

SPEECH

BY THE UNICEF REPRESENTATIVE,

**MS. CARRIE AUER AT THE DISSEMINATION WORKSHOP FOR THE
INFANT AND YOUNG CHILD FEEDING STUDY**

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I feel greatly humbled to speak at this dissemination workshop on behalf of the Development Partners involved in nutrition here in Malawi. The study being disseminated today on Infant and Young Child Feeding is an important step forward in our concerted efforts to position nutrition as an important national priority in Malawi. It complements similar milestone events we have held in the past, notably the launch of the National Nutrition Policy and Strategic Plan in early 2010.

Ladies and gentlemen, reducing malnutrition remains one of the greatest development challenges facing Malawi at present. According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey of 2006, one in two under-five children is stunted, one in five is underweight and one in 20 is wasted. According to the World Health Organization, Malawi tops the list of sub-Saharan countries with the highest rates of stunting, a place it shares with Burundi and Madagascar, both of which have either emerged from

or are currently embroiled in civil crises of one sort or the other. For Malawi, a country that has never experienced war or widespread civil unrest, this situation is simply difficult to accept.

By any reckoning, Malawi's high rates of malnutrition jeopardize its children's prospects for survival, growth and development. At national level, malnutrition not only slows down social-economic progress but it also diminishes the nation's productive capacities. Malnourished children have impaired immune systems which render them vulnerable to sickness and death and, because today's children are tomorrow's workforce, malnutrition also has the profound effect of lowering an individual's economic productivity. Just to pick one example: according to the government's own projections made in 2008, if current levels of stunting remain unchanged over the next ten years, Malawi will lose US\$ 207 million in future economic productivity as the direct result of malnutrition.

We are gratified that the Government of Malawi has been a leader among African countries in its formal recognition of the importance of good nutrition as a human right and as an essential foundation for national growth and development. The Nutrition Policy and Strategic Plan provide the framework for nutrition interventions and by locating coordination of nutrition in the Office of the President and Cabinet, the

government continues to signal its commitment to nutrition at the highest levels.

Nevertheless, policies alone, however sound and well crafted, are ineffective without the means and resources to turn them into meaningful action. The time has come when these strategies and policies should be translated into effective, scaled-up action.

This is why there is an emerging international consensus that for the problems of malnutrition to be effectively tackled, there needs to be a concerted, scaled-up response at both national and international levels. During the MDG Summit in September last year, the international community came together to launch the “Scale-Up Nutrition” (SUN) roadmap, a global call for the principles of the Paris Declaration to be applied to nutrition. This means greater national ownership and stewardship of nutrition interventions and better coordination of donor support. The SUN initiative was launched together with the “1,000 Days” initiative, a call on countries to focus their investments on the critical 1,000 days “window of opportunity” that comprises the nine months of a woman’s pregnancy and the first two years of her child’s life.

These two inter-related initiatives recognize that intensified efforts are needed to address the issues of malnutrition in many developing countries including Malawi. In essence, the two initiatives require that we speak with one voice on the need to prioritize malnutrition, coordinate

our support, and rally behind and strengthen national leadership. Speaking with one voice entails that we draw particular attention to the critical 1,000 days “window of opportunity” and link it to the importance of child-care practices as an essential pre-requisite for solving malnutrition.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are delighted that Malawi was among the first countries to join the SUN Initiative. This means that the government has already expressed its intention to provide committed leadership to a scaled-up national nutrition response and its Development Partners their commitment to effectively coordinate their support. What we have therefore is a perfect scenario for accelerating progress: government policy, strategic, and institutional leadership backed by consolidated donor support. We believe that when these factors function effectively, Malawi can turn the page on its persistent malnutrition problem.

Let me seize this opportunity to assure this gathering of UNICEF’s continued commitment to the implementation of the National Nutrition Policy and Strategic Plan. Improving child nutrition is not only entirely feasible but is also affordable and cost-effective. Together with other sister agencies in the United Nations and the Development Partners, we will continue to:

- Support and strengthen better coordination, continue capacity development and improve monitoring systems;
- Link nutrition projects with health system strengthening, food security investments and social safety nets, as well as with the larger poverty reduction agenda;
- Effectively partner with the private sector and with civil society organizations to deliver adequate nutrition to all children. We have an excellent example of how powerfully well this partnership can work in the recent fortification of sugar produced by Illovo; and
- We will also strive to adhere to the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action, both of which call for aid coordination and strong mutual accountability.

In conclusion, as we scale-up our nutrition efforts, we need to keep our focus on achieving results. As development resources become more and more scarce, nothing will succeed like success itself. Our investments must be accompanied by rigorous evaluations of large scale programs, not just small studies, to seriously assess how to effectively go to scale in diverse environments and settings. This would be a major contribution to global scale-up efforts.

Thank you.