# Championing nutrition for kids

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Hunger and malnutrition among Filipino children continue to be prevalent, not so much due to a lack of an institutional framework, but more because of inconsistent implementation of programs meant to address the problem.

There has been progress, indeed, from the 1980s when an iconic photo of an emaciated child from Negros came out. However, malnutrition remains a crisis and should be viewed as an important election issue that candidates in the midterm polls must address.

Per the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef), around 18 percent or 2 million children in the country are severely food poor. In addition, one in four children experiences stunting and undernutrition, which will leave lasting consequences on their cognitive development that will impact their future. Unless this is addressed, the country is looking at generations of poor Filipinos whose poverty will be perpetuated and passed on in an endless cycle.

The Unicef’s “Child Food Poverty: Nutrition Deprivation in Early Childhood” report published in June 2024 noted that of the 2 million children experiencing food poverty, four out of five were fed only breastmilk/milk and/or a starchy staple, such as rice, corn, or wheat; less than 10 percent were fed fruits and vegetables; and less than 5 percent were fed nutrient-dense foods such as eggs, fish, poultry, or meat.

“Children living in severe food poverty are children living on the brink,” said Unicef representative to the Philippines Oyunsaikhan Dendevnorov.

## First 1,000 days

“Children who consume just rice and some vegetable soup a day are up to 50 per cent more likely to experience severe forms of malnutrition … This can have an irreversible negative impact on their survival, growth, and brain development,” she added.

In the article “The first 2,000 days and beyond,” (Commentary, 4/24/25) published by the Inquirer this week, economist Gary Teves wrote that nutrition and health-care interventions during the first 1,000 days of a child’s life are crucial for their lifelong health, learning, and productivity.

Teves added that the next 1,000 days, or from 2 to 5 years old, are equally important because it is when children learn language, develop social skills, and prepare for formal education.

“Taken together, the first 2,000 days have lifelong consequences for health, education, and economic productivity. Investing in both periods is essential to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and malnutrition,” Teves said.

In 2018, two crucial laws were signed: Republic Act No. 11148 or the Kalusugan at Nutrisyon ng Mag-Nanay Act also known as the “first 1,000 days law,” and RA 11037 or the Masustansyang Pagkain para sa Batang Pilipino Act. These laws ensure that children get the necessary support from birth to their early years in school.

## Supplemental meals

RA 11037 institutionalized the school-based feeding program (SBFP) and supplementary feeding program (SFP). The SBFP, supervised by the Department of Education, addresses undernutrition by providing hot meals or nutritional food products and milk to “wasted” and “severely wasted” learners (as determined through their weight-to-height ratio) from kindergarten to Grade 6.

SFP, on the other hand, under the Department of Social Welfare and Development, provides food supplements in addition to regular meals to children enrolled in day-care centers. The supplemental meals are hot meals served during snack time in the morning or afternoon sessions.

Sen. Grace Poe, one of the main authors of RA 11037 and whose two six-year terms end on June 30, said it is important to ensure the continuity of these programs beyond this year.

This year’s SBFP has been allocated P11.7 billion in the national budget—P65.7 million higher than last year’s allocation. The program’s future would depend on how much budget it would get in the coming years.

## Economic future

“We’re not starting from zero. The programs and the budget for child nutrition are in place, but we need champions for this advocacy to ensure its continuity,” Poe said.

“We hope we elect officials who believe that the economic future of our country hinges on our children,” she added.

On top of these existing nutrition programs, the government must also look into providing free breakfast for learners. It has often been said that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but many, especially poor students, often go to school without any sustenance. If they do, the quality of the breakfast most likely does not have nutritional value to help them stay alert in class and absorb their lessons.

All these initiatives require budgetary support that the national government must consistently commit to.

If the government truly wants to attain economic development, it must first help the poorest overcome barriers to productivity. And breaking generational poverty begins with ensuring that poor Filipino children get the necessary nutritional support to help in their mental and physical development so they can grow to be productive members of society.