTION set out to build and grow a group of parliamentary champions for nutrition. This began by targeting MPs who engaged with the World Bank through the Parliamentary

Network (an independent group of MPs dedicated to World Bank and International Monetary Fund engagement) but may not have been directly involved in nutrition.

From 2016 to 2019, ACTION held five meetings for parliamentarians, co-hosted with the Parliamentary Network and Action Against Hunger. Held at the World Bank, the meetings coincided with the World Bank's Spring and Annual Meetings and were attended by at least 30 individual MPs over the period. At these meetings, MPs heard presentations from World Bank experts on the Human Capital Project and the value of nutrition initiatives, shared information on nutrition needs and initiatives in their own countries, and brainstormed opportunities to advocate for early-years investments within the World Bank.

For many of the participating MPs, these meetings served as an introduction to nutrition development work at the World Bank and were a springboard for the early-years work they would pursue in their countries. To help develop their early-years expertise, parliamentary attendees recommended that ACTION (along with Action Against Hunger) develop a briefing book for MPs to use in their efforts. Published in advance of the 2018 World Bank Spring Meetings, the book provided an overview of the economic and scientific evidence of the value of early-years interventions, outlined opportunities for early-years financing through the World Bank, and identified actions MPs could take to support ongoing investment in this area.²³

**AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL,
ACTION PARTNERS TARGETED
MP CHAMPIONS IN WORLD
BANK DONOR COUNTRIES
IN AN EFFORT TO MAINTAIN
AND EXPAND INVESTMENTS
IN NUTRITION**

At the national level, ACTION partners targeted MP champions in World Bank donor countries in an effort to maintain and expand investments in nutrition. In 2016, RESULTS hosted a journalist trip to Madagascar to report on stunting, resulting in the publication of 10 undernutrition articles in the U.S., UK, Italian, and Canadian press. This coverage increased the likelihood that MPs from donor countries (and their constituents) would learn about the problem of undernutrition and take action.

ACTION partners in the UK and Canada also led delegations of lawmakers from those countries on visits to nutrition intervention sites in Ethiopia and Tanzania in 2017 and 2018. The goal of these trips was to show MPs the impact of their countries' investments through development assistance. Subsequently, members of the House of Lords in the UK, for example, referred to information gathered in these visits when making the case for nutrition funding in the UK's foreign aid portfolio. In response, government ministers confirmed the integration of nutrition into aspects of the UK's foreign aid as a priority.

RESULTS UK houses the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Nutrition for Growth (N4G), a cross-party working group composed of MPs and other groups, comprising six parliamentarians and a group of 50–60 other interested parties. The group, formed in 2019, holds monthly meetings with a focus on nutrition research briefings, strategic planning to secure continued nutrition commitments from the UK, and the facilitation of meetings between the APPG and members of the UK government.



STAKEHOLDER INSIGHT

To capture stakeholder input to this study, ACTION conducted video interviews with its partners (except in the case of the MPs from Tanzania, who submitted their answers to the interview questions in writing), including: four current and former members of the ACTION Secretariat; one member of ACTION partner KANCO; representatives of two external allied organizations (Action Against Hunger and the SUN Movement); seven MPs from Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, and the UK; three World Bank staffers who work with the Parliamentary Network; and one World Bank staffer who works in the nutrition division. Eighteen participated in total.

Interviewees were selected because of their knowledge of and/or participation in ACTION's advocacy activities with the World Bank. Interviews were guided by a standard set of questions aimed at assessing the value of ACTION's World Bank advocacy strategy, barriers to achieving outcomes, and recommendations for future advocacy priorities. In addition, MPs were asked about their role in advancing nutrition at national level and their perspective on the support needed from civil society and the World Bank to achieve results.

BENEFITS

The World Bank is an important resource and partner for nutrition investments

For interviewees, the value of having the World Bank prioritize nutrition was obvious and clear. A large part of the Bank's value lies in the scale on which it operates, both in terms of finance and global reach. An ACTION partner, whose own nutrition programming has received funding as part of a World Bank nutrition investment in their country, referred to the World Bank as, ***“a big-line source for nutrition resources.”*** Dissan Boureima Gnomou, an MP from Burkina Faso, noted, ***“Money from the World Bank is what allowed us to get a nutrition line [item] in our country's budget for the first time.”*** Lord Collins of Highbury, Shadow Spokesperson on Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and International Development in the UK House of Lords, said, “Meeting the nutrition people at the World Bank, I got to benefit from their expertise and learn more about their strategies on human capital. I got an understanding of how their team monitored and judged the effectiveness of their nutrition spend.”

**THE WORLD
BANK'S GLOBAL
REACH AND
REPUTATION
LENDS CREDIBILITY
AND MOMENTUM
TO NUTRITION
INVESTMENTS**

The World Bank's global reach and reputation lends credibility and momentum to nutrition investments. ***“The World Bank partnership is very important for our low-income and lower-middle-income countries and their government officials,”*** said Jean Sebastien Kouassi country finance expert at the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement Secretariat, ***“and having the funding come from the World Bank lends momentum to nutrition projects.”*** For example, another MP mentioned ***“presenting World Bank nutrition materials to my colleagues and government officials, in which the World Bank analyzed the cost of stunting, and people really taking it seriously because it was a World Bank analysis.”*** This credibility was also noted by World Bank staffers, who highlighted the organization's trusted technical expertise and its ability to ***“diagnose and benchmark nutrition goals and mark progress.”*** This analysis is bolstered by the World Bank's in-country reach, which, as the staffers noted, includes personnel ***“on the ground that provide [the organization] with updates on country needs as well as expertise in program development and implementation.”***

Interviewees noted the value of listing stunting as part of the HCI. One ACTION ally believed that without stunting in the HCI, ***“the issue would not be on my country's radar.”*** It provided Mr. Kouassi with more avenues to press his government to devote more resources to nutrition, noting, ***“the government takes the World Bank/IMF indicators seriously and wants to measure well against them.”***

ACTION's World Bank expertise was of great benefit to ACTION partners and MPs

The World Bank, as a former ACTION staffer noted, ***“is an enormous institution, with a high bar to entry when it comes to understanding its mechanics.”*** An ACTION partner noted that, before working with ACTION, they had very little knowledge and understanding

of how to navigate the World Bank. An ACTION partner and an external ally cited ACTION's advocacy training as a key primer on *“how the World Bank works and which levers matter when it comes to nutrition work.”*

The same was true for the MPs interviewed. Dr. Olanrewaju Tejuoso, a distinguished senator from Nigeria, noted how ACTION's Parliamentary Briefing book was a *“very helpful primer on nutrition opportunities at the World Bank.”* Mr. Gnoumou said, *“Before my involvement with ACTION [through the World Bank parliamentary meetings], I knew nothing, but now I know something and can explain to my fellow MPs some tips on how the World Bank works.”* Lord Collins said, *“[ACTION] introduced me to senior World Bank officials, nutrition experts, politicians from my own country, and politicians from recipient countries. I got to see how decisions are made at the Bank and the pressure needed to sustain nutrition commitments.”*

CHALLENGES

ACTION may have work to do to further its brand identity at the World Bank

There is confusion among the World Bank's nutrition team about what ACTION is, how it differs from RESULTS Educational Fund, and whether partners/external allies are speaking on behalf of ACTION or themselves. *“I get very confused about whether I am talking to or participating in something with ACTION or with a wider coalition of [non-governmental organizations], and I don't know what the ACTION coalition is and whether and how it is distinguished from RESULTS work,”* a team member said.

OVER THE YEARS, ACTION AND BANK STAFF HAVE WORKED MORE CLOSELY TOGETHER, AND ACTION HAS SEEN NUANCED PROGRESS THAT HAS CONTRIBUTED TO ADVOCACY WINS

There is also frustration over the multiple and duplicative data requests the Bank receives from ACTION and its partners: *“It was getting quite time consuming to respond to seemingly uncoordinated data requests from within the same coalition. We would see different groups asking questions worded exactly the same as many as ten different times. It was too much, and we finally had to dictate that we would only respond via the Global Nutrition Report.”*

In addition to the duplicative requests, the nutrition staffer noted that ACTION and its coalition ask for nutrition information at different turning points, using a timeframe the Bank itself does not use to track investments. *“We get a request for investments as of, say, January, then a request for investments as of March, and then June, and we have to tell them over and over again that we don't update our numbers like that, and we cannot just analyze things based on ACTION's preferred time period.”*

The nutrition staffer also pushed back on advocates' concerns over how the Bank tracks its investments. *“The issue that comes up every single year with every single ACTION group is that the Bank is a different kind of donor than others. We report based on allocations made and not on disbursements. Any allocation made is attached to a legally binding*

commitment by the recipient country, and so we see that as a firm way to count because the country has to use it for what they have agreed to use it for. But we cannot convince the advocates of this, no matter how hard we try.”

It is worth noting that while a World Bank allocation may be a legally binding commitment, the Bank’s language varies, as in the case of its initial commitment for N4G, for example, which referred to disbursements. In addition, when the Bank reported against its N4G pledge initially, it did so, seemingly, based on disbursements rather than allocation, so advocates remained steadfast in pushing for transparency and accuracy in the reporting of these commitments.

On some core issues, ACTION and the Bank don’t see eye to eye, demonstrating the complexity of the relationship. Over the years, ACTION and Bank staff have worked more closely together, and ACTION has seen nuanced progress that has contributed to advocacy wins. In a meeting with the nutrition team in June 2021, the Bank team revealed that they would be conducting a review of their investments, project by project.

There are challenges to engaging MPs

Former ACTION staffers, ACTION partners and allies, representatives from the World Bank, and MPs themselves talked in depth about the challenges of engaging MPs. All stakeholders understood the importance of parliamentarians in, among other things, approving and monitoring World Bank loans. However, the role of MPs is limited by the World Bank’s policy of working exclusively with country executives in making grant and loan decisions and the resulting lack of information MPs have on World Bank agreements with their country. As one ACTION ally put it, *“The World Bank deals directly with a country’s finance ministers, not the MPs, and so any advocacy targeted at MPs must recognize that their scope is limited.”*

MPs have sometimes felt out of touch with World Bank initiatives in their countries. *“When I was on the Health Committee,”* said one parliamentarian, *“the only time I would hear about a World Bank loan was if there was an accusation of inappropriate use of the funds by my country, and the Parliament would be called in to investigate.”*

Mr. Gnoumou noted that it was easier for him to secure meetings with World Bank staff in Washington, DC than with the World Bank staff working in his own country. *“I have asked for meetings, but I have not been able to secure them. The World Bank in DC has helped arrange for me to tour World Bank nutrition programming in other countries, but I cannot get information about nutrition programming in my own country.”*

World Bank staff and MPs themselves noted that the “shorter time horizon” of MPs’ re-election cycles can make it difficult to engage MPs on long-term priorities such as multi-year nutrition investments. As one World Bank staff member noted, *“The natural turnover in politics is a challenge. MPs move to different committees or leave politics altogether. You might put in a lot of work with an MP only to see them move on after a few years.”*

FORMER ACTION STAFFERS, ACTION PARTNERS AND ALLIES, REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE WORLD BANK, AND MPS THEMSELVES TALKED IN DEPTH ABOUT THE CHALLENGES OF ENGAGING MPs

Although the MPs that were interviewed appreciated the opportunity the ACTION World Bank meetings afforded them, former ACTION staffers and ACTION allies were not certain that there was a sufficiently clear vision for the meetings. One former staffer noted, ***“I don’t know what the outcome goals were and what was expected of MPs back home and how ACTION’s support would translate for MPs once they were back home.”*** This dovetails with a request from the MPs that future ACTION work with them focus more on in-country nutrition opportunities and connections. According to Hon. Gnoumou, ***“I think [ACTION]***

WORLD BANK STAFFERS NOTED THE LEVEL OF EFFORT NECESSARY TO KEEP A STRONG NETWORK OF MPS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD ENGAGED IN WORLD BANK PRIORITIES

can also facilitate more interaction with the World Bank at the local level, to help us connect with in-country programming.” Lord Collins noted, ***“I would wonder after each [MP meeting at the World Bank] about the program’s reach. How do they reach beyond to work with the MPs who are not in attendance?”***

ACTION external allies noted that MPs from IDA-eligible countries often don’t have the same kind of support staff as MPs from donor countries, meaning that MPs in IDA-eligible countries are not able to appraise the national nutrition financing landscape (especially the domestic resources

allocated or disbursed), giving them less ability to lead on nutrition initiatives or to meet with nutrition advocates regularly. ***“It is hard to get the attention of representatives in the ministry of finance in order to advance our work,”*** said Mr. Kouassi. ***“It is, therefore, also useful to further engage MPs with the support of civil society organizations for both mobilizing and tracking nutrition financing. In several countries, MPs can play a bigger role in supporting a better integration of nutrition in the national legislation, policies, and budgets.”*** Being affected by tight resources is true for some in donor countries as well. As Lord Collins noted, ***“Opposition politicians [like me] don’t have access to a huge amount of resources, so having [ACTION’s] support is an important resource in terms of providing me with the evidence I need to make the case for nutrition funding.”***

World Bank staffers noted the level of effort necessary to keep a strong network of MPs throughout the world engaged in World Bank priorities, including nutrition. This was echoed by former ACTION staffers, one of whom said: ***“If ACTION wants a more comprehensive strategy to work with MPs, the work required likely merits a person to do that full-time.”***

The impact of ACTION partners’ nutrition tracking on World Bank transparency is as yet unquantified

ACTION staff and its external allies agree on the importance of independent, outside tracking of the World Bank’s nutrition investments. ***“Our analysis showed that there was an important role for an outside analysis of the World Bank’s nutrition investments, even without full access to the data. The analysis questioned the level of high-impact nutrition investments the Bank was actually making and helped open a conversation with the Bank about how it was tracking investments and what kind of investments it was making,”*** said



Joanne Carter, executive director of ACTION partner RESULTS Educational Fund. Xochitl Sanchez development finance manager for the ACTION Secretariat noted, ***“The process showed the World Bank that it was not fulfilling its nutrition commitments and put pressure on it to do better.”***

ACTION staff were aware that the World Bank took ACTION’s nutrition tracking analysis seriously. In meetings with the World Bank, ACTION staff noticed that their nutrition scorecard was tacked up on staff office boards and were informed that their scorecard results were used in internal World Bank meetings to highlight the Bank’s nutrition tracking issues. As a World Bank staff member noted, ***“The Bank relies on civil society to understand what is working and what is not working when it comes to nutrition progress.”*** According to ACTION staffers, ACTION’s nutrition tracking work also got the attention of donor countries, who raised concerns as to the low level of recent World Bank nutrition spending. Still, interviewees were unable to identify concrete reforms (outside of the nutrition tracking code reforms) that elevated the World Bank’s transparency on nutrition tracking and held the Bank accountable for its nutrition investments.

Despite code reforms within the World Bank that make it easier to track nutrition disbursements and a database update that breaks out nutrition and food security theme coding, gaps remain in the detail of available data. As one former ACTION staff member noted, ***“tracking nutrition investments is still time-intensive and requires some methodical guesswork on the part of civil society.”***

The World Bank's governance structure poses some challenges for the ACTION advocacy model

Nearly every interviewee noted that the World Bank could be an *“overwhelming”* institution to navigate. As one ACTION partner noted, *“It is an enormous institution, with a high bar of entry when it comes to understanding how it works.”*

In addition to its size and scope, the World Bank's governance structure presents barriers to civil-society engagement and impact. According to a former ACTION staff member, *“The ACTION model is to drive grassroots action, but that model breaks down [because] the World Bank is not or does not see itself as accountable to a country's citizens.”* For the World Bank, its relationships and agreements with countries are through that country's executive branch. Those agreements, according to an ACTION partner, are *“fairly opaque.”* According to an ACTION staff member, *“there is no formal mechanism or governance structure that allows advocates to demand or obtain transparency”* on what those agreements are.

An ACTION partner described how the World Bank responds to advocates' requests for information: *“They direct us to seek information from our own governments rather than the Bank.”* As an ACTION staffer noted, *“The Bank's governance structures don't really facilitate engagement between the Bank and advocacy groups on the ground. Those doors are not open. The presumption within the Bank is that the relationship is with the country's finance minister.”*

IMPACT

ACTION's facilitation of advocate and MP attendance at World Bank meetings has forged important connections and opportunities

In organizing advocate and MP engagement at World Bank meetings, ACTION has provided unique opportunities for those stakeholders to understand how the World Bank works, to make important connections at the World Bank, and to cross paths and engage with senior

ACTION'S CONVENING OF MPS AROUND WORLD BANK MEETINGS HAS PROVIDED COUNTRIES WITH VALUABLE OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE LEARNINGS AND BEST PRACTICES WITH EACH OTHER

officials from their own countries. An ACTION partner noted, *“I got to meet with my country's finance minister after cornering him in the hallway. I would never have had access to the finance minister if I tried to make an appointment with him at home.”*

Mr. Gnomou was in the same meeting as his country's finance minister and secured a one-on-one conversation with him in which he *“got him to agree to make better nutrition commitments in our country's budget.”*

One MP noted the value of ACTION's World Bank convenings in drawing the attention of his country's senior government officials. These government officials attended because senior World Bank officials were also attending.

The MP said, *“When [my country’s senior government officials] saw me speak at the meeting, it gave credibility to my efforts at home to advance nutrition initiatives. The government officials took me more seriously back home.”*

ACTION’s convening of MPs around World Bank meetings has provided countries with valuable opportunities to share learnings and best practices with each other. Lord Collins noted: *“I hoped to learn from other countries’ experiences on the subject because it is very relevant... and I did learn a lot about what countries such as Guatemala, Jamaica, India, Nepal, and some West African countries were doing [on nutrition and the early years]. This experience sharing is very important.”*

Mr. Gnoumou also noted the ways in which an ACTION-facilitated trip to Washington, DC helped to solidify his commitment to working on nutrition issues: *“It demonstrated that ACTION is invested in me, and in my work, and that makes me want to do even more back home.”* Lord Collins said, *“The trips gave me a better understanding of how important the World Bank work was, in terms of nutrition-sensitive activity, and gave me a very effective and strong building block to do my work at home. It made me a better advocate and it enables me to keep banging on in my country about our support for nutrition.”*

FUTURE NEED

COVID-19 has deprioritized nutrition in IDA-eligible countries and among donors

Advocates noted that responding to COVID-19 has been, understandably, the top public-health priority of governments and donors this year. This has taken attention and resources away from nutrition programming and investments. An MP from a donor country noted that his government had cut development funding during COVID-19, including funding for nutrition initiatives. As one ACTION external ally noted,

“We are seeing this across all funders and in many countries, that the main health response has prioritized COVID-19 prevention and treatment.” Another ACTION ally noted that, despite the link between malnutrition and vulnerability to COVID-19 illness and death, *“there is very little conversation within donor networks on the value of nutrition programming as a way to mitigate COVID-19.”*

Advocates worry about the progress that may have been lost on reducing malnutrition and whether additional resources will be allocated to address the ongoing disruption. Lord Collins noted that his donor country, the UK, had cut development funding during COVID-19, including funding for nutrition initiatives. As Dr. Tejuoso observed, *“Nutrition has got to remain a top priority of the Bank. There is still so much work to be done.”* Lord Collins further noted, *“Whatever priorities governments have, if the foundation spending on nutrition isn’t there, they are wasting their development funds.”*

ADVOCATES NOTED THAT RESPONDING TO COVID-19 HAS BEEN, UNDERSTANDABLY, THE TOP PUBLIC-HEALTH PRIORITY OF GOVERNMENTS AND DONORS THIS YEAR



FUTURE DIRECTION

The World Bank remains an essential resource in the fight against stunting and other forms of malnutrition, but in the wake of COVID-19, a concerted advocacy push will be required to maintain and maximize the World Bank's commitments to nutrition initiatives. ACTION and its partners have a key role to play in this advocacy, through direct engagement with the World Bank, through ACTION's network of parliamentary champions, and through ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the World Bank's nutrition portfolio. Learnings from this case study can help to steer ACTION's advocacy work to ensure that the World Bank's nutrition investments realize the opportunities they should for children at risk of or suffering from malnutrition.

Based on the findings of this case study, the following recommendations are designed to improve the efficacy of ACTION's nutrition advocacy with the World Bank.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Continue to pressure the World Bank to keep nutrition a priority

WIn the wake of COVID-19, it is more important than ever for nutrition to remain a priority focus area for the World Bank. According to recent estimates, an additional \$1.2 billion is needed annually to tackle the impact of COVID-19 on nutrition, on top of the World Bank's estimates of \$7 billion per year. With its demonstrated World Bank experience and expertise, the ACTION partners must intensify their advocacy for the resources needed to close the funding gap for nutrition and early-years commitments.

While ACTION has focused its advocacy efforts on stunting, it should expand its focus to include other forms of malnutrition, including wasting and obesity. As of 2021, 45 million children worldwide are affected by wasting, and 39 million children under the age of 5 were overweight or obese.²⁴ Rates of childhood obesity are on the rise in LMICs.²⁵ One way to step up ACTION's work in this regard would be advocating for wasting and obesity to be included as indicators in the HCI, which would draw greater attention to these problems at country level.

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RECOMMENDATION 2:

Continue to track World Bank-funded nutrition programs

Work remains to be done in monitoring the implementation of World Bank-funded nutrition initiatives and evaluating their impact. With its expertise in monitoring World Bank funding and its track record of producing accurate and well-respected reports, ACTION partners can continue to advocate to the World Bank to track and release more information on program disbursements and impacts. This would inform future funding decisions and help identify best practices in the implementation of nutrition projects. It would also help civil-society organizations in implementing countries to hold their governments to account for their use of World Bank funds. ACTION partners, who are locally rooted and experienced in engaging the World Bank, as well as national, regional, and local governments, are ideally situated to this task.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Increase ACTION's capacity to support a broader network of partners engaging with the World Bank

ACTION is a key leader and expert partner in nutrition advocacy, accountability, and policy efforts, so opportunities to improve the capacity for this work are critical. Future grant funding could be used to support or incentivize an expert team to implement the recommendations of this case study and to build ACTION's capacity to support and manage a broader network of partners.

Overall, ACTION partners could undertake grassroots activism more broadly, as a catalyst for pressuring national finance ministers to address nutrition, access World Bank funding, and track funding allocations and progress.

ACTION IS A KEY LEADER AND EXPERT PARTNER IN NUTRITION ADVOCACY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND POLICY EFFORTS, SO OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE CAPACITY FOR THIS WORK ARE CRITICAL

ACTION's work with MPs should include more opportunities for MPs to engage with in-country executive branch leadership (presidents, prime ministers, finance ministers, members of cabinet) who are directly engaged in World Bank financing decisions. In this way, ACTION's MP network can influence those decision-makers who will influence the World Bank most directly. MPs should be trained specifically in this sort of in-country executive-branch advocacy.

In addition, ACTION should work to facilitate opportunities for MPs and ACTION partners on the ground to meet with World Bank staff working on nutrition programming at national level and learn more about the nature and impact of the nutrition initiatives they are supporting.

If its MP engagement grows in size and scope of activities, ACTION should allocate more staff time (at least one full-time resource) to drive this work. In its collaboration with civil-society partners, ACTION should also devote more resources to coordinating advocacy efforts, which would both improve efficiency and strengthen relationships with the World Bank.



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