



Charlotte Brown

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## Looking for impact? Think about food

*Charlotte Brown on why food is a multi-sectoral bang-for-your-buck advocacy dream. Based on the recent nutrition for growth summit, she argues that it ticks almost every box, including return on investment, economic growth, long term sustainability and improved human security.*

Those of us involved in the aid sector, universities, and health are being told to do more with less and, in many cases, expected to do more with nothing—to have impact and to evidence our impact. I've just returned from the civil society side of the nutrition for growth summit taking place in Paris, and I want to make a case for why thinking about food might alleviate some of those headaches and do some good in the process.

## Why should we talk about food?

- Looking for ROI? Investing in nutrition can contribute a multiple percentage difference to a country's GDP. Data from [the World Bank](#) suggests that every \$1 invested in childhood nutrition will yield up to \$35 in economic returns. Meanwhile, preventable undernutrition cumulatively costs the world at least US\$761 billion per year [or US\\$2.1 billion per day](#).
- What's the business case? DYK that malnutrition costs the global economy [US\\$3.5 trillion a year](#)? Impaired physical growth is impaired economic growth, too – a loss of 1% of potential attained height in adulthood [reduces earnings by 2.4%](#). Improved nutrition means a more productive workforce and lower cost of social welfare budgets due to decreased mortality.
- Looking for a sustainable intervention? Investing in childhood nutrition has cascading, multi-generational impacts. Think positive spill-over effects.
- Concerned about security? As then [UN Secretary General Kofi Annan](#) put it, 'extreme poverty anywhere is a threat to human security everywhere.'

The point is we all benefit from a well-fed world. Food security is a global public good. And yet, food and nutrition are neglected. Instead of unlocking these diverse benefits, nutrition continues to be understood narrowly as a health issue. In contexts of development and humanitarian intervention, supporting diverse, nutritious diets is considered a costly part of 'care and maintenance' rather than a fundamental resource for enabling the success of developmental goals. Instead, food and nutrition are considered a costly part of 'care and maintenance' and are **often the first thing to be cut**. Unsurprisingly, these contexts become then dominated by health interventions focused on treating malnutrition – not through addressing the systemic barriers to diverse, nutritious diets, but rather through an ever-expanding list of supplements and imported packaged therapeutic foods.

**Let's give an example.** Ongoing cuts to vital food assistance interventions (including cash transfers which support dietary intake) will have effects on cases of tuberculosis. **Malnutrition is the leading risk factor for TB infection**. We know that malnutrition decreases immune system functioning. Malnutrition also decreases the efficacy of treatment, reduces people's ability to sustain treatment, and increases the likelihood of experiencing negative side effects from medications.

Think about the reverse: investing in people's diets means fewer cases of TB, better treatment outcomes, improved immune systems, and fewer long-term risks from undergoing TB treatment. If it sounds like a win-win, it's because it is.

And it's not necessarily about costly interventions – relatively simple changes can have massive impacts. **This blog was founded on the principle of bringing together examples of what works.** Iodising salt is a great example of a job well done (though not finished). Vitamin A supplementation is another – **GiveWell estimates** that about \$2 USD is needed to provide one year of vitamin A supplements to a child, with a return of around \$3500 on each life saved.

Even our best economic estimates likely underestimate the compounding effects of these interventions. Positive feedback loops and negative feedback loops abound. Again, a commonsense example here will help. If children are hungry, they can't concentrate in school, so they can't reap the benefits of all that money invested in building schools in underserved areas. A lesson that is as true in **London** as it is in **Uganda**.

**Where can researchers come in?** Think about food! Not just as a cultural resource, but a life-orienting vital resource. Remember that context matters – improvements in nutrition outcomes need to be context-specific. Remember that these are highly social and political problems but that solutions are in sight, too – and there's no scarcity of grassroots actors trying to enact them. Collaborate – talk to advocacy organisations, work with people trying to change country-level legislation, to **youth agitating for change**. In the push for local solutions, we need policymakers to introduce better legislation, remove the structural barriers to change, invest in long-term returns and avoid the risks that localisation turns into yet another way to make people responsible for systemic problems.

## A few thinking points:

**Dietary diversity is key** – think macro and micronutrients – these things often intersect. While understanding the scientific interfaces of these issues is important, it's often very difficult to think about solutions without an understanding of how people's lives shape what they eat. Impact in these spaces will often require a cross-cutting approach that considers the scope for change across sectors – think food, agriculture, environment, land, health and labour policies – it's about more than just accessing enough food!

In the nutrition space, we need to think critically about the **role of corporate interests**. The back and forth over the marketing, contents and pricing strategies of **infant formula** is a great example of how to effectively deploy the question of 'who benefits from keeping people sick and malnourished?' Critical thinking in this space can help us better identify where power and political or economic interests lie in this space that might be blocking change.



**McDonalds-supplied school desks** in South Africa come to mind – the same desks turn into backpacks, **turning children into walking billboards**. To give a curious example from my own research context, Pepsi branding is proudly displayed alongside the details of an "Uganda government prison" in Arua City. Forming part of highly visible attempts of corporations to turn people and public facilities into marketing tools.

**Disclaimer:** These discourses are a problem. One person without food should be enough to take this seriously, but that's not the world we live in. While pushing for more humane narratives, here, I'm attempting a business case approach.

Photo author's own and top banner by **Jedidiah-Jordan O.**

### About the author

**Charlotte Brown**

Charlotte Brown is an LSE researcher who studies migration, food security, and humanitarian policy in East Africa.

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