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Nutritional status of pregnant women and school children in Kosovo

Prishtine/Pristina, 31 April 2010 - UNICEF and the National Institute of Public Health (NIPH) publish a Survey on the Nutritional status of pregnant women and school children in Kosovo.

Poor nutrition is a significant cause of inadequate health status in Kosovo. According to the UNICEF supported Survey on Nutritional Status of pregnant women and school children, 15,7 % of school age children are tested with mild anemia. Anemia was present in 23.0% of pregnant women, thus revealing a significant public health problem. In order to assess the nutritional status of children the survey measured the height of each child comparing it with WHO standards and concluded that 15.5% of children were stunted and 4.7 % were severely stunted.

The same Survey found that current practice of iodized salt supply in Kosovo is ensuring adequate iodine nutrition status not only in school aged children but also among pregnant women. This is a remarkable result as it will contribute to elimination of iodine deficiency disorders in general.

Millions of children suffer from micronutrient deficiencies – when the body lacks essential minerals – iodine, iron and zinc – and vitamins – vitamin A, folate. These deficiencies are among the world's most frequent and most serious health risk factors. Each year malnutrition is implicated in about 40% of the 11 million deaths of children under five in developing countries. Micronutrient malnutrition contributes to a vicious cycle of poor health and depressed productivity, trapping families in poverty and eroding economic security in dozens of countries worldwide.

Deficiencies in iodine can lead to severe mental or physical impairment, in iron to life-threatening anaemia or lowered productivity, in vitamin A to blindness or to a weakened immune system and in folate to low birth weight or birth defects such as spina bifida.

Mr. Johannes Wedenig, UNICEF Head of Office says 'Malnutrition is both a consequence and cause of poverty. Children's nutrition and well being are the foundation of a healthy, productive society. While there are significant results achieved in elimination of iodine deficiency disorders in Kosovo, it is equally important to address anemia and folic acid deficiency. This can be achieved through a very cost effective measure known as flour fortification with folic acid and iron'

The level of iron deficiency anemia found in women and children is not only a public health problem but represents significant current and future economic losses for Kosovo as well. The simple, cost-effective and high-impact measures such as flour fortification may ensure improvement of pregnant mothers' and

MEDIA RELEASE

children's nutritional status. The annual economic loss due to iron deficiency and folic acid is estimated at about 10.4 million Euro. Annual fortification of flour with iron and folic acid is estimated at 0.53 million Euro while potential cost benefit is 9.87 million Euro.

UNICEF in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, NIPH, and the working group on IDD are supporting a set of measures to combat micronutrient deficiencies. Such measures include the development of the Law on flour fortification and its effective implementation.

Other key tools in the effort to defeat micronutrient deficiencies include: an adequate diet, which includes immediate and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, and continued breastfeeding with age-appropriate complementary foods, micronutrients, prevention and treatment of disease and proper care and feeding practices.

For more information, Arbena Kuriu Communication Officer, tel: +381 38 249 230/231/232, mob: + 377 44 221 935. E-mail: akuriu@unicef.org