SDG 3: ZERO HUNGER

The triple burden of malnutrition – undernutrition, hidden hunger and overweight – threatens the survival, growth and development of children, young people, economies and nations.

**Stunting** is a clear sign that children in a country are not developing well – and is both a symptom of past deprivation and a predictor of future poverty.

**Wasting** can be lethal for children, particularly in its most severe forms. Contrary to common belief, most wasted children around the world live in Asia and not in emergency settings.

**Hidden hunger** harms children and women. Iron deficiency reduces children’s ability to learn and iron deficiency anaemia increases women’s risk of death during or shortly after childbirth.

**Child overweight** is on the rise across every continent and can lead to early onset of type-2 diabetes, stigmatization and depression; it is a strong predictor of adult obesity, with serious health and economic consequences.

The greatest burden of all forms of malnutrition is shouldered by children and young people from the poorest and most marginalized communities, perpetuating poverty across generations. The onset and ongoing crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the situation, especially for the most vulnerable children. Analysis supported by UNICEF on the impact of COVID-19 on nutrition, indicates the number of children with wasting could increase by about 14 per cent (6.7 million children) over the first 12 months of the pandemic, with higher increases in Africa (20-25 per cent). Over 250 million children could miss the benefits of vitamin A supplementation - vital to strengthen children’s immune systems - due to pandemic containment measures. As of late May, 368.5 million school-age children were missing out on school meals due to closures. UNICEF reports suggest a 30 per cent overall reduction in the coverage of essential – and often life-saving – nutrition services.

"Child nutrition is a vital concern. 368.5 million children across 143 countries who normally rely on school meals for a reliable source of daily nutrition must now look to other sources. That challenge is made greater by the economic shock facing households, which will negatively affect the diets of children, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers. Additionally, hastily implemented lockdown measures risk disrupting food supply chains and local food markets. If these effects are not quickly resolved they pose potentially grave consequences for food security."

--Policy Brief by the UN Secretary-General: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children

**KEY ASKS**

There are five key responses essential to improve children’s nutrition that should be included in development plans and agendas as well as COVID-19 response plans and budgets, to put children’s nutrition rights first.

1. **Empower families, children, young people and women to demand affordable nutritious food**: Demand affects supply as food producers respond to consumers’ behaviours and aspirations. Furthermore, when social protection systems are effective, nutrition education is appropriate, and healthy options are affordable, convenient and desirable, parents and caregivers are able to make healthier food choices for children. As children grow older, knowledge and information can make them powerful agents of change. Stimulating demand for nutritious foods means not only educating consumers on the benefits of healthy diets, but also leveraging cultural and social aspirations and protecting consumers from the promotion of unhealthy foods.
2. **Drive food suppliers to do the right thing for children:** Demand alone is not enough. Healthy food must be available, affordable, safe and convenient. Food producers and suppliers have a key role to play, and so do governments, which must create a level playing field for all producers and suppliers, end inappropriate promotions that undermine caregivers’ confidence, and help ensure that their actions fully align with children’s best interests. Food systems are diverse, and so are the solutions, but all food production and consumption must become sustainable if we are to protect children’s nutrition today and tomorrow. COVID-19 food system impacts may limit availability and affordability of healthy foods for children and families, especially the most vulnerable, and governments should maintain access to local markets, shops and stores and guarantee supply chains to support availability of reasonably-priced fresh foods and essential staples.

3. **Build healthy food environments for all children:** The personal and external food environments are where children and their caregivers interact with the food system. While the forces of supply and demand shape food environments, context-appropriate actions such as mandatory front-of-pack labelling and protection against exploitative marketing practices, particularly in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, can help create food environments that are conducive to nutritious diets for children.

4. **Mobilize supportive systems to scale up nutrition results for every child:** As well as food systems, four other key systems must be mobilized to deliver nutrition services, improve nutrition practices and achieve nutrition outcomes at scale. The health, water and sanitation, education and social protection systems must all deliver interventions in a coordinated fashion. A systems approach to children’s nutrition can help ensure that children and families have access to healthy diets and that children receive the nutrition services they need to develop to their full potential. Due the COVID-19 pandemic, food systems are increasingly vulnerable to disruptions, health systems are overburdened, and service delivery disrupted, education systems are substantially altered, and social protection systems are facing a sharp increase in demand as a result of a sudden economic downturn and rapidly spiralling unemployment. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic should include investments to secure children and women’s access to nutritious and diverse foods and providing accurate information on infant feeding to caregivers. Services for the early detection and treatment of child wasting as well as interventions on vitamin A supplementation for children, and micronutrient supplementation and nutritional support for pregnant and breastfeeding women need to be continued.

5. **Collect, analyse and use good-quality data and evidence regularly to guide action and track progress:** Lack of adequate data prevents governments from responding with effective policies, strategies and programmes. Accurate and timely data are needed to understand malnutrition, take coordinated, evidence-based action, and to hold all actors to account. Data collection methods and frequency must be transformed to expand what we know about the diets and nutrition of children, adolescents and women at every stage of life. Innovative methods embracing technology to collect data and information on nutrition in a safe and efficient manner is essential. Guidance and capacity building will be required to ensure quality data collection. Data systems must become responsive and a culture of data-sharing and transparency must be developed.

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**MONITOR -- THE IMPORTANCE OF DISAGGREGATED DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND USE**

Like the challenge of malnutrition itself, data on child, adolescents, and maternal nutrition is evolving. The global dietary shift and the triple burden of malnutrition are increasing the need for more data, while technologies are opening opportunities for new understanding. As addressing malnutrition becomes more holistic, with a focus on systems that cut across sectors and take into account food environments and consumer behaviour, a wider range of actionable data is needed.

Using data and evidence to shape decision-making for policies and programming is crucial to understand dietary decisions that improve children’s lives. There is a strong need for new tools to better understand children’s diets. **Methods to measure food availability, access, affordability, demand and use** and the relationship between all these aspects is needed, along with tracking and understanding the nutrition transition as unhealthy diets become more prevalent worldwide.

The potential impact and effectiveness of data do not lie only in tracking more indicators or producing more surveys: the analysis and use of existing data to drive policy advocacy and programme design and implementation is vital. This effort must also be linked to the development of global and national targets for improving children’s diets and feeding practices.

**INVEST -- SOCIAL SPENDING AND PROGRESS ON RESULTS FOR CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & YOUTH**

To address the **multifaced challenge of malnutrition**, a systems approach should be adopted to provide the multiple responses needed. The **systems approach** better captures the importance of the interactions and interconnections across different areas, such as food, health and education, and crystallizes a common purpose: better diets and better nutrition for children, adolescents and women. The food system must respond and provide better dietary choices for children, adolescents and women. The health, water and sanitation, education and social protection systems are also fundamental in driving transformation, particularly in the personal and external food environments, and delivering the necessary services to support better diets, practices and nutrition.
outcomes. That approach puts the focus on multiple, interconnected determinants, and recognizes shared responsibility, and the need to **mobilize attention and resources** from a wider variety of societal and governmental institutions.

Social protection programmes are a powerful instrument to not only lift families and children out of poverty, but also to promote maternal and child nutrition through nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programmes. A range of interventions, such as conditional and unconditional cash transfers, food subsidies, food rations and school feeding, can provide communities with the means to access and afford nutritious food and limit the long-term effects of deprivation. There is growing evidence that **cash-transfer programmes**, in particular, targeted to households with young children improves their growth and nutritional status.

**ACTIVATE -- AWARENESS BUILDING & MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & YOUTH**

Local communities and civil society organizations (CSOs) can play a significant role in promoting better child nutrition, including by representing the voices of marginalized groups (such as small landholders, indigenous children, and women), holding government and business accountable, and directly serving the nutritional needs of their communities.

The process for preparing the 2021 voluntary national review should directly involve children and adolescent girls and boys, especially the most marginalized or excluded. For example, through consultations (on and/or offline), surveys or polls, focus group discussions, etc. UNICEF together with civil society, child-focused organizations and other partners could support the government in that process. The results of these efforts as well as the methods employed should be described in the VNR report, including the number of young people involved in the process.

**Provide spaces for children, adolescents and youth to learn about, discuss and act on the SDGs, including Zero Hunger.** UNICEF can support this effort due to our existing work in this space and creating child-friendly education and entertainment materials through our foundational partnerships on the World’s Largest Lesson and Comics Uniting Nations. UNICEF’s Youth Activate Talk Methodology is also a platform from children to express their ideas on the SDGs through a variety of medium.

Awareness-raising and participation should be part of a continuum to regularly, meaningfully and consistently engage children, adolescents and young people as knowledge producers and agents of change to influence decision-making processes and outcomes as well as behaviours and social norms amongst themselves, their households and their communities. This goes beyond engagement just for the purposes of reporting periods, but rather creating standing mechanisms and spaces for young people to engage and have their perspectives heard in decision and policy-making processes and outcomes as well as behaviours and social norms amongst themselves, their households and their communities.

Research on meaningful youth engagement and participation suggest that adolescents need to feel a sense of belonging and trust of others, opportunities to socialize with peers, and to be involved in activities that they consider fun. Furthermore, focus should be put on improving the diets and lifestyle behaviours of adolescent girls and boys by engaging them through nutrition education and interpersonal communication on healthy diets and physical activity, including efforts to **involve adolescents for developing IT based solutions to improve nutrition.**

For more information, visit: [https://www.unicef.org/sdgs](https://www.unicef.org/sdgs)