

Children & Nutrition: Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States

Underweight prevalence in children under five	
Current available data	5% (1 million children)
Other key nutrition indicators	
Infants with low birthweight (%)	9
Children exclusively breastfed 0-6 months (%)	22
Households consuming iodized salt (%)	47
Under-five mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)	38



UNICEF HQ05-1809/Pirozzi: Examining a poster on iodine deficiency in the Kharkiv region, Ukraine.

Challenges

Lack of data makes it hard to predict whether the entire region is on track to reach the MDG target, but some countries will make it. Only 5% of children are underweight and all but three countries that have data show underweight prevalence rates in single figures. However, this region still has serious nutrition problems, with 14 countries reporting that at least 10% of their children suffer from stunting. The region also has one of the lowest levels of exclusive breastfeeding in the world. With just 22% of babies exclusively breastfed until the age of six months, the region is on a par with West and Central Africa. However, the major nutrition problem in CEE/CIS is 'hidden hunger' or micronutrient deficiencies caused by lack of iodine, iron and folic acid. The region has the lowest proportion of households using iodized salt in the world at just 47%, leaving children vulnerable to iodine deficiency disorders (IDD).

Priority countries

- In the Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, 2 million of the 2.4 million babies born each year lack protection against brain damage due to iodine deficiency.
- In Tajikistan, more than one third of all children (36%) suffer from stunting, vitamin A deficiency is as high as 27% and 15% of babies are born with low weight. Tajikistan also has the highest under-five mortality rate in the region.
- In Albania, more than one third of children (34%) are stunted. In Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (in addition to Tajikistan), the stunting rates stand at more than 20%.

Progress

- Three countries have made particularly impressive progress: Kazakhstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan have halved their underweight prevalence rates since the mid-1990s. Croatia and Ukraine have cut the rate to just 1%.
- The region has boosted the use of iodized salt from the mid-20s to 47% since 2001 – a major achievement. Six countries are believed to have eliminated IDD (Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia Serbia and Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkmenistan), and another five are close to achieving this goal. However, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, with 47 per cent of the region's total population, are lagging behind, pulling the regional average down.
- Flour fortification is becoming standard business practice among flour mills and is underway in Central Asia.

UNICEF in Action

- UNICEF is a key player in the regional goal to eliminate iodine deficiency, convincing decision-makers, the public and salt producers of the importance of salt iodization and the cost of inaction. UNICEF Regional Goodwill Ambassador Anatoly Karpov sees this as a personal crusade and has lobbied many national leaders.
- 2005 was a breakthrough year, when UNICEF and USAID focused on opponents to salt iodization, gaining their support for legislation on this issue.
- In Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, UNICEF provides iodized salt test kits for schools to promote the use and benefits of iodized salt among those that purchase salt: mothers.