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A Quarter of the World's Children Seriously Underweight

Report Says World Failing in Fight Against Childhood Undernutrition

NEW YORK, 2 May 2006 -- More than one quarter of all children under the age of five in developing countries are underweight, many to a life-threatening degree, says a UNICEF report published today. Poor nutrition remains a global epidemic contributing to more than half of all child deaths, about 5.6 million per year.

Progress for Children: A Report Card on Nutrition says the proportion of children under five who are underweight has fallen only slightly since 1990 - proof, according to UNICEF, that the world is failing children.

"The lack of progress to combat undernutrition is damaging children and nations," said UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman, speaking on her first anniversary as head of the global children's agency. "Few things have more impact than nutrition on a child's ability to survive, learn effectively and escape a life of poverty."

The report charts national and regional progress towards the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG): to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. Achieving this goal means halving the proportion of children who are underweight for their age, the most visible sign of undernutrition. But current trends show the world is still far off track.

Despite progress in some countries, developing-world averages for underweight children have dropped just five percentage points in the last 15 years. Today, 27 per cent of children in developing countries are underweight – around 146 million. Nearly three quarters of the world's underweight children live in just ten countries, and over half in just three countries: Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. These figures are just the tip of the iceberg, according to UNICEF.

"For every visibly undernourished child, there are several more battling a hidden nutritional crisis," Veneman said. "Many are seriously deficient in essential vitamins and minerals such as iodine, vitamin A and iron."

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies may not be apparent to the eye but their consequences can be seen worldwide. These critical building blocks are essential to develop children's bodies and minds. Without them, children become easy prey for common diseases and underperform at school. For example, a lack of iodine in household diets leaves 37 million newborns vulnerable to learning disabilities every year. And iron deficiency is a major cause of maternal deaths.

Eliminating these deficiencies can change a nation's fortunes, says the report. Good nutrition is essential for achieving the MDGs, from eradicating poverty to making sure that children can go to school, and from reducing maternal mortality to combating major diseases.

Progress breakdown

The report shows only two regions of the world on track to meet the MDG target for reducing the prevalence of underweight children: **Latin America and the Caribbean** and the **East Asia and Pacific** region, with underweight prevalence rates of 7 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively. Progress in East Asia largely has been due to the great leaps taken by China to reduce its underweight prevalence by an average of 6.7 per cent per year since 1990. Other countries in the region are lagging behind.

In **South Asia**, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan account for half of all the world's underweight children: Approximately 47 per cent of India's under-five population is underweight, dragging down the regional average.

The famine-prone **Eastern and Southern Africa** region has not made measurable progress to meet the MDG target on underweight children, its overall tally remaining static at 29 per cent. Despite some bright spots, most notably Botswana, several countries are backsliding with drought-related food crises and the rise of HIV/AIDS taking their toll. The **West and Central Africa** region has done better, partly due to strides made by some countries to support exclusive breastfeeding for infants and community-based health care. These efforts have been boosted by the UNICEF-sponsored Accelerated Child Survival and Development programme in the region.

Undernutrition rates within the bigger nations of the **Middle East and North Africa** have pushed back the regional average. Iraq, Sudan and Yemen are all showing a rise in the proportion of underweight children – with conflict playing a major role in many cases.

The **Central and Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States** has the world's lowest childhood underweight figures, just 5 percent. But here, as in **industrialized countries**, there are disparities. Low birthweight is more common among the poorest and among ethnic minorities. In some countries, child obesity is now a serious challenge.

Solutions

Because the roots of undernutrition lie in poverty, lack of education and inequality, fighting back will take more than food deliveries, according to *Progress for Children*. Unsafe feeding practices and repeated bouts of illness such as diarrhoea and malaria are all major factors depriving children of nutrients. And in sub-Saharan Africa, HIV/AIDS is robbing millions of children of the support they need to be adequately fed and cared for. UNICEF has convened a global campaign, "*Unite for Children. Unite Against AIDS*", to bring much needed care, treatment and support for children affected by the epidemic.

Solutions can be as simple as a capsule of vitamin A costing just a few cents delivered during immunization – a programme currently saving around 350,000 lives per year by boosting immune systems. And fortifying staple foods with key nutrients like iron and iodine is a proven way to protect millions of children against damaging deficiencies and developmental delays.

The report calls urgently for a nutrition "safety net" to guarantee children's access to these services every day. This means making child nutrition a central component of national policies and budgets, providing better nutrition information and resources for families, and planning to cope with emergencies.

It also stresses a special focus on the first two years of life – a critical window of opportunity to safeguard children's future potential. Young bodies and brains may never recover from the effects of poor nutrition during this development stage. A healthy, well nourished pregnancy is an essential first step. And promoting exclusive breastfeeding is the most powerful tool to ensure a child thrives through infancy.

A common approach to the problems of undernutrition is also essential, particularly on reaching the poorest children. The Executive Director of UNICEF has just assumed the chair of the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition, and along with the World Food Programme is leading the new *Ending Child Hunger and Undernutrition Initiative* to build momentum for the 2015 nutrition goal. Nutrition is also a major focus of the UNICEF co-chaired Partnership on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health to accelerate progress towards reaching the MDG target on reducing child mortality.

To support this, UNICEF has developed a ten-year health and nutrition plan to help governments reach children with a far more comprehensive package of lifesaving care.

“The Millennium Development Goal to eradicate extreme hunger by 2015 challenges us to bring good health and nutrition to millions of additional children in the decade ahead,” Veneman said. “We still have time to achieve this goal, but only if the international community acts now to deliver the commitment and resources it has promised.”

About UNICEF: For 60 years UNICEF has been the world’s leader for children, working on the ground in 155 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world’s largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

Note to broadcasters: video footage of nutrition projects worldwide is available free of charge from The Newsmarket at <http://www.thenewsmarket.com> or by visiting www.unicef.org.

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