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Climate change complicates efforts to fight hunger

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More than 50 million children afflicted with stunting—caused by chronic malnourishment at the start of life—now have real hope for better health, thanks to [Scaling Up Nutrition \(SUN\)](#), a global movement to tackle under-nutrition.

In just two years, SUN has connected 30 countries and 100-plus partners. These leaders recognize malnutrition’s devastating impact on both individual lives and economic development. Their collective progress has been notable, despite financial and political challenges, and momentum is building. But SUN’s efforts are increasingly complicated by climate change, which poses a marked threat to food and nutrition security.

At a meeting in September at United Nations (UN) headquarters in New York, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, together with heads of state, praised SUN’s rise and success. SUN is a novel, unified approach offering proven solutions to under-nutrition—including support for breastfeeding, access to vitamins and minerals, and improved farming methods.

But at that same meeting, Dr. Dipu Moni, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, sounded a sobering alarm: “Bangladesh is already feeling the impacts of climate change, losing as much as 3 to 4 percent of GDP [Gross Domestic Product] which otherwise would have supported our efforts on health and malnutrition.”

Moni predicted, “Climate change will hinder crop diversification efforts and adversely affect the yield, price, and consumption of food grains, thereby reducing calorie intake and increasing child malnutrition.”

In an interview with UNEARTH News, Dr. Anthony Lake, Executive Director of [UNICEF](#) and Chair of the SUN Movement Lead Group, acknowledged the impact of climate change on nutrition.

“Climate change affects everything,” he said. “Nutrition is very much involved in a double sense. On the one hand, climate change is helping to contribute to malnourishment. If you look at more violent storms, if you look at the heat and droughts...being exacerbated by climate change, they have a huge effect on malnourishment in children.”

Lake went on: “But at the same time, if you don’t have healthy children who have been well-nourished, they’re all the more vulnerable to the disasters that will come from climate change over the next generation or two. The two are very intimately linked.”

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates 900 million people across the globe are chronically undernourished. An additional one billion suffer from “hidden hunger,” a lack of vitamins and minerals.

Children, one-third of whom are undernourished, are especially vulnerable. The first thousand days of a child’s life, from conception through the second birthday, are key. Without proper nutrition, irreversible damage can occur, including stunted growth and cognitive impairment.



Tony Lake, Chairman of the SUN Movement Lead Group and Executive Director of the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), addresses the high-level meeting on the Movement. Photo credit: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

Stunting prevents its victims (who now number more than 180 million worldwide) from fulfilling their true potential, with tragic implications not only for them personally, but also for their homelands. The World Bank estimates malnutrition can cost affected countries 2 to 3 percent of their GDP, not to mention billions of dollars in salaried employment and health care spending. (Of note, investing \$1 in nutrition during the crucial 1000-day window can generate \$30 in return.)

Dr. David Nabarro, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Food Security and Nutrition, coordinates SUN's work. He sat down with UNEARTH after SUN's meeting to explain how climate change undermines food and nutrition security.

"Countries are having to cope with a number of threats," Nabarro said. "Firstly, an increased frequency of droughts, floods, and other extreme climatic events. Secondly, in the case of lowland areas, increased salination. Thirdly, they're also having to cope with a change in some of the health hazards they face, particularly insect populations and the like."

"This is a combination of threats that affects the resilience of communities," Nabarro continued. "We see it very acutely in the countries of the Sahel like Niger and the result is increased stress for local populations, which translates into higher levels of food insecurity and higher levels of childhood and women's under-nutrition."

[Climate scientists anticipate extreme weather events and natural disasters will increase](#) in number and severity throughout the 21st century. As a consequence, according to UN reports entitled "[Implications of climate change on undernutrition](#)" and "[Climate change and nutrition security](#)," large numbers of people will be at higher risk for hunger and under-nutrition.

In a nutshell, there will be less food available, and it will be more difficult to access.

According to Nabarro, it's essential to approach these challenges from "a multitude of directions." Of critical importance: "anything we can do to limit the rise in the world's temperature."

But also "working with societies so they're able to be more resilient in the face of shocks associated with climate. That includes nutritional resilience as well as resilience in food systems, resilience in agriculture production."

Nabarro warned: "We need to recognize that during the next 20 years these challenges are going to get more pronounced and they are going to bite into the fabric of communities and be very much felt, particularly by young children as a result of challenges getting adequate nutrition because of the seasonal changes in access to food and the other factors associated with climate change."

Building resilience requires multiple sectors at local, national, and international levels to collaborate on comprehensive programming. As Lake stressed, "We all have to be working on this together—the advocates on climate change, the advocates on nutrition, education, sanitation, all of us."

Nabarro, who is watching his colleagues address climate change in their home countries, spoke poignantly on their plight, which may soon be ours:

"We see it. We listen to Bangladesh, we listen to Niger, we listen to Ethiopia, Kenya, focusing on this. They're dealing with climate change now. It's not a future issue, it's a now issue. Those of us who are working on nutrition are naturally quite anxious about what this spells in terms of the prospects for the children of the future."



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