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Adapting social assistance programs to address malnutrition in all its forms in Asia and the Pacific

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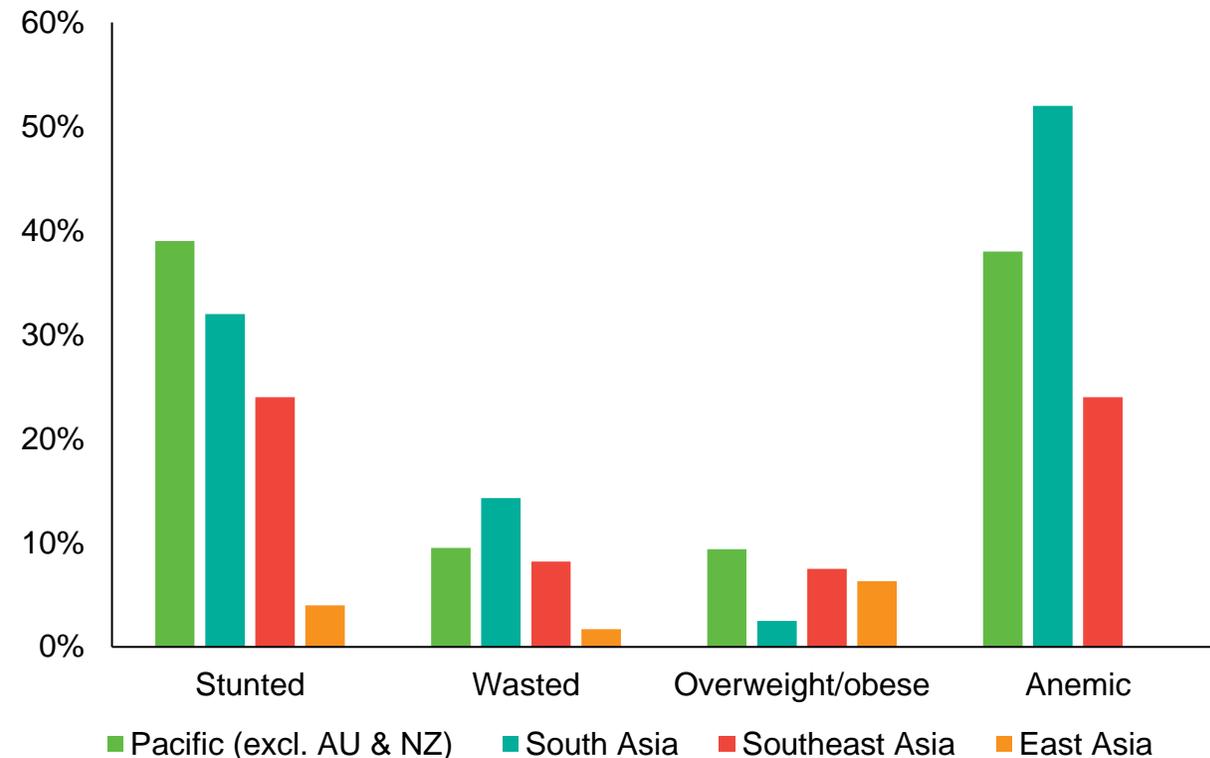
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Malnutrition in all its forms in Asia and the Pacific

- In Asia and the Pacific
 - >350 million people are undernourished
 - ~ 1 billion are overweight/obese
- All forms of malnutrition have likely been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic
 - For example, moderate or severe wasting is estimated to increase by 14.3% among children <5 y; 57.6% of this in Asia¹

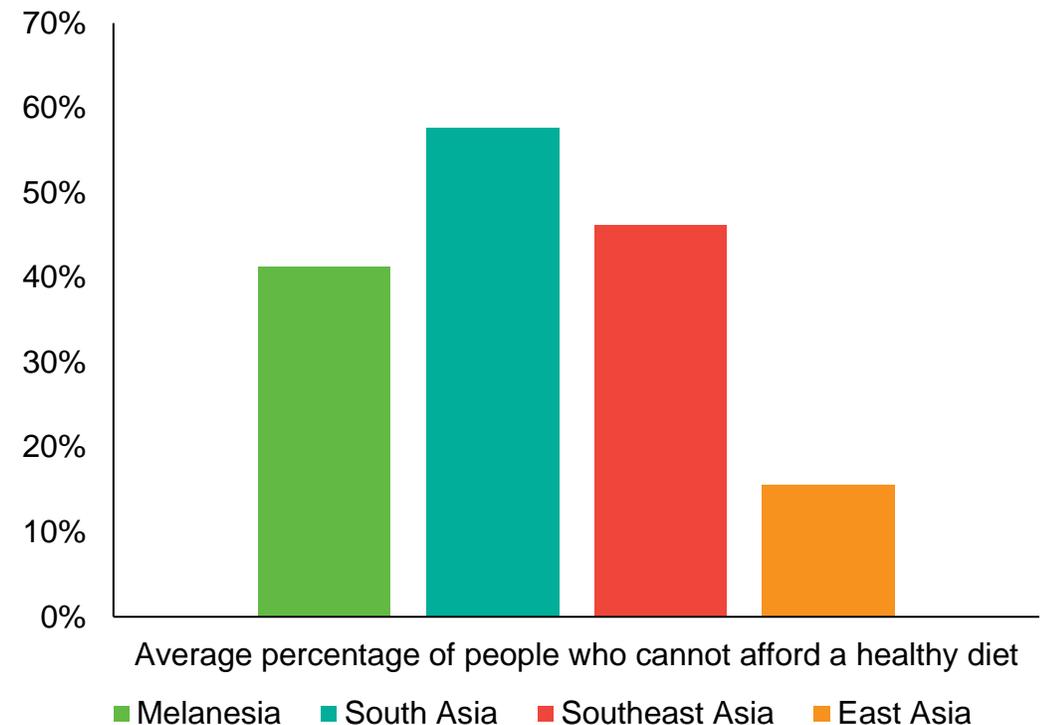
Prevalence of malnutrition in among children < 5 y in Asia and the Pacific by sub-region^{2,3}



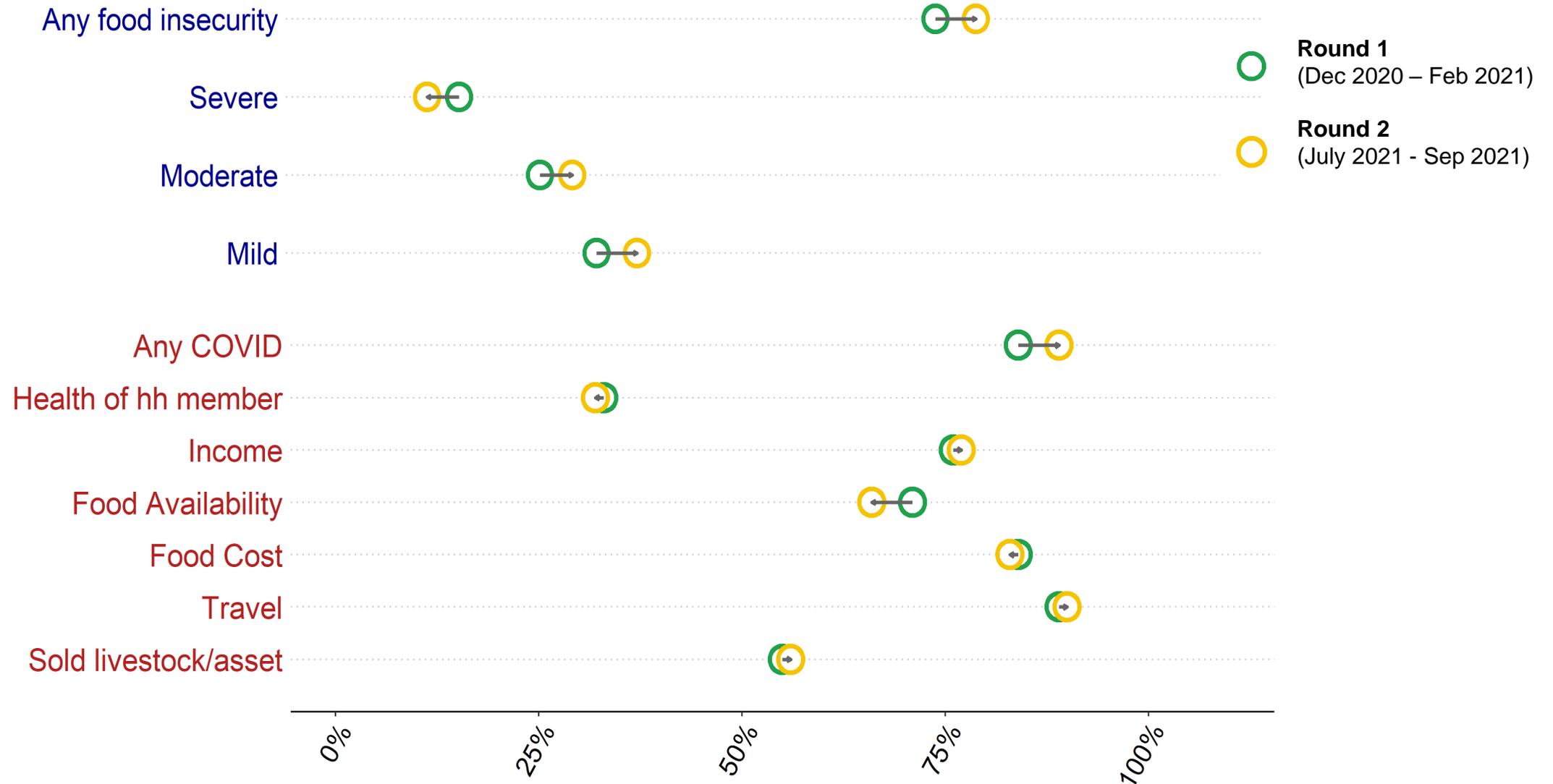
Poor quality diets as a primary driver of malnutrition

- Poor quality diets are a primary cause of all forms of malnutrition and the leading cause of disease worldwide⁴
- Nearly 2 billion in Asia and the Pacific cannot afford a healthy diet²
- The COVID-19 pandemic has likely increased this number substantially. For example, estimates indicate that¹:
 - An additional 140 million people will be living in extreme poverty (<\$1.90 per day)
 - 50% increase in acute food insecurity in LMICs

Average percentage of people who cannot afford a healthy diet by sub-region in Asia and the Pacific⁵



Food insecurity and perceived impacts of COVID-19 among smallholder farmers in Sri Lanka



Multisectoral strategies to improve diets and reduce all forms of malnutrition (1)

- In 2013, in the Lancet Nutrition Series, highlighted the need to make large-scale programs across multiple sectors nutrition-sensitive to address the underlying causes of malnutrition⁶
- In 2020, a paper in the Food and Nutrition Bulletin highlighted seven opportunities for improving impact of programs on diet and nutrition outcomes⁷
- In 2021, a report on the food and nutrition situation in Asia² calls for integrating actions across the health, WASH, education, agriculture and social protection sectors to improve diets and reduce all forms of malnutrition



Nutrition-sensitive opportunities

Target nutritionally vulnerable groups

Add or link to nutritionally-relevant complementary activities

Adequate quantity and nutritional quality of the transfer

Make transfers conditional

Nutritionally-relevant assets

Align with national nutrition action plans

Apply a gender and protection lens

Multisectoral strategies to improve diets and reduce all forms of malnutrition (2)

- In 2020, a paper in the Lancet highlighted five actions for safeguarding children's right to nutrition during the pandemic – with two dealing specifically with social protection programs⁸
 - Safeguard and promote access to nutritious, safe, and affordable diets
 - Invest in improving maternal and child nutrition through pregnancy, infancy, and early childhood
 - Re-activate and scale up services for the early detection and treatment of child wasting
 - Maintain the provision of nutritious and safe school meals for vulnerable children
 - Expand social protection to safeguard access to nutritious diets and essential services

Social protection as a strategy to improve diets and combat all forms of malnutrition

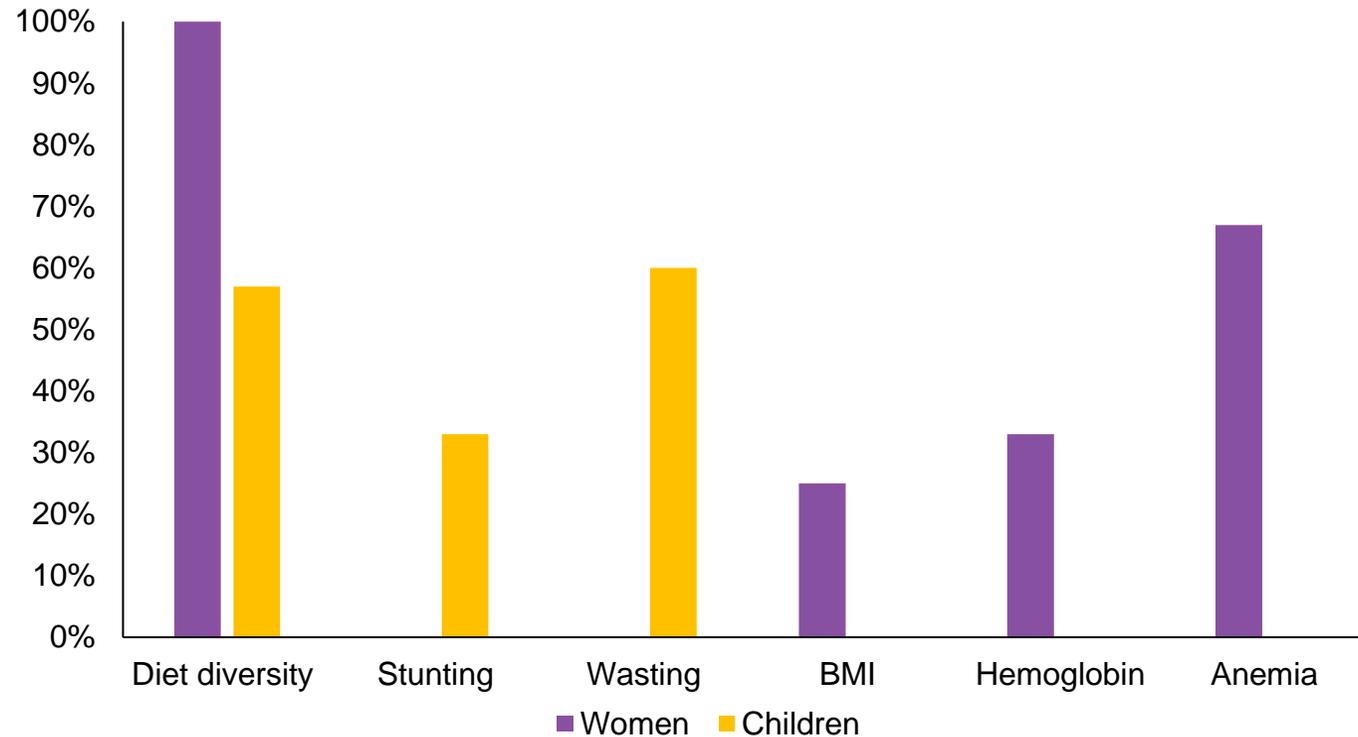
- LMICs spend 1.5% of GDP on social safety net programs such as cash, in-kind transfers, and school meals, and this tripled between 2000-2016
- Social assistance programs (SAPs), which are a subset of social protection programs, are primarily designed to support the incomes and resilience of the poor
- In recent years, interest in leveraging SAPs to improve nutrition and health outcomes by making them nutrition-sensitive has increased
- While most SAPs seek to increase food security – this has not often translated into improvements in nutrition
- Thus, how best to make SAPs work for nutrition, in what contexts and for which populations remains an open question

Review of the effectiveness of SAPs for improving diet and nutrition outcomes among women and children⁹

- Assessed outcomes for men, women and children
- Diet-related outcomes:
 - Dietary diversity
 - Micronutrient intake
 - Intake of micronutrient-rich foods
- Nutritional status outcomes:
 - Anthropometry (HAZ, stunting, WHZ, wasting, BMI, underweight (among adults), overweight, MUAC)
 - Anemia
 - Micronutrient status
- To summarize impacts we pooled results by program and outcome type and considered the impacts for each individual treatment arm as the unit of analysis

Summary results: Cash transfers

Proportion of study arms that included a cash transfer with a positive impact on diet and nutrition outcomes



■ Women

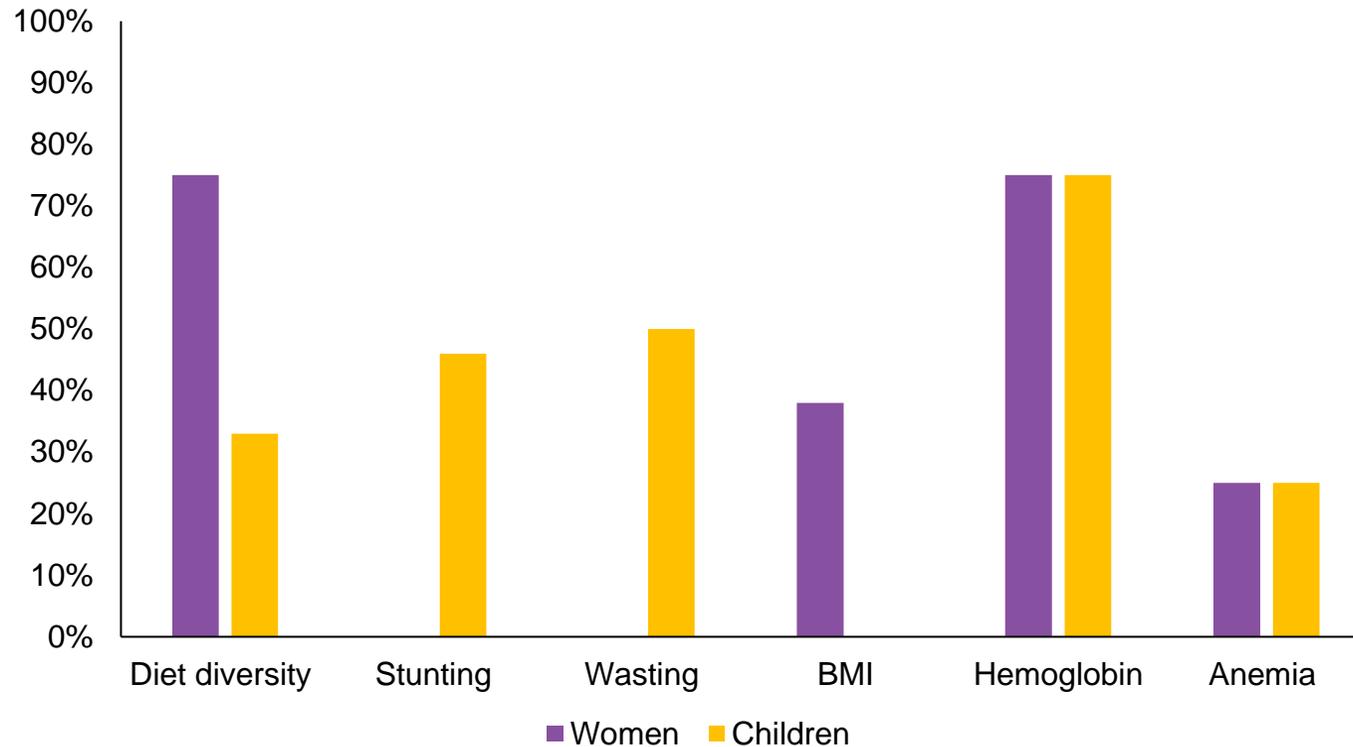
- Impacts on diets and anemia assessed in 3 study arms, and BMI in 4 study arms

■ Children

- Impacts on diet diversity assessed in 7 study arms, anemia in 4, stunting in 15 and wasting in 5
- Only 1 study assessed impact on micronutrient status and found no impact

Summary results: In-kind transfers

Proportion of study arms that included an in-kind transfer with a positive impact on diet and nutrition outcomes



■ Women

- Impacts on diet diversity in 5 study arms, anemia assessed in 3 study arms and BMI in 8 study arms

■ Children

- Impacts on diet diversity assessed in 12 study arms, anemia in 4, stunting in 11 and wasting in 4

Summary results: Vouchers

▪ Women (n=2)

- Positive impact in one study each on:
 - Vitamin A
 - Anemia
 - BMI
- Negative impact on anemia in one study

▪ Children (n=3)

- Positive impacts on:
 - Stunting in one of two studies
 - Vitamin A, B-12 and folate status in one study
- No impacts on:
 - Wasting (n=2)
 - Anemia (n=2)

Summary results: School meals

▪ Children

- Positive impacts on:
 - Anemia
 - Micronutrient status
 - Cognitive outcomes
- Negative impacts:
 - Increased prevalence of hookworm infection with the provision of fortified rice (with all 3 levels of iron and zinc) where hookworm infection prevalence was $> 15\%$. Where prevalence was $< 15\%$ only the highest level of fortification resulted in an increase in hookworm infections.

What does it take to make SAPs work for nutrition?

- **Targeting women and children** increases likelihood of positive impacts on an array of diet and nutrition outcomes.
- **Ensuring adequate quantity, quality and duration of transfers** (all kinds)
 - However, depending on context, **need to consider addressing all forms of malnutrition.**
- **High quality nutrition, health and hygiene BCC** activities may increase impacts, but findings are inconsistent, likely due to variability in quality, frequency, duration, etc.
 - Recent evidence suggests multichannel strategies are needed.
- **School meals can be effective for supporting the education, health and nutrition of school-age children** – particularly for more disadvantaged children.
- Improvements in nutrition, health and cognitive outcomes, especially among girls, can also have intergenerational effects
- However, to achieve impacts, programs need to be well designed, implemented, targeted and taken up

What more do we need to know to better leverage SAPs for achieving diet and nutrition outcomes?

- **Target groups**

- Effectiveness of programs targeting pre-schoolers and adolescents

- **Outcomes**

- Impact of SAPs on MN status and overweight
- Effectiveness of HGSP programs for increasing the income of smallholder farmers.

- **Program types**

- Effectiveness of public works, resilience and graduation programs to improve nutrition outcomes.

- **Program components**

- Understanding the “effective dose” of BCC and whether it requires periodic reinforcements and/or multiple channels
- How to design SAPs to address undernutrition and overweight/obesity simultaneously (trade-offs in transfer type and size)

Conclusions

- Malnutrition is pervasive in Asia and the Pacific and gains in the last decade are threatened by the impacts of COVID-19
- Multisectoral strategies, including nutrition-sensitive SAPs are needed to combat all forms of malnutrition
- Yet, there is still much to learn about how to best design, target and scale SAPs for achieving the necessary improvements in diet and nutrition outcomes
- Program-research partnerships should be leveraged to fill key evidence gaps to expand the impact of SAPs beyond food security and short-term income gaps and ultimately to increase their cost-effectiveness



Thank you!



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