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Malnutrition: South Africa's Largest Child Murderer

A kid's life should be happiness, giggles, and sunshine, with their biggest worry being if they have grown since yesterday. Standing on their tippy toes, pushing their chest out and chin up, measured day after day. This *should* be normal. But, according to UNICEF, a global organization dedicated to protecting children and their rights, in South Africa, "27% of children under the age of five suffer from stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition and 23% of children live in severe child food poverty."¹ This is significant as it impacts children for the rest of their lives. A child who experiences stunted growth can have severe health effects such as undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, cognitive/physical impairments, and, even worse, child mortality. If an effective solution is not put in place soon, child mortality and health risks will increase, and the economy will continue to decline, possibly to an irreversible low. Although improving partnerships with nutrition programs and nutritional awareness may be effective short-term for addressing malnutrition, the best solution is increasing access to nutritious foods because it is a long-term solution that can improve malnutrition, the economy, and society of South Africa.

South Africa, a democratic republic, is on the coastline of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and borders Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Eswatini. South Africa has diverse landscapes ranging from the dry and vast Kalahari Desert to the breathtaking Drakensberg Mountains. With around 60 million people and 11 official languages, South Africa is home to three capitals: Pretoria, Cape Town, and Bloemfontein.² A typical family in South Africa varies greatly from a typical household in the USA. Many families live together on a compound, with multiple generations in one place. Fathers traditionally serve as sole providers, while mothers and children manage the household. Elders help raise the children, making important decisions for the family. Meals, few and far, reflect cultural influences, often containing African or Indian attributes.³

In South Africa, malnutrition remains one of the largest underlying causes of child mortality. (UNISA, 2025) Children are not reaching their full growth and development potential. Irreversible physical and cognitive damage occurs, impacting them for life. Malnutrition often starts in the womb; with

¹ UNICEF. (n.d.). *23% of children in South Africa live in severe child food poverty*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/23-cent-children-south-africa-live-severe-child-food-poverty>

² Britannica. (n.d.). *South Africa | Flag, capital, people, official languages, map, population, & facts*. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa>

³ Britannica. (n.d.). *South Africa | Flag, capital, people, official languages, map, population, & facts*. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa>

undernourished mothers, children begin life disadvantaged. Malnutrition is at an all-time high. The effects of COVID-19 have worsened the situation. UNICEF believes that “the country is on track to meet some of the World Health Assembly 2025 targets.”⁴ However, there is still significant need for improvements. 1.7 million children are expected to be stunted in 2025, a number twice as high as their current targets. Many of these children live in urban areas.⁵ According to the Department of South African Statistics, “2.6 million people reported having inadequate access, and 1.1 million reported severely inadequate access to food in 2021”.⁶ High proportions of these children lived in the biggest cities in the country, Johannesburg and Cape Town. These cities are currently experiencing a strong positive correlation between city growth and malnourished children. As the city experiences a boom in growth and infrastructure, the city officials are struggling to keep up with the demand to provide for their citizens thus exposing them to high malnutrition risk.⁷ As world hunger continues to grow and malnutrition increases in South Africa, it is vital that an effective and swift solution is put into place immediately.

One possible solution for the growing malnutrition problem in South Africa is improving partnerships with different nutritional programs. These programs can help bring access to fresh, nutritious food throughout the country and gradually improve nutrition. According to these partnerships, improvement starts with prevention, which is their prime goal. The Integrated Nutrition Programme (INP) is a national strategy in South Africa dedicated to “children below six years old, at-risk pregnant and lactating women.”⁸ By expanding this partnership, South Africa would gain the tools and resources necessary to prevent and improve malnutrition nationwide. The INP works to provide support, education, and awareness throughout the communities of South Africa. Moreover, partnerships improve families’ access to growth monitoring and development resources through various doctors to ensure they stay on the right track. Supported by the Department of Health, the INP is a low-cost option for the government to implement.⁹ By improving access to preventative tools, malnutrition numbers would decrease as the upcoming cohorts would be less likely to experience malnutrition and its effects. The current population would have access to resources, including groceries and community involvement, to reverse the effects of the current malnutrition.¹⁰ Another initiative, the Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI) “gives women, families, and health providers tools they need to end malnutrition in children under 5 and in

⁴ UNICEF. (n.d.). *The ‘slow violence’ of malnutrition in South Africa*. UNICEF.

<https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/slow-violence-malnutrition-south-africa>

⁵ UNICEF. (n.d.). *Poor diets damaging children’s health worldwide, warns UNICEF*. UNICEF.

<https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/poor-diets-damaging-childrens-health-worldwide-warns-unicef>

⁶ Statistics South Africa. (2021). *Focus on food inadequacy and hunger in South Africa in 2021*. Statistics South Africa. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16235>

⁷ Statistics South Africa. (2021). *Focus on food inadequacy and hunger in South Africa in 2021*. Statistics South Africa. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16235>

⁸ Western Cape Government. (2019). *Integrated nutrition programme*.

<https://d7.westerncape.gov.za/service/integrated-nutrition-programme>

⁹ Western Cape Government. (2019). *Integrated nutrition programme*.

<https://d7.westerncape.gov.za/service/integrated-nutrition-programme>

¹⁰ Western Cape Government. (2019). *Integrated nutrition programme*.

<https://d7.westerncape.gov.za/service/integrated-nutrition-programme>

pregnant and nursing women”.¹¹ SANI, although under the financial support of the Government of Canada, is committed to helping South Africa thrive.¹² Through this partnership, the government can help multiple cohorts while keeping costs low. Similarly to INP, SANI partners with local health officials to educate and treat malnutrition through a broad and targeted approach using the Community Impact for Nutrition model, which has shown success worldwide.¹³ Moreover, by implementing a plan that has already shown improvements in other countries, South Africa would likely follow suit. SANI would be impactful in South Africa because it would not require resources from the South African government. Finally, the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) is a program funded by the South African government under the INP that “provides one nutritious meal” to students in “primary and secondary schools”.¹⁴ In 2013/14, the program had “reached over 9 million children,” and continued investment is bound to see improvements in malnutrition. This would allow kids to have at least one nutritious meal a day and allow them some food security.¹⁵ Moreover, by showing kids what a nutritious meal looks like, they could take the information and share it with their families to improve nutrition at home. While not a complete solution to the problem, the currently implemented NSNP is a start in improving malnutrition throughout South Africa. These programs do have limitations. They are low-cost to South Africa but require effort and time. Moreover, many of the aspects of these programs (healthcare, education, fresh food) cannot be achieved without support of outside governments and humanitarian groups like Canada. Despite potential drawbacks, like the government refusing to put forth effort or losing tax money to these programs, there are many benefits that are certain to happen. Malnutrition will drastically decrease, and children's lives will be improved. While this solution has a great outlook, it may not be the most sustainable as it requires help from outside resources.

Another solution to improve South Africa's malnutrition is improving nutrition awareness. By focusing on the educational aspect of nutrition, citizens of South Africa will be better informed and equipped to provide their families with the best nutrition. A UNICEF Southern Africa initiative works to provide “quality nutrition services such as support for breastfeeding, complementary feeding, micronutrient supplementation, deworming and dietary counselling – that keep children and women well nourished”. They have begun work “implementing the “first foods” for children in Africa” ensuring that children get a beneficial start in life.¹⁶ By implementing this education system, families can play a key role in ensuring children get proper nutrition. Moreover, by extending malnutrition education, responsibility shifts to the

¹¹ CARE. (n.d.). *Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI) - Reducing malnutrition*. CARE.

<https://www.care.org/our-work/food-and-nutrition/nutrition/southern-african-nutrition-initiative-sani/>

¹² CARE. (n.d.). *Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI) - Reducing malnutrition*. CARE.

<https://www.care.org/our-work/food-and-nutrition/nutrition/southern-african-nutrition-initiative-sani/>

¹³ CARE. (n.d.). *Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI) - Reducing malnutrition*. CARE.

<https://www.care.org/our-work/food-and-nutrition/nutrition/southern-african-nutrition-initiative-sani/>

¹⁴ South African Government. (n.d.). *What is the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)?* South African Government. <https://www.gov.za/faq/education/what-national-school-nutrition-programme-nsnp>

¹⁵ South African Government. (n.d.). *What is the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)?* South African Government. <https://www.gov.za/faq/education/what-national-school-nutrition-programme-nsnp>

¹⁶ UNICEF. (n.d.). *Addressing malnutrition in young children in South Africa: Setting the national context for paediatric food-based dietary guidelines*. *Journal of Nutrition*, 150(2), 395–402. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7662515/>

entire family, which can improve children's malnutrition. Another organization, the University of South Africa, “offers courses aimed at providing knowledge on” nutrition.¹⁷ Nutrition courses equip elders with proper education, working to improve the health of all generations. Moreover, this program increases the accessibility of college-level education to South African citizens. This solution ensures families are gaining correct valuable education on how to improve their families' malnutrition, through educated professors.¹⁸ While this solution would have many benefits as South Africans would understand the correct steps needed to improve their nutrition, this solution has many negatives, making it unfeasible. Many citizens do not have access to these courses as they are not located near a college, nor do they have the means necessary to get there. Some of these courses are costly making them unattainable for citizens. This solution requires the support and resources of the government, which may be lacking. This hinders the effectiveness of the solution making it a less important solution to implement.

The best solution for the significant problem of malnutrition is to increase access to nutritious food. By increasing access, citizens have more options to improve their diets, but economically, the country will flourish if they focus on improving the agricultural sector and become independent in terms of food production. An initiative whose main goal is increasing access to food through South Africa's agriculture is the Siyakhana Initiative. They work to “improve food security” and “increase access to nutritious and sustainably grown foods” by operating in one of South Africa's “most prominent and important urban organic agriculture demonstration sites”.¹⁹ By improving agriculture, this initiative improves malnutrition and the economy by making South Africa more financially independent and increasing their citizens' access to agricultural jobs, increasing household income. This increase in agricultural participation will increase food production numbers, ensuring that South Africa has enough food for every citizen.²⁰ Moreover, this initiative is a sustainable solution that addresses the malnutrition problem and the lack of agriculture. Another initiative with a similar goal is Rise Against Hunger Africa, an organization dedicated to implementing “community programs and school garden projects” established to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the community.²¹ Likewise, this initiative creates jobs for children and women to allow them to help improve their nutrition and community, and generate income. One current garden, Place of Hope, “has established a vegetable garden and has 300 laying hens. Half of the produce is able to not only feed Place of Hope's children, but also children at six other ECDs. Additionally, the

¹⁷ University of South Africa. (n.d.). *Nutrition*. University of South Africa.

<https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Register-to-study-through-Unisa/Subjects-%26-modules/All-subjects/NUTRITION>

¹⁸ University of South Africa. (n.d.). *Nutrition*. University of South Africa.

<https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Register-to-study-through-Unisa/Subjects-%26-modules/All-subjects/NUTRITION>

¹⁹ Idealist. (n.d.). *Siyakhana Initiative for Ecological Health and Food Security, Johannesburg*. Idealist.

<https://www.idealists.org/en/nonprofit/774ecaad8c4a40d1b160ce9d8c31cf5e-siyakhana-initiative-for-ecological-health-and-food-security-johannesburg>

²⁰ Idealist. (n.d.). *Siyakhana Initiative for Ecological Health and Food Security, Johannesburg*. Idealist.

<https://www.idealists.org/en/nonprofit/774ecaad8c4a40d1b160ce9d8c31cf5e-siyakhana-initiative-for-ecological-health-and-food-security-johannesburg>

²¹ Rise Against Hunger. (n.d.). *Nutrition and empowerment in South Africa*. Rise Against Hunger.

<https://www.riseagainsthunger.org/articles/nutrition-and-empowerment-in-south-africa/>

other half of the produce is sold to generate income to sustain the school's operations." In this past year over 2.9 million meals were provided by this organization alone, demonstrating the great success their program has had.²² This solution allows malnutrition to decrease, increases the economy of South Africa, and has a larger-scale impact as one garden can feed multiple cities.²³ Moreover, it encourages children to play a role in their nutrition. By educating and teaching children about proper nutrition from a young age, malnutrition numbers will decrease as long as children have access to the foods they need. Children can play a role in their nutrition and feel a sense of pride and accomplishment knowing that their efforts help to feed themselves and their family. Working alongside this initiative, CAF America has placed a large focus on decreasing food waste and giving it back to the community. This initiative has begun "recovering edible surplus food across the food system and redistributing it to vulnerable communities across South Africa," ensuring that every amount of edible food is used to feed the country.²⁴ This initiative is beneficial because it ensures no food goes to waste. Not only does it decrease malnutrition, but it improves the significant problems of food waste around the world. By uniting multiple countries together through this initiative, South Africa is no longer alone in their fight to stop malnutrition.²⁵ Moreover, it increases South Africa's access to new foods. This initiative can expose children to food, otherwise unknown to them and their families. Certain produce can be replanted, encouraging the growth of small scale farming. CAF's initiative promotes sustainability and is a low cost solution that repurposes what is already available. Moreover, by recovering wasted food, South Africa can enlist the help of other countries without harming their economies and resources.²⁶ By working in connection with all three of these sustainable initiatives, the government will be able to set their country up for success in decreasing malnutrition and drastically improving the economy while making every citizen an important part of their nutrition.

If the South African government were to accept this solution going forward, momentous results would be achieved. Communities would have access to higher-quality food for years to come, ensuring that future generations have all the tools necessary to be successful. Through efforts of organizations, this solution would remain low cost to the South African government, allowing them to implement it quickly around the country. With the support of the government, these organizations have the means and resources

²² Rise Against Hunger. (n.d.). *Nutrition and empowerment in South Africa*. Rise Against Hunger. <https://www.riseagainsthunger.org/articles/nutrition-and-empowerment-in-south-africa/>

²³ Rise Against Hunger. (n.d.). *Nutrition and empowerment in South Africa*. Rise Against Hunger. <https://www.riseagainsthunger.org/articles/nutrition-and-empowerment-in-south-africa/>

²⁴ CAF America. (n.d.). *Fighting food insecurity: How charities in South Africa are making a difference*. CAF America. <https://cafamerica.org/story/fighting-food-insecurity-how-charities-in-south-africa-are-making-a-difference/>

²⁵ CAF America. (n.d.). *Fighting food insecurity: How charities in South Africa are making a difference*. CAF America. <https://cafamerica.org/story/fighting-food-insecurity-how-charities-in-south-africa-are-making-a-difference/>

²⁶ CAF America. (n.d.). *Fighting food insecurity: How charities in South Africa are making a difference*. CAF America. <https://cafamerica.org/story/fighting-food-insecurity-how-charities-in-south-africa-are-making-a-difference/>

necessary to help the big struggling cities begin their startups of improving access to nutritious food.²⁷ Implementation of these organizations would allow the citizens to become self-sufficient, eventually implementing these initiatives independently, a great feat in South Africa.²⁸ This solution is feasible as it is a lower cost option that enlists the help of the entire community rather than placing the focus and sole responsibility on the government.²⁹ By enlightening the children on their role in nutrition and educating them on how they can improve their situations, these children will grow up with the foundation necessary to feed themselves and their future families. Malnutrition will likely decrease as these plans increase and support the future cohorts of children. The implication of this solution would create immediate results, encouraging the citizens to continue investing and working towards the goal. While the overall demographics may take some time to change, small wins in each community would be almost instantaneous. This solution will remain effective for generations to come as farming techniques and nutrition resources are passed along through families. This solution not only improves the malnutrition problem, but targets to solve sustainability through the use of gardens and reusing waste.³⁰ Going forward, if this solution is further accepted, South Africa will be on track to improve their malnutrition percentage and nutrition throughout the whole country. This solution is already implemented in villages throughout South Africa, but it is not enough. By improving the already implemented organizations to increase access to nutritious foods, South Africa can make great strides to improve their malnutrition problems.

Malnutrition in South Africa is still a significant problem, affecting more than half of the country, kids and adults alike. Despite efforts and progress, malnutrition remains unresolved. “Two in three children under 5 in Southern Africa do not receive the minimum diverse diets they need for healthy growth and development.”³¹ Unsuccessful prevention efforts have left the country’s youth burdened and impeded, qualities that have left them incapable of reaching their full potential and affecting them for their lifetime. While improving partnerships with nutrition organizations and improving nutrition awareness are hypothetically successful solutions, they hold many limitations, including government support and lack of resources, that hinder their effectiveness and therefore remain incapable of improving the current situation. Increasing access to nutritional food remains the best solution as it improves the malnutrition, societal, economical, and agricultural aspects of the country, and is already backed by many worldwide organizations ready to improve nutrition throughout South Africa. It is more important than ever that the

²⁷ UNICEF. (n.d.). *Poor diets damaging children’s health worldwide, warns UNICEF*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/poor-diets-damaging-childrens-health-worldwide-warns-unicef>

²⁸ Rise Against Hunger. (n.d.). *Nutrition and empowerment in South Africa*. Rise Against Hunger. <https://www.riseagainsthunger.org/articles/nutrition-and-empowerment-in-south-africa/>

²⁹ Rise Against Hunger. (n.d.). *Nutrition and empowerment in South Africa*. Rise Against Hunger. <https://www.riseagainsthunger.org/articles/nutrition-and-empowerment-in-south-africa/>

³⁰ CAF America. (n.d.). *Fighting food insecurity: How charities in South Africa are making a difference*. CAF America. <https://cafamerica.org/story/fighting-food-insecurity-how-charities-in-south-africa-are-making-a-difference/>

³¹ UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa. (n.d.). *Nutrition | UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/esa/nutrition>

South African government implements a sustainable and effective solution and makes essential strides to improve the country's overall malnutrition to begin setting its citizens up for success.

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