

Children & Nutrition: West and Central Africa

Trends in underweight prevalence in children under five	
1990	32%
Current available data	28% (17 million children)
Average annual rate of reduction (AARR)	1.6% (insufficient to reach MDG target)
Other key nutrition indicators	
Infants with low birthweight (%)	15
Children exclusively breastfed 0-6 months (%)	20
Children receiving vitamin A supplementation (%)	60
Households consuming iodized salt (%)	68
Under-five mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)	191



UNICEF/HQ98-0524/Pirozzi. SIERRA LEONE:
Angella Nallo, aged 10, is part of a UNICEF-
supported food security programme in the
southern town of Bo.

Challenges

Despite having the highest under-five mortality rate in the world, this region has made some progress since 1990 in reducing the proportion of children under five who are underweight. Five countries are on track to hit the MDG target: Benin, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia and Mauritania. Even so, the region as a whole is unlikely to reach the goal without accelerated action. It has the lowest exclusive breastfeeding rates in the world, at only 20%, and anaemia remains a major threat. Around 10% of the region's children are wasted, including more than 1 million children in the Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Political instability, prevalent in many countries in the region, is putting extreme pressure on children's health and nutritional status.

Priority countries

- Nigeria, the most populous country in the region, dominates the statistics with 29% of children underweight. While it is making progress with an AARR of 2.2%, it will not hit the MDG target.
- Sierra Leone's high child mortality rate - the highest under-five mortality rate in the world at 283 per 1,000 live births - is fuelled by the large proportion of low birthweight babies (23%) and the low proportion of babies who are exclusively breastfed (4%).
- Niger has one of the highest underweight rates in the region. Around 40% of children under five are stunted. Just 1% of babies are exclusively breastfed for six months, the lowest rate in the world.

Progress

- Several countries have achieved 80% vitamin A supplementation coverage for children and many have included deworming programmes for anaemia control into vitamin A programmes.
- Gambia reduced the proportion of underweight children from 26% in 1996 to 17% in 2000 and reaches 91% of its child population with vitamin A supplements.
- Ghana has made immense progress in exclusive breastfeeding, from just 4% in 1988 to 53% in 2004.

UNICEF in action

- UNICEF sees infant/young child feeding as a priority across the region, particularly breastfeeding.
- UNICEF stockpiles therapeutic and supplementary food, reaching more than 300,000 children in Niger in 2005 in partnership with the Government of Niger, World Food Programme and NGOs.
- The Accelerated Child Survival and Development (ACSD) programme has been delivering lifesaving health services to mothers and children across the region to 11 countries in West Africa since 2001. In areas covered by the whole package of ACSD interventions, the under-five mortality rate was reduced by an estimated 20%.