

# Malnutrition in Guatemala

## *Holding Our Country Back*

For more information, contact:

Monica Woldt, FHI 360/FANTA,  
mwoldt@fhi360.org

### A Call to Action for Municipalities in Guatemala

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**Almost half of Guatemala's children under 5 are chronically malnourished, and in the Western Highlands, as many as 7 in 10 children suffer from chronic malnutrition. Your municipality needs your involvement and help to improve and overcome malnutrition.<sup>1</sup>**

Chronic malnutrition, or stunting, is a hidden epidemic in Guatemala. Stunting causes children to be shorter than healthy children of the same age. All too often stunting is not recognized as a health and development problem because stunted children may appear to be naturally short like their parents or younger than they really are. However, while stunted children may seem healthy, this form of malnutrition causes medium- and long-term problems with physical and intellectual development, resulting in effects that are largely irreversible after 2 years of age, preventing children from achieving their full potential and limiting the population's opportunities for better living conditions in the future.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Why Does Malnutrition Matter?

#### Impact on Health

- Malnourished children are more likely to suffer and die from common childhood illnesses such as diarrhea and pneumonia than healthy children.<sup>2</sup>
- By 2026, with no change in nutrition, more than 70,000 children will die related to poor breastfeeding practices alone.<sup>3</sup>
- Being malnourished during pregnancy can lead to death for mothers and babies.<sup>2,4</sup>
- Malnutrition in childhood can lead to chronic diseases such as heart disease in adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

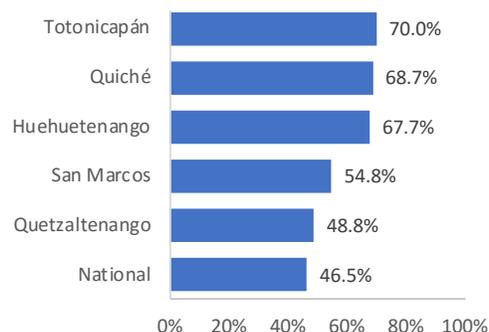
#### Impact on Education

- Children who are stunted learn to stand and walk later and have poorer cognitive function than their well-nourished peers.<sup>2,5</sup>
- Stunted children perform worse in school, are more likely to repeat grades, and are more likely to drop out of school than well-nourished children.<sup>5,6</sup> This means that, by 2026, if there is no change in stunting, children will lose 33 million equivalent school years of learning from stunting alone.<sup>3</sup>

#### Impact on Economic Development

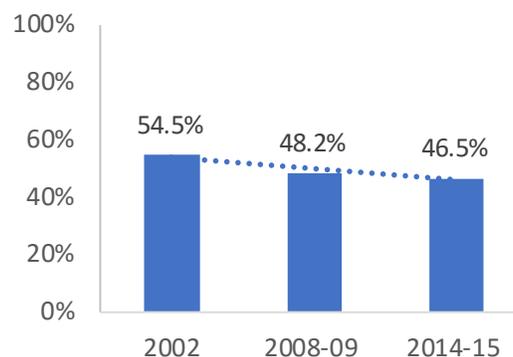
- Malnourished children earn less money in adulthood compared to those who are well-nourished and better-educated as children.<sup>7</sup>
- Malnutrition weakens Guatemala's economic productivity by reducing labor productivity, which impedes agricultural and industrial production and slows development.<sup>6,7</sup>
- By 2026, Guatemala will lose Q146,207 million (US\$19,437 million) related to stunting alone.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1.** Prevalence of Chronic Malnutrition Among Children < 5 Nationwide and in Five Departments of the Western Highlands in Guatemala<sup>1</sup>



Guatemala is committed to the Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to end all forms of malnutrition by 2030. While stunting has decreased slightly in recent years (see Figure 2), this rate of improvement is not enough. All levels of government (national, departmental, and municipal) must work together with civil society, the private sector, and academia if Guatemala is to succeed in the prevention and reduction of chronic malnutrition.

**Figure 2.** Stunting Trend Among Children < 5 Years of Age<sup>1</sup>



Main data sources include: <sup>1</sup> Encuesta Nacional de Salud Materno Infantil 2014-2015 (MSPAS et al. 2017), <sup>2</sup> "Maternal and Child Undernutrition and Overweight in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries" (Black et al. 2013) <sup>3</sup> "Reducing Malnutrition in Guatemala: Estimates to Support Nutrition Advocacy—Guatemala PROFILES" (FANTA 2017), <sup>4</sup> "Mortality Risk in Pre-term and Small-for-Gestational-Age Infants in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries: A Pooled Country Analysis" (Katz et al. 2013), <sup>5</sup> "Greater Length-for-Age Increases the Odds of Attaining Motor Milestones in Vietnamese Children Aged 5–18 Months" (Kulkarni et al. 2012), and "Severity and Timing of Stunting in the First Two Years of Life Affect Performance on Cognitive Tests in Late Childhood" (Mendez and Adair 1999), <sup>6</sup> "Effects of Health and Nutrition on Cognitive and Behavioural Development in Children in the First Three Years of Life" (Grantham-McGregor et al. 1999) and "Developmental Potential in the First 5 Years for Children in Developing Countries" (Grantham-McGregor et al. 2007), <sup>7</sup> "Effect of a Nutrition Intervention During Early Childhood on Economic Productivity in Guatemalan Adults" (Hoddinott et al. 2008), <sup>8</sup> Costing of Essential Nutrition Interventions for the Reduction of Child Chronic Malnutrition in Guatemala (FANTA 2015).

## Malnutrition is preventable and treatable. But we must act now.

According to the Guatemalan constitution (Art. 257), municipalities must allocate at least 90% of general budget revenue received from the government to education, preventive health, infrastructure, and public service programs and projects.

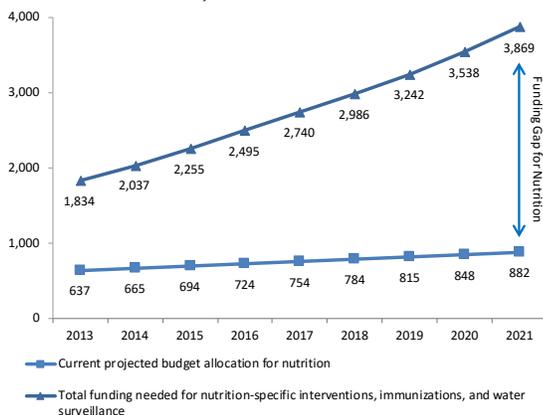
### Improving Nutrition—An Investment In Your Municipality's Future

- Improving nutrition in your municipality would:<sup>2,3,5,6,7</sup>
  - Improve the health and well-being of individuals and families.
  - Improve cognitive development in children.
  - Help children stay in school longer and perform better in school, resulting in higher wages in the future. On average, in Guatemala, a child who is 2 years of age in 2026 will gain 1.7 equivalent school years of learning just related to a reduction in stunting.
  - Increase physical capacity and reduce sick days in adulthood, leading to greater economic productivity. By 2026, gains for Guatemala would total Q25,229 million (US\$3,354 million) related to a reduction in stunting alone.
  - Reduce child and maternal deaths.
  - Reduce the risk of overweight and obesity in adults.

However, lack of funding is a major challenge standing in the way of improving nutrition in Guatemala. The Government of Guatemala has invested less than one-third of the funds necessary to provide critical nutrition interventions at scale across the country, and particularly in the Western Highlands (see Figure 3). Investments from municipalities within your mandates are needed to help bolster efforts to prevent and reduce malnutrition in your communities.

As shown in Box 1, the Government of Guatemala has identified 10 interventions that need to be scaled up to reduce chronic malnutrition across the country.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 3. Funding Gap at the National Level for Nutrition Interventions: Projected Budget versus Funding Needed by Year (Millions of Quetzales)<sup>8</sup>**



### What Can Municipalities Do to Improve Nutrition?

As an elected official or municipal worker, you can serve your community and fulfill your mandate by directing resources reserved for health to investments in nutrition. You can:

- Advocate at the departmental and national levels to increase the resource allocation for nutrition and to close the funding gap.
- Conduct a capacity assessment exercise with key stakeholders to discuss and analyze the nutrition situation in the municipality and identify actions to improve nutrition.
- Budget and allocate funds for nutrition-specific interventions in annual municipal budgets and incorporate nutrition-specific interventions into annual municipal plans that can be implemented through local health services.
- Promote the integration of nutrition interventions into other priority maternal and child health activities and work across sectors to link nutrition with other health interventions.
- Ensure safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene at the municipal level, which is required for municipalities by the Health Code (Dto. 90-97).
- Allocate funds for the recruitment and training of Ministry of Health personnel to provide nutrition services, including health educators and community nurses.
- Ensure adequate infrastructure and logistics for health service delivery, including purchasing supplies such as micronutrients and equipment for growth monitoring and promotion.
- Promote nutrition-sensitive agricultural projects in your municipality.
- Form a nutrition commission at the municipal level to coordinate and monitor activities and to ensure that funds allocated to nutrition are being used.

#### Box 1: Interventions Needed in Guatemala

##### Nutrition-Specific Interventions Needed Include:

- Promoting maternal nutrition during prenatal care
- Promoting exclusive and continued breastfeeding
- Promoting complementary feeding for infants and young children and providing fortified complementary food
- Promoting dietary diversity
- Supplying micronutrients for mothers and children
- Conducting growth monitoring
- Promoting nutritional management of sick children
- Managing acute malnutrition at the community level

##### Other Health Interventions:

- Monitoring water quality
- Providing vaccinations



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