

Establishing stunting as an additional indicator of endemic poverty to monitor
progress made towards the achievement of MDG 1

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The first Millennium Development Goal (MDG 1) - to “halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger”, establishes “the proportion of children under five years of age who are underweight as the indicator to monitor progress towards this goal”. Substantial evidence collected across continents shows that stunting (low height-for-age) in children below the age of five is a stronger indicator of hunger and of one of its determinants, poverty, than other anthropometric indicators or estimates of per capita income. This is because stunting indicates the *chronic* restriction of a child’s potential growth, reflecting the cumulative effects of inadequate food intake and poor health conditions that result from endemic poverty.

Recent studies in 36 low and middle-income countries highlight the close link between poverty and stunting. The adequacy of height growth at two years of age is indeed the best predictor of human capital. So, prevalence of stunting is highest amongst the poorest segments of the population: poor children are about twice as stunted as their wealthier peers. While poverty is associated with an inadequate intake of food, it is also closely linked with poor sanitation and hygiene leading to infectious diseases on the one hand, and with poor maternal education and increased maternal stress on the other.

Stunting has been associated with lower educational achievement and cognitive ability. It is also linked with lower economic status in adulthood, caused by lower educational achievements and by decreased productivity in jobs requiring manual labour. Lastly, women with short stature tend to have babies with lower birth-weights, contributing to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

It is also important to note that children who become stunted during their first two years of life and who put on weight rapidly later in childhood are at high risk of chronic diseases related to nutrition.

The success of sustainable actions to alleviate poverty is thus best measured by their capacity to reduce the prevalence of stunting in children under five years of age. This reduction will lead to higher levels of human development that will in turn contribute to boosting economic growth and further alleviating poverty.

For monitoring the progress made towards the achievement of MDG 1, it is therefore recommended that both countries and development partners report against the prevalence of stunting in children below the age of five as an internationally agreed indicator of endemic poverty.

Reference material

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