Jain S. and Greiner T. 2025. "Effects of cuts in development assistance on nutrition in low-income countries." *World Nutrition*, *16*(2), June, 3–5. https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.20251623-5

Editorial

Effects of cuts in development assistance on nutrition in low-income countries

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Keywords: foreign aid, malnutrition, severe acute malnutrition, SAM, food insecurity

https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.20251623-5

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World Nutrition 2025;16(2):3-5

INTRODUCTION

Nutrition has long-term implications for human health and is an essential driver of the Sustainable Development Goals. The recent unexpected and abrupt withdrawal of approximately half of the global funding for nutrition will have severe outcomes for the coming decades. These aid cuts threaten a huge array of health, agriculture, and nutrition-supporting programmes. This sudden receding of donor support will eventually halt access of critically ill and malnourished children to the lifesaving programmes. In addition, the institutional and infrastructural capacities to deliver nutrition services have in some cases been destabilised.

While the US has gradually cut back its foreign assistance, from over 2% of GDP in 1950 to about 1/10 that level in recent years (Locks et al. 2025), the abruptness of the current cutback is unprecedented and particularly harmful. Organizations working at grassroots level in low-income countries are having to make impossible choices on who will be saved and who will have to die (Stanley, 2025). Rapid declines in food security are impossible for families to cope with other than suffering from increased hunger (Sterck and Bruni, 2025). As Desai et al. (2025) point out, "even if these cuts were reversed, the loss of experience, institutional memory, and infrastructure may not be easily remedied in the future."

These US cutbacks are coming at a time when Europe is also faltering in its support for development in countries that most need it: the United Kingdom (40%), France (37%), the Netherlands (30%) and Belgium (25%). These cuts are coming at a terrible moment in history when many low-income countries are coping with food security emergencies, five on the verge of starvation (World Food Programme, 2025). These cuts will also compromise and reverse decades of advancement in reducing malnutrition (Sheldrick, 2025) in the coming years. This will in turn have implications on economic security, financial stability and public health (Andridge et al. 2024).

UNICEF (2024) estimated that 1.2 million deaths were averted in 2023 by treating 7.4 million children with severe acute malnutrition in 47 high-risk countries. Half the supply of the main products used for this work came from USAID. In 2022, the United States and other donors reporting to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development spent $591 million on severe-wasting treatment (Andridge et al. 2024), which was matched by receiving countries. For management of these programs, there are proven, community-based approaches that are particularly effective (WHO, 2007) but they are labour-intensive to establish and now are at risk of collapsing.

The collapse in nutrition funding has led to rations being cut in half in the WFP-supported Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya (Musambi, 2025). In Nigeria, it has led the charity Helen Keller International to stop a programme that provided nutrition services for 5.6 million children (Micronutrient Forum, 2025). Likewise, in Sudan, almost 80% of emergency food kitchens are closed. In addition to treatment programs, nutrition funding cuts have impacted essential prevention programs like breastfeeding promotion, food fortification, school meals, and agriculture. These are silent shields that prevent millions of children from getting into wasting, stunting, and life-threatening deficiencies. It comes down to this," says Saskia Osendarp, Executive Director of the Micronutrient Forum, "Seven children will die every ten minutes, not because we don't have the tools to save them— but because money is being pulled" (Micronutrient Forum, 2025).

Some experts are urging governments to look beyond traditional aid (Keller and Eldridge, 2025). Links with agriculture, environmental, and climate movements could be further developed as one way of leveraging additional support to some nutrition-related programming. Development banks and international finance institutions, whose lending is already allocated for the next several years, should start to make exceptions to their traditional ways of working and integrate nutrition into rapidly developed concessional loan frameworks. Small local enterprises in low-income countries could receive support to produce locally made, highly nutritious complementary foods for young children and utilize existing community-based networks for distributing them or develop new ones.

Unless timely action is taken, ongoing cuts to nutrition funding are likely to lead to further loss of life— weakening

treatment systems, limiting prevention efforts, and reversing years of progress. This represents a significant public health challenge with far-reaching, long-term consequences. During the time that you, dear reader, read this article, about seven more children will have died—victims of a crisis for which proven solutions already exist. But, as far right parties in numerous countries make themselves felt, apparently the need to utilize available resources for further "assistance" to wealthier citizens of high-income countries takes precedence.

> *"The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong with the world."* –Paul Farmer

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SJ and TG were equally responsible for conceptualization and writing. Both authors approved the final version and consent for the publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors are Associate Editor and Editor-in-Chief, World Nutrition.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

Nothing to disclose.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None

FUNDING

none

Received: June 27, 2025; **Revised:** June 27, 2025; **Accepted:** June 28, 2025; **Published:** June 30, 2025

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