Association between economic growth and early childhood undernutrition: evidence from 121 demographic and health surveys from 36 low-income and middle-income countries

Sebastian Vollmer et al.
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It is presumed that increased economic growth will lead to increases in average income, especially improving the incomes of the poor, which in turn will improve access to, and consumption of, goods and services that improve nutritional status and health. However, although there have been a few studies looking at the relationship between economic growth and undernutrition, strong evidence to support this remains unclear. This study investigated whether changes in national economic growth were associated with reductions in the prevalence of early childhood stunting, underweight, and wasting.

Data on children aged 0-35 months from 121 Demographic Health Surveys from 36 low-income to middle-income countries was analysed. Overall results showed that macroeconomic growth has a null to quantitatively very weak association with reductions in early childhood stunting, underweight, and wasting. There are several possible reasons for this:

1. The growth in incomes could be unequally distributed.
2. If rising incomes reach most households, they might not necessarily be spent in ways that enhance the nutritional status of children.
3. Rising average incomes could be poorly associated with improvements to public services that are essential to improve the nutritional status of the population.

Most importantly, this overall finding challenges the assumption that economic growth will automatically lead to reductions in child undernutrition. These results emphasise the need to focus on direct investments in health and nutrition.

Taken from Nutrition Exchange 4
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