

# good news on **nutrition**



## **briefing 3: humanitarian & development**

Successful programmes in Pakistan and Burkina Faso demonstrate the value of investments in ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) and in nutrition-sensitive agriculture (NSA). The UK should increase spending on nutrition and encourage other actors to do the same. In regard to RUTF, the UK should increase its investment in the UNICEF-led Child Nutrition Fund and support the development of locally produced RUTF. In regard to NSA, the UK should ensure that all of its investments in farming improve nutrition in ways that reduce socio-economic inequalities.

# Introduction

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Humanity is falling well short of Sustainable Development Goal 2 (including the target to end all forms of malnutrition) and the World Health Assembly global nutrition targets.<sup>1</sup> Political leaders across the world bear responsibility for this state of affairs.

Nevertheless, in some instances, the lives of severely undernourished children are being saved, and entire communities are gaining access to sufficient nutritious food. This is the third in a series of briefings that highlight positive change in key aspects of nutrition.

This briefing focuses on successful approaches to tackling malnutrition in humanitarian and development contexts. Specifically, using real-life examples, it explains the importance of providing ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) and investing in nutrition-sensitive agriculture (NSA).

The scale of the challenge is considerable. For example, 13.7 million children worldwide are severely wasted (dangerously too thin for their height), a condition that is responsible for up to 20% of deaths of children under five years old.<sup>2</sup> More broadly, around 2.8 billion people across the globe cannot afford a healthy diet.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, as the following examples of providing RUTF in Pakistan and supporting enhanced homestead food production (EHFP) in Burkina Faso demonstrate, it is possible to rise to these challenges in a strategic manner. Ultimately, greater progress in creating equitable and sustainable nutrition-sensitive food systems will reduce the need for interventions such as RUTF.

The UK should increase spending on nutrition in both humanitarian and development contexts, and encourage other donors and Global South governments to do the same. In regard to RUTF, the UK should increase its investment in the UNICEF-led Child Nutrition Fund and support the development of locally produced RUTF. In regard to NSA, the UK should ensure that all of its investments in farming improve nutrition in ways that reduce socio-economic inequalities.

# Ready-to-use therapeutic food

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## Why RUTF is important

Severe acute malnutrition, also known as severe wasting, represents nothing less than a wholesale betrayal of child rights.<sup>4</sup> It is a small mercy that an incredible product – RUTF – exists to help children between six months and five years of age who are battling this condition (without other medical complications).

RUTF is a high energy and micronutrient-dense paste made with peanuts, sugar, milk powder, vegetable oil, vitamins and minerals. As it has a two-year shelf life, does not require refrigeration, can be consumed directly from its one-dose foil sachet, possesses an appealing taste and is easily digestible, RUTF is highly convenient. Thus RUTF enables the majority of affected children to receive the necessary care and nourishment in their own homes and communities instead of in hospitals.

With a cure rate of over 90% when used as part of a community-based malnutrition programme, RUTF has revolutionised the treatment of severe wasting.<sup>5</sup> Children given RUTF are 33-51% more likely to achieve nutritional recovery compared to those provided with alternative dietary approaches.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, RUTF helps children to recover from severe wasting faster than alternative dietary approaches.<sup>7</sup> In 2023, RUTF was added to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Model List of Essential Medicines.

UNICEF procures 75-80% of RUTF globally.<sup>8</sup> It leads the Child Nutrition Fund, which supports government-led efforts in countries that have high burdens of undernutrition, including those that have developed operational roadmaps as part of the United Nations' Global Action Plan on Child Wasting.

## Good news on RUTF: Pakistan

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Pakistan grapples with widespread child malnutrition. One in 10 children under five in the country is severely wasted.<sup>9</sup> Yet RUTF has proven to be a powerful tool in the country's struggle against uncomplicated severe wasting.<sup>10</sup>

Between 2005 and 2011, community-based management of severe wasting was implemented in Pakistan as externally funded, largely standalone programmes in response to disasters. From 2012, the Government of Pakistan (GoP) began establishing vertical programmes to address severe wasting, including the provision of RUTF, across all four provinces of the country. In 2018, the GoP accepted that a package of essential nutrition interventions, including RUTF, should be integrated into the routine package of services delivered through primary healthcare. These efforts resulted in the treatment of a substantial number of children suffering from severe wasting.

A number of factors have driven the success of RUTF in Pakistan. In 2010, the GoP developed national guidelines to steer programming to address severe wasting. The guidelines, which were developed in partnership with multilateral institutions and civil society organisations, include RUTF, and were updated in 2015 based on learning generated over the previous five years. The guidelines have helped to ensure consistent practice in combating severe wasting.

Furthermore, the GoP is clearly attempting to shift from an emergency-focused approach to a mainstream public health approach. To this end, the GoP is seeking to develop the capacity of community health workers, known as lady health workers (LHWs), to deliver a wider range of services, including working with mothers and other caregivers to identify, treat and prevent cases of severe wasting. This includes, but is not limited to, the supply and utilisation of RUTF.

Last but not least, Pakistani academics and medical practitioners have been involved with some groundbreaking research on RUTF. A particularly notable group of studies explore children's developmental potential and not just their weight gain. If given in a timely manner and in line with WHO recommendations, RUTF is effective in improving both

weight gain and the developmental potential of children.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, administration of high-dose vitamin D or prebiotics, in addition to RUTF, safely and significantly enhances both weight gain and the developmental status of children.<sup>12</sup>

When LHW Sumaira Yasmeen saw Haseena Fiyyaz's eight-month-old boy, Younas, in Punjab, she quickly discovered that he was severely wasted. Sumaira provided Haseena with RUTF to give to Younas. RUTF played a huge role in helping Younas to recover. After seven weeks, Sumaira was able to say: "Now that Younas's nutritional level has improved... we will stop giving [him] RUTF and shift him to micronutrient supplementation along with appropriate home based food."<sup>13</sup>

## RUTF challenges in Pakistan and beyond

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Despite the success of RUTF in Pakistan, huge challenges remain. These challenges are also broadly relevant to other contexts in South Asia and the wider Global South.

First, there is a severe lack of funding. In the year to August 2024, only one-third of those children in need of RUTF in Pakistan received it.<sup>14</sup> Recent cuts to official development assistance, including by the UK, are likely to have aggravated this situation.<sup>15</sup> National governments certainly need to adequately invest in the procurement, storage and distribution of RUTF. But international donors must also step up to the plate in solidarity with the most marginalised. It is estimated that it would only cost an extra US\$950 million annually to scale up RUTF treatment so that it reaches virtually all children in need worldwide.<sup>16</sup>

Second, there is a need to accelerate efforts to identify, treat and prevent severe wasting through the health system. It is important to fully integrate identification and treatment into national routine primary services. But action to prevent severe wasting, which will actually reduce the need for RUTF, is also necessary. Critical measures that can prevent severe wasting include: prenatal micronutrient supplementation; breastfeeding promotion and support; vitamin A supplementation; immunisation; water, sanitation

and hygiene interventions; nutrition education; cash transfers; and investments in pro-poor nutrition-sensitive agriculture (see below).

Third, the GoP and international donors should promote the in-country production of RUTF. In Asia and Africa, procuring locally produced RUTF is, on average, cheaper than procuring RUTF from Europe.<sup>17</sup> RUTF based on locally available ingredients can generate economic benefits, enhance food security and increase the sustainability of the product. In addition, while more work is required in Pakistan to ensure that locally produced RUTF can be equally or more acceptable to children, other countries in the region and wider Global South have already demonstrated this is possible.<sup>18</sup>

# Nutrition-sensitive agriculture

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## Why nutrition-sensitive agriculture is important

In general, agriculture is the source of most people's livelihoods in the Global South.<sup>19</sup> Yet agriculture often fails to enhance nutrition; for example, it contributes to one-third of stunting worldwide.<sup>20</sup> NSA promotes the sustainable production of diverse, nutrient-rich foods that improve dietary quality and nutritional outcomes for all. As a consequence, NSA integrates nutrition goals into agricultural development, and thus contributes to the creation of rights-based food systems.

Despite being food producers, many farming communities suffer from poor diets and malnutrition. NSA enables smallholder farmers and their families to retain a range of nutritious foods for household consumption and engage with markets for such foods. This approach to agriculture can also stimulate wider demand for a variety of nutritious foods, and make such foods more affordable.<sup>21</sup>

Empowering women, through education and training, resource access and accumulation, and decision-making opportunities, is central to NSA. This can lead to improved household food security and nutrition, including for children. In addition, NSA programmes are most effective when they incorporate behaviour-change communications that raise awareness about healthy diets, safe food handling practices and good practice in infant and young child feeding (ICYF).<sup>22</sup> For these reasons, NSA emphasises the importance of collaboration and coordination across multiple sectors.

Research shows that NSA interventions have many positive effects. These include strong long-term benefits for children in terms of higher food consumption, dietary diversity and nutrient intake, as well as a lower occurrence of diseases.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, NSA supports a wide range of development goals, and is geared towards reducing socio-economic inequalities.

## Good news on nutrition-sensitive agriculture: Burkina Faso

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EHFP is an approach to NSA developed by Helen Keller International (HKI).<sup>24</sup> Through EHFP programmes, model farms are established and managed by women in their local community. At these farms, women learn improved agricultural practices from master agriculture trainers. Moreover, interactive nutrition education is provided by community health groups, which improves women's understanding of malnutrition's causes and solutions, and promotes behaviour change.

Participating women are then supported (including with agricultural inputs) to establish and manage their own gardens. These women aim to grow more varied agricultural produce, so that they are able to feed their children and families diverse diets rich in micronutrients, and generate earnings from selling surplus production. These women are also better placed to apply good ICYF and hygiene practices.

HKI began implementing EHFP in eastern Burkina Faso in 2009. Child malnutrition is widespread in this semi-arid and often insecure region of the country. Thus HKI targeted over 800 pregnant women and women with children under 12 months in 30 villages. These women began growing vegetables at their homes (including in the dry season), feeding their children more diverse, nutritious diets on a consistent basis, and using improved breastfeeding and nutritional practices.

Just two years after this EHFP programme's initiation, rigorous evaluations determined that it had already generated multiple benefits. For example, among children benefiting from the programme, the prevalence of wasting reduced by 9% and diarrhea decreased by 16% compared with children in control villages.<sup>25</sup> This is unsurprising as, compared with women in control villages, participating women owned more agricultural assets, produced more nutritious foods, experienced lower underweight prevalence, enjoyed greater household decision-making power, and possessed greater knowledge about hygiene and some IYCF practices.<sup>26</sup>

In response to high demand, HKI mobilised resources to reach 1200 more women in the original target villages, and then secured funding to extend the EHFP programme to 30 additional villages in eastern Burkina Faso. EHFP works because it adopts a holistic approach to tackling malnutrition and the marginalisation that drives it. Furthermore, the EHFP approach is informed by high-quality evidence and a genuine commitment to learning.

A final reason for the success of EHFP is that it actively encourages knowledge sharing. In Burkina Faso, for instance, it is clear that many women who have participated in the EHFP programme have trained other women. In the words of a master agriculture trainer: "... others [women] who do not participate can also benefit because the example is replicated through the ideas, advice and expertise of these [participating] women."<sup>27</sup>

## Nutrition-sensitive agriculture challenges in Burkina Faso and beyond

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While EHFP in Burkina Faso (and elsewhere) has had a range of positive benefits, including sustained impact,<sup>28</sup> there are certain challenges. These challenges are generally of relevance to NSA programmes in West Africa and the wider Global South.

One set of challenges relates to programme design and implementation. Three issues are particularly worth highlighting.<sup>29</sup> First, in the initial phase of the programme, the need to ensure sufficient water for irrigation, as well as universal access to clean water and sanitation,<sup>30</sup> received inadequate attention. Second, some master agriculture trainers expected greater financial compensation, and some community health groups wished they had received food donations for their contributions. Third, some of the agricultural inputs (e.g. the number of tools and quality of seeds) and certain aspects of the nutrition education (e.g. the frequency of home visits and clarity of information about feeding unwell children) could be improved.

Another set of challenges relates to ensuring that programmes such as EHFP in Burkina Faso can be scaled up and transferred to other locations (with adaptations as required). This requires<sup>31</sup> political will and leadership, so that nutrition-sensitive laws and evidence-based policies are developed and implemented in inclusive and accountable ways. Of course, for these things to happen, suitable funding and proper management of financial resources are essential. Alignment of local priorities with national policies and plans, and coherence across different sectors (particularly, though not exclusively, in relation to the agriculture-nutrition nexus), are also essential.

A final set of challenges relates to ensuring that, in the same way that RUTF should not be viewed as a ‘humanitarian’ intervention alone, NSA (including EHFP) should not be considered to be only a ‘development’ intervention. For example, research demonstrates that agriculture initiatives in displacement-affected communities can enable the formation of cooperatives, generate employment opportunities and develop market linkages.<sup>32</sup> Yet it is important that these and similar initiatives genuinely consider nutrition.

## Recommendations

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 **The UK should** increase spending on nutrition in both humanitarian and development contexts, and encourage other donors and Global South governments to do the same.

 **The UK should** increase its investment in the UNICEF-led Child Nutrition Fund and support the development of locally produced RUTF.

 **The UK should** ensure that all of its investments in agriculture improve nutrition in ways that reduce socio-economic inequalities.

## Endnotes

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