Nutrition: a quintessential sustainable development goal

In the final paper of our 2008 Lancet Series on maternal and child undernutrition, Saul Morris and colleagues wrote that, “The international nutrition system—made up of international and donor organisations, academia, civil society, and the private sector—is fragmented and dysfunctional”. They concluded that, incredibly, no evidence base existed to prioritise actions to improve nutrition. And they argued that the voice of countries must be better heard, felt, and reflected in global decision making. Too often country priorities to strengthen nutrition were ignored by donors and agencies alike. 5 years on, thanks to the work of a consortium of scientists led by Robert E Black from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (the Maternal and Child Nutrition Study Group), we review the progress made against these findings and recommendations. Although some news is better than 5 years ago, there is still a deeply worrying gulf between country needs and global actions. But what is most different—an extraordinary opportunity as well as a severe challenge—is the political urgency of nutrition.

This latest Lancet Series updates, with extensive new data, the contribution undernutrition in its various forms makes to child mortality and morbidity. Compared with 2008, the result is a radically different picture of the relation between nutritional deficiencies and child health. The overall finding is that 3·1 million children younger than 5 years die every year from undernutrition; that is a staggering 45% of total child deaths in 2011.

To address this enormous and too often hidden cause of child mortality, the Maternal and Child Nutrition Study Group propose a new framework to optimise the delivery of priority evidence-based interventions to prevent and treat undernutrition across the whole life course. Unique to this Series is the systematic approach to both the timing of the interventions and to creating an enabling environment for nutrition. The Maternal and Child Nutrition Study Group emphasises ten interventions targeted to women of reproductive age, during pregnancy, and to infants and children. They calculate the effects of these interventions in 34 countries across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, where 90% of the global burden of undernutrition resides. In doing so, they reinforce the importance of the first 1000 days from conception to 2 years. What goes right and what goes wrong for fetal and child nutrition during this period has lasting and irreversible consequences for later life.

There are several entirely new findings in this Series. First, the adolescent girl is identified as especially vulnerable to the effects of undernutrition. But that very predicament also makes adolescent girls a group with a special opportunity too.

Second, the importance of fetal growth restriction or being born small for gestational age is highlighted. According to new estimates, fetal growth restriction causes more than 800 000 neonatal deaths and 20% of stunting in children younger than 5 years worldwide. These findings are presented by Robert E Black and colleagues, and Joanne Katz and colleagues in the companion Article. Third, the Series is not only concerned with interventions. It also identifies delivery platforms for the implementation of those interventions, most promisingly in the community and in schools. Fourth, the Series costs these interventions and explains why those costs—an additional Int$9·6 billion annually for the 34 countries identified—are much less prohibitive than they might at first seem. And finally, the Series identifies a further threat to maternal and child nutritional status: overweight and obesity.

On June 8, 2013, the Governments of Brazil and the UK will co-host a Nutrition for Growth event. There is therefore an immediate opportunity to foster political
support for the interventions that can be quickly scaled up or linked to nutrition programmes—such as early child development initiatives. It is equally important to take note of the message of Marie Ruel and colleagues— that in certain sectors, such as agriculture, the evidence of the effect of targeted programmes on maternal and child nutrition is largely inconclusive and requires new approaches to field evaluation.

Since 2008, there have been only limited increases in donor aid for nutrition. It is true that nutrition is not so readily attractive to politicians as an international development priority. Undernutrition has a complex set of political, social, and economic causes, none of which are amenable to easy solutions that fit within the timeframe of a single political cycle. For this reason, the outlook today for nutrition is not wholly good. The target endorsed only a year ago at the World Health Assembly—to reduce by 40% the number of children stunted by 2025—is already on course to be missed.

As the endpoint of the Millennium Development Goals approaches, countries and the international community may agree that nutrition was one of the great missed opportunities of the past 15 years. But this neglect can be turned around quickly. As sustainable development becomes the dominant idea post-2015, nutrition emerges as the quintessential example of a sustainable development objective. If maternal and child nutrition is optimised, the benefits will accrue and extend over several generations. This remarkable opportunity is why Stuart Gillespie and colleagues take a very different approach to implementation than in any previous Lancet Series. Instead of exhorting politicians and policy makers to do something—or worse, simply hoping that political commitment will appear like a rabbit out of a hat—they set out a practical guide about how to seize the agenda for nutrition, how to create political momentum, and how to turn that momentum into results. This is the prize we have to grasp in the next 18 months.

Richard Horton, Selina Lo
The Lancet, London NW1 7BY, UK

We thank the Maternal and Child Nutrition Study Group, led by Robert E Black, for leading the conception and design of this Series. We also acknowledge the generosity of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for providing financial support.