

Children & Nutrition: Middle East and North Africa

Trends in underweight prevalence in children under five	
1990	14%
Current available data	17% (8 million children)
Average annual rate of reduction (AARR)	-1.6 (no progress towards MDG target)
Other key nutrition indicators	
Infants with low birthweight (%)	15
Children exclusively breastfed 0-6 months (%)	29
Households consuming iodized salt (%)	58
Under-five mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)	56



UNICEF/HQ03-0475/Shehzad Noorani. IRAQ: Women bring their children to be screened for undernutrition at the Al-Zafarania General Hospital in Baghdad.

Challenges

The proportion of underweight children in the region increased between 1990 and 2004. The region as a whole is unlikely to reach the MDG target because regional statistics are being dragged down by the plight of children in three large countries: Iraq, Sudan and Yemen. In many cases, conflict has been a significant factor contributing to a decline in children's health. Beyond these three countries, the picture is more optimistic. Six countries and territories – Djibouti, Jordan, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Oman, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia – are all on track to reach the MDG target, and underweight prevalence in 12 countries approach those of industrialized countries. However, the region faces some large disparities, with children living in the poorest households more than twice as likely to be underweight as children living in the richest households, and those living in rural areas 1.7 times more likely to be underweight as those in urban areas of the region. There are concerns on breastfeeding, with only around 29% of babies being exclusively breastfed for the first six months and the duration of breastfeeding declining in most countries.

Priority countries

- The proportion of children underweight in Iraq is still higher than it was in 1990, standing at 16%. Following the 1991 war, undernutrition rates soared before falling in the late 1990s. Levels of exclusive breastfeeding are low at 12% and the disruption of breastfeeding by the provision of free infant formula under the Oil for Food programme has left a legacy of poor feeding practices.
- In Yemen the situation has also deteriorated, with 46% of all children underweight, up from 30% in 1991-1992. More than half of all Yemeni children under five are stunted and almost one-third of babies are born with low weight.
- In Sudan, 41% of children are underweight and the country has the highest proportion of wasted children in the region (16%). Just 1% of households consume iodized salt.

Progress

- The Occupied Palestinian Territory has reduced underweight prevalence among children under five by an average of 5.3% per year.
- Jordan, OPT and Qatar have reduced the prevalence of stunting in children to less than 10%.
- Tunisia has achieved universal salt iodization, and Iran and Jordan are well on track to eliminate iodine deficiency. Household consumption of iodized salt is above 80% in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates..

UNICEF in action

- UNICEF is working with the Governments of Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen to create Centres of Excellence in the management of severe undernutrition. The scheme aims to build national capacity to manage nutrition in crises with the help of teaching institutions, nutrition departments and universities who will train health and nutrition workers. During crisis, the centres will train doctors, nurses, NGOs, the UN, the Ministry of Health and others.
- In Iraq, UNICEF provides potassium iodate, iodine/salt-mixing machines and testing kits to sustain salt iodization, equipment and capacity building for the national Wheat Flour Fortification project, and supports vitamin A and ferrous/folic acid supplementation to reach nearly 500,000 infants and 700,000 pregnant and lactating women. Over 10,000 severely undernourished children were treated at 67 UNICEF-supported Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres across the country in 2005.