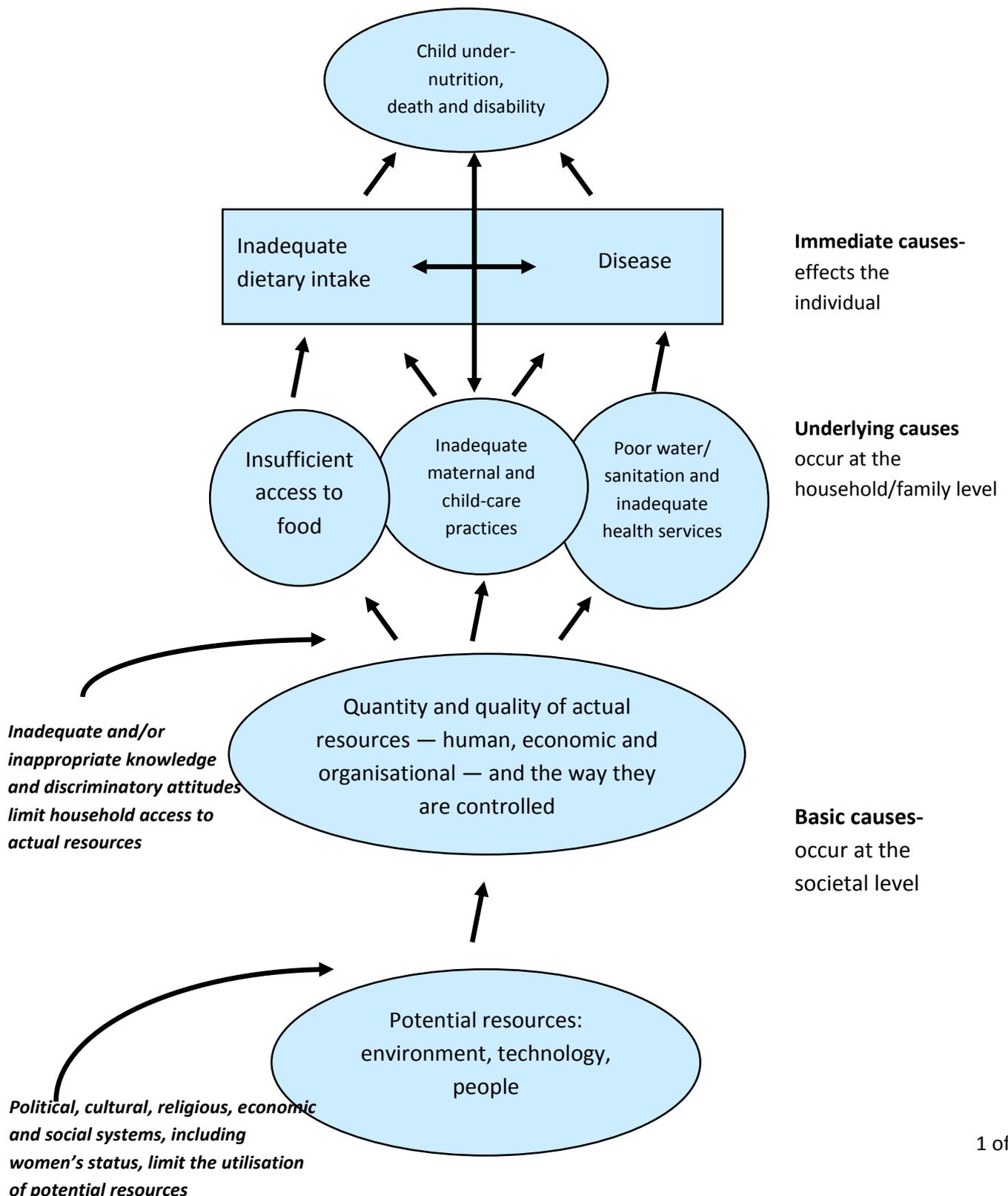


What does undernutrition look like and how does it impact communities?



This background sheet takes a closer look at the causes and effects of under nutrition.

Undernutrition is not just caused by insufficient access to food; food is only one part of the picture. As you will in the diagram below, child under-nutrition is the result of the interaction between disease and lack of food. This is caused by underlying factors, which include care practices (such as exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months and early initiation of breastfeeding) as well as access to sanitation and clean water and household food security. The underlying factors are in turn influenced by societal level factors including access to land, resources, education, and jobs as well as factors such as women’s position in society.



Case Study: Under-nutrition in India

This case study takes the UNICEF framework and applies it a specific country context. This is what nutrition programming experts do when they think what will be the most effective programme to implement in a specific context.

India has made huge progress in terms of increasing its economic growth in the past 15 years, rising from a low income country to a lower middle income country, with huge growth in the private sector, especially in the areas of information technology. However, the country, with a population of 1.3 billion people, also contains one third of the malnourished children in the world.

What causes this malnutrition?

Looking at the top of our diagram, we can see that under-nutrition is caused immediately by two factors, disease and inadequate food consumption. This is critical, with both playing equal parts in under-nutrition. Often a child will not have a strong immune system because of a poor diet, making them more susceptible to disease. They then get sick and lose their appetite, causing them to become more undernourished. Sick children usually have higher calorie needs as well, so they need to consume more food when they are sick, leading to a cycle of disease and malnutrition.

Why does the child get sick? Looking at the framework, you must think about what is happening within families. In India about 30% of the population lives below the poverty line, meaning they cannot afford to access nutritious foods. Often poor people do not have regular work, relying on day labour jobs which are erratic and they can go months with no work, making it hard to ensure the family has a reliable supply of food.

Care practices are also very important, especially for very young children, the period most critical for preventing long-term stunting. Several interventions have been shown to save lives: starting breastfeeding within the first hour after birth provides critical immunization for the child AND reduces the risk of haemorrhage for the mother, a double win.

Exclusive breastfeeding for six months is also very important, decreasing a child's risk of diseases such as diarrhoea and pneumonia significantly compared to

children who are fed breast milk supplements. This also protects the child from contaminated water and provides important antibodies (which protect against disease) which are provided in breast milk.

Finally, it is important to consider the family's personal environment; do they have access to clean water? Do they have a latrine or other type of flushing toilet? Is there enough water available for people to drink as well as bathe regularly? Can people afford to buy soap? In India, over 600 million people practice open defecation, which is a large contributor to child under-nutrition in the country.

Finally, we must consider the societal level factors that contribute to under-nutrition. These factors are often rooted in poverty but are also influenced by issues such as inequality. In India, key factors impacting under nutrition are things such as women's unequal voice in society and inability to influence many decisions within and outside the home. Lower castes and tribal peoples are often discriminated against and have less opportunity to access government services and jobs. Tribal peoples often live in remote areas and are not able to access healthcare and other services and often are unable to find work. These are just a few of the issues that influence under-nutrition at a societal level; many other issues also come into play.

As you can see from the above discussion, under-nutrition is not just about food; indeed food is only one factor that influences nutrition. In order to effectively tackle under-nutrition in a sustainable way there is a need for a multi-pronged approach that helps with not only the immediate causes but also the underlying and basic causes.