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Breaking the cycle of wasting and stunting in volatile contexts: integrating cross-sectoral, accelerated, and accountable nutrition interventions

The dual burden of wasting and stunting reflects the compounding effects of poverty, food insecurity, inequitable health systems, and the commercial determinants of health in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In South Africa, a nation shaped by apartheid's legacy and enduring structural inequalities, children face disproportionate risks due to exposure to ultra-processed, nutrient-poor diets, environmental pressures, and limited access to essential services. Recurrent wasting episodes often result in irreversible stunting, perpetuating developmental deficits, reduced economic productivity, and intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

This review advocates for a systems approach to malnutrition, guided by the Mainstreaming, Acceleration, and Policy Support (MAPS) framework to align actions with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Mainstreaming embeds child nutrition across health, education, and social protection systems. At the same time, acceleration prioritises interventions with cross-cutting impacts, such as maternal cash transfers, community-based management of acute malnutrition (CMAM), improved water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and regulation of commercial food environments. Policy support strengthens governance, accountability, and long-term sustainability through coherent policies and robust monitoring systems.

Preliminary efforts to operationalise this multi-pronged approach in South Africa are underway, informed by the recent evaluation of the South African National Food and Nutrition Security Plan 2018-2023 (NFNSP). Early experiences indicate that integrated, cross-sectoral interventions hold the potential to address the structural drivers of malnutrition and foster sustainable change. This presentation will share insights from these initial efforts and inform the global discourse on designing scalable, context-sensitive solutions to tackle the dual burden of wasting and stunting. Without systemic reforms, isolated interventions will fail to deliver lasting progress for vulnerable children.

Keywords: Wasting, stunting, systems thinking, cross-sectoral interventions, commercial determinants, Sustainable Development Goals

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Biography

Shuaib Kauchali is the Head of the Division of Community Paediatrics and Child Health at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. His work addresses the dual burden of wasting and stunting in children by advancing evidence-based, systems-level interventions. He has co-authored impactful research, including global analyses on the scaling up inpatient care for severe acute malnutrition and the intersection of wasting and stunting, highlighting the critical role of workforce capacity, policy alignment, and community engagement. His contributions have informed strategies to improve child survival and reduce inequalities in volatile contexts.

