



Leveraging Nutrition and Social Protection Programming

to address Malnutrition and Poverty, including in Fragile and Humanitarian Contexts

UNICEF Position Paper



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SUMMARY

Children’s and women’s rights to good nutrition and social protection are enshrined in international human rights instruments. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – specifically SDGs 1 and 2 – are commitments to end poverty and hunger, with specific targets to reduce malnutrition by 2030; however, the world is not on track to achieve them.

Malnutrition and poverty are inextricably linked. Malnutrition in early childhood is both a cause and a consequence of poverty, and poverty is both a cause and a consequence of malnutrition in early childhood. Therefore, solutions to reduce both malnutrition and poverty are best achieved when policies and programmes to reduce malnutrition work in tandem with those to reduce poverty.

A positive impact on maternal and child nutrition is more likely to be achieved when social protection measures are adequate, sustained and combined with quality nutrition programmes, including adequate food and nutrition policies and access to nutritious and diverse diets, essential nutrition services, and nutrition information, counseling and support. This is especially relevant in contexts affected by recurrent shocks, including climate change, food insecurity and conflict.

UNICEF seeks to optimize the programming synergies between nutrition and social protection to improve outcomes for children. **To do this, UNICEF commits to five key strategic priorities:**



1

Taking a multi-level approach to integrating nutrition and social protection programmes

– including actions related to evidence and analysis, policy, financing and coordination platforms, programme design, local capacity for implementation, and monitoring.



2

Implementing integrated nutrition and social protection programmes that are informed by **context and are fit-for-purpose, agile and impactful.**



3

Scaling up and adapting nutrition and social protection programmes to respond to urgent humanitarian needs

and to strengthen the resilience of communities to prevent worsening vulnerability and malnutrition for children and women in humanitarian and fragile contexts.



4

Strengthening nutrition and social protection capacities at decentralized local levels

– both with governments and communities – to build skills, ownership and sustainability and ensure that good policies and programmes lead to tangible reductions in child poverty and malnutrition.



5

Investing in gender-transformative nutrition and social protection programmes,

recognizing that gender equality is integral for sustainable results in both nutrition and social protection.

BACKGROUND

Millions of children and women around the world are not getting the nutrition they need to survive and thrive. Many of these same children and women are living in poverty and have no access to social protection. Global shocks – such as conflicts, climate change, rising food prices and global pandemics – are not only worsening existing inequalities but are forcing even more children and women into malnutrition and poverty. These phenomena are often inextricably linked and can persist across generations if the cycle is not broken.

Malnutrition in early childhood is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Likewise, poverty is both a cause and a consequence of malnutrition in early childhood.¹ Tackling these complex and interconnected problems requires a comprehensive, systemic, and transformative

response across both nutrition and social protection.

This UNICEF position paper describes the rationale for purposively integrating nutrition and social protection programmes and explains why a collaborative response matters for children and women. It also lays out five strategic priorities for UNICEF in integrating nutrition and social protection programmes to enhance impact for children and women. These priorities include actions to prevent increased vulnerability and malnutrition in fragile and crisis-affected contexts and joint actions to tackle emerging challenges. UNICEF is well placed and committed to adopting this integrated, collaborative, and systemic approach that prioritizes preventive and sustainable actions across nutrition and social protection programmes.



UNDERSTANDING THE URGENT NEED TO BRING NUTRITION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION TOGETHER

Fulfilment of our universal commitments

Children's rights to nutrition and social protection are enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The independence and indivisibility of these rights mean that policies and programme solutions to realize them must be based on cooperation and integration. Similarly, the SDGs – a global road map and set of commitments made by all countries – reaffirm that ending poverty (SDG 1) and ending hunger and malnutrition (SDG 2) are inextricably linked. However, the world is not on track to achieve these goals by 2030.

Children and women face complex and interconnected challenges

The relationship between malnutrition, hunger and poverty is strong and incontrovertible.² The debilitating physical effects of child food poverty³ and malnutrition lead to children having poorer cognitive skills, fewer years of schooling, lower school attainment and reduced wages in adulthood, leading to an increased probability of living in poverty.^{4,5} In turn, poverty threatens children's nutritional well-being; it heightens their risk of becoming and remaining malnourished, and of relapsing into malnutrition even after they have recovered.⁶ When crises hit, the poorest are often the most likely to be affected by child food poverty and by malnutrition.

The intergenerational cycle of poverty and malnutrition can persist for generations, as undernourished mothers are more likely to give birth to children who are undernourished. This exacerbates existing inequalities and undermines the health, development and human capital of entire countries. The World Bank estimates that undernutrition is causing productivity losses that cost low-income countries between 3 and 16 per cent of their GDP every year.⁷

Families affected by poverty often cannot afford quality food and lack regular access to fresh fruits and vegetables.⁸ At the same time, unregulated markets are often flooded with cheap ultra-processed foods that are high in salt, sugars and saturated fat, and low in essential nutrients.⁹ Limited access to nutritious foods and the pervasiveness of nutrient-poor ultra-processed food products puts children from poor

families at greater risk of overweight, undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight.¹⁰

Poverty that is associated with increasing urbanization – due to increased cost of living and the need to seek employment opportunities to afford food rather than produce one's own food – can make it even more challenging for families to access and afford nutritious, diverse and affordable diets. Related to this urbanization shift is that as women are increasingly engaged in employment, new challenges are emerging in relation to the care agenda, given that there may not be sufficient mechanisms and capacities in place for adequate childcare.¹¹

Nutrition and social protection programmes with mutually reinforcing objectives and design adaptations can have an impact

The use of cash transfers in social protection programmes can improve maternal and child nutrition, including by reducing the socioeconomic barriers to accessing nutritious diets. Results achieved for children and women are greater still when cash transfers reach the most nutritionally vulnerable; for example, when targeted directly to children and women during the first 1,000 days from conception to 2 years of age – the critical window of nutrition vulnerability.¹² Furthermore, social protection programmes that are combined with evidence-based complementary interventions, such as evidence-based food and nutrition policies, essential nutrition services, and timely and quality nutrition information, counseling and support, can lead to improved nutrition practices and can facilitate access to essential nutrition services for children and women.¹³

Evidence shows that cash transfers delivered in humanitarian and fragile contexts can help address the underlying determinants of malnutrition. For example, cash transfers can increase household access to a diverse range of nutritious foods for children and women. Cash transfers can also facilitate access – to essential nutrition and health services in these contexts – by covering cost of transport for example, including for life-saving treatment for child wasting. Cash transfers can also improve food intake and dietary quality and prevent children with severe wasting from relapsing following recovery in treatment programmes.¹⁴



Over the longer-term, if cash transfers are adequate, sustained and combined with quality nutrition programmes, they can have a positive impact on nutrition outcomes, such as stunting and wasting.¹⁵ Moreover, when other social protection measures – such as social insurance, job creation and broader livelihood responses – are combined with social transfers and are nutrition-responsive in their design, results for children and women are likely to be enhanced, sustained and transformative. This is especially the case when a comprehensive set of interventions are in place that aim to address multiple underlying determinants of maternal and child malnutrition, such as gender discrimination, disability and socioeconomic inequalities.

It is not just younger children who can benefit from better integration of maternal and child nutrition and social protection policies and programmes. There is evidence that school meals, also considered a social transfer, can improve nutrition outcomes for children and adolescents. These outcomes are enhanced when school nutrition programmes are combined with complementary nutrition interventions, such as micronutrient supplementation, deworming prophylaxis, healthy food environments in schools and nutrition education, information and counseling for children and their families.

Triggering integrated nutrition and social protection programmes early is essential for preventing malnutrition, especially in fragile and humanitarian contexts

Social protection contributes to the prevention of child food poverty, malnutrition and deteriorating vulnerability. Early warning information systems, such as the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC), can be used to trigger timely action to scale up social protection programmes in response to shocks and mitigate hunger, poverty and malnutrition in children and women.

The impact of early expansion of social protection programmes during times of crisis, particularly in contexts affected by severe food and nutrition insecurity, can be enhanced through the simultaneous scaling up of quality nutrition services through the food, health, and education systems and large-scale community action. Coordination between cash, livelihoods and agricultural recovery programmes is also important.

UNICEF'S UNIQUE AND VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION TO INTEGRATED NUTRITION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMING

UNICEF is a global leader in child rights and has unparalleled experience in nutrition and social protection policies and programmes for children and women across the globe, including in humanitarian and fragile contexts. UNICEF's policy guidance – including the Social Protection Framework (2019) and *Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030*¹⁶ – promotes the need for a systems approach, which effectively demands the realization of synergies across these two sectors (*Box 1 and Box 2*).

UNICEF leads maternal and child nutrition and social protection programming in over 130 countries,¹⁷ remaining present and active throughout humanitarian crises and disasters. With this global experience and presence, UNICEF's comparative advantage has several facets:

- UNICEF **works closely with governments**, promoting policies and programmes that take an integrated, systems-based approach to realizing child rights.
- UNICEF is a **convener**, engaging multiple partners in policy and programme design and implementation and leveraging the support of public, private and non-governmental organizations.
- UNICEF contributes to building **strong monitoring and accountability systems** to ensure that programmes reach the most marginalized children and women.
- UNICEF works with governments and partners on **sustainable financing** to strengthen the capacity of national and local governance systems, helping to enhance sustainability.
- UNICEF works closely with governments to **prevent malnutrition in all its forms**. Prevention is at the core of UNICEF's work for maternal and child nutrition, in all contexts: development, fragile and humanitarian.
- UNICEF works closely with governments and partners to **prepare for, respond to and recover from** political, social, economic and climate-related shocks, while protecting the most vulnerable.
- As Cluster Lead Agency for Nutrition, UNICEF has the **operational capacity** to lead and coordinate the delivery of maternal and child nutrition programmes in response to humanitarian crises, including where national capacities and systems are fragile or inadequate.
- UNICEF has the **operational capacity** to support the delivery of cash transfers and programmes to affected populations in a rapid and risk-informed manner where existing national systems are not functioning or are inadequate.

Box 1: What is UNICEF's approach to programming for maternal and child nutrition?

The guiding principle of UNICEF programming for maternal and child nutrition is that 'prevention comes first, in development, fragile and humanitarian contexts.' When efforts to prevent malnutrition fall short, our programmes aim to ensure the early detection and treatment of children with life-threatening malnutrition, both in development and humanitarian contexts. UNICEF aims to improve child and maternal nutrition by addressing its immediate determinants (diets and care), underlying determinants (food, practices and services) and enabling determinants (resources, norms and governance) strengthening the capacity and accountability of five key systems: food, health, water and sanitation, education and social protection.

Box 2: What is UNICEF's approach to social protection systems?

A social protection system includes policies and programmes aimed at preventing, reducing and eliminating economic and social vulnerabilities to poverty and deprivation and their lifelong consequences. Programmes such as cash transfers, social insurance, family-friendly policies, and social care services help families to overcome poverty and vulnerability and access health care, nutritious food and quality education. UNICEF works to build integrated social protection systems to address multiple and compounding vulnerabilities across the lifecycle.

UNICEF'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

By bringing together nutrition and social protection programmes, UNICEF can effectively reach children and women who struggle to access good nutrition because they are poor, marginalized and excluded. At the same time, children and women who are well-nourished have a greater opportunity to escape poverty. To positively impact both child poverty and malnutrition UNICEF commits to:

1. Integrating nutrition and social protection programmes at multiple levels

UNICEF commits to taking a multi-level approach to integrating nutrition and social protection programmes – including actions related to evidence, policy, financing and coordination platforms, design, local capacity for implementation and monitoring.

Nutrition and social protection systems are more likely to have a mutually reinforcing impact on children and women when they include programmes with purposeful synergies. Achieving this requires finding and making connections between nutrition and social protection at multiple levels, including:

- **Investing in the evidence** and understanding the relationship between poverty, vulnerability, hunger, child food poverty and malnutrition to inform policies and programmes.
- **Identifying entry points in national policies and strategies and strengthening coordination platforms** that bring together relevant stakeholders, including government ministries, United Nations agencies and national and international CSOs and NGOs working in social protection and nutrition.
- **Advocating jointly across nutrition and social protection for sustainable and adequate financing** based on evidence and public finance tools and analysis.

For example, in Sri Lanka, UNICEF social policy and nutrition teams jointly advocated with the Government – using evidence and cost analysis – to expand the existing national voucher programme (which targeted pregnant and lactating women) to also include children under 2 years of age to strengthen the impact on nutrition in early childhood.

- **Enhancing and adapting programme design to reach the most socioeconomically and nutritionally vulnerable children, women and families**, including children with disabilities, by taking into consideration targeting, the transfer modality and size, and establishing firm linkages with other interventions, such as policies and programmes to improve children's diets, deliver essential nutrition practices and promote positive feeding, dietary and care practices for children, adolescent girls and women.
- **Strengthening shared information systems, programme monitoring and local capacities** to ensure effective implementation at the local level.

For example, in Nepal, where there is already a policy-level commitment to link nutrition and social protection through the Child Support Grant, UNICEF is supporting local authorities, female health community volunteers and health workers to strengthen the implementation capacity and linkages between, social protection and nutrition programmes at the local level

- **Connecting nutrition and social protection with other systems** – including food, health, water and sanitation, education and child protection – to safeguard the protection and nutrition of children and women across the life course.

2. Designing integrated maternal and child nutrition and social protection programmes that are agile, fit-for-purpose and impactful, including in fragile and humanitarian settings

UNICEF commits to implementing integrated nutrition and social protection programmes that are informed by context and are fit-for-purpose, agile and impactful.

There is no blueprint that identifies the most relevant entry points between maternal and child nutrition and social protection programmes. Synergies must be guided by a multi-level approach (outlined above), context-specific evidence, and the following principles:

- **Focusing on the points in a child's lifetime when impact is greatest.** UNICEF prioritizes joint maternal and child nutrition and social protection

programming to reach children and women during the first 1,000 days (from conception to 2 years of age) – the critical window of opportunity for child survival, growth and development. This is also the period when social protection can have the greatest impact on breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and malnutrition. UNICEF also seeks to reach older children, particularly school-age children and adolescent girls, by linking nutrition and social protection interventions to optimize their nutrition and well-being and that of their families and communities through transformative actions.

- **Combining social protection interventions with nutrition interventions to improve dietary diversity, feeding and care practices and access to essential nutrition services.** Cash transfers on their own are unlikely to impact nutrition outcomes. However, when integrated with nutrition programmes, such as programmes aiming to improve children’s diets, deliver essential nutrition services, and promote positive feeding, dietary and care practices, cash transfers can improve dietary diversity, access to services, and uptake of positive practices.

For example, the UNICEF-supported Merankabandi programme in Burundi links participants in the Government’s national social safety net with social and behaviour change communication sessions. Community agents facilitate the sessions on nutrition and child feeding and care, including through cooking demonstrations aiming to improve children’s diets and nutrition by using foods from kitchen gardens.

- **Using information to identify entry points for programme linkages, inform programme design and track success.** Evidence of the relationship between poverty and malnutrition will help UNICEF identify entry points for programme linkages and inform the design of new programmes. Ongoing analysis of programme data will inform adjustments to programmes, particularly when contexts change and new shocks emerge. UNICEF will measure the impact on nutrition by evaluating changes in diets, practices and services – the underlying determinants of child and maternal nutrition – not just nutrition outcomes.
- **Scaling up successful programmes.** Advocacy for scaling up programmes requires quality evidence from ‘proof-of-concept’ and demonstration programmes. Therefore, it is imperative that UNICEF invests in monitoring and evaluation

mechanisms that produce quality data and analyse programme costs and feasibility to inform scale-up.

For example, UNICEF worked with the Government of Kenya on its Nutrition Improvements through Cash and Education (NICHE) programme to test the provision of nutrition and child protection counselling alongside cash transfers. Evidence from this pilot informed plans to further expand the programme.

- **Connecting to, triggering responses from, and building coherence with other systems.** Social protection programmes alone will not be enough to improve maternal and child nutrition outcomes. UNICEF nutrition programmes leverage the food, health, water and sanitation and education systems to ensure that children have access to nutritious and affordable diets, essential nutrition services, and positive nutrition and care practices. Strengthening the food system to improve the quality of children’s foods, food environments and food practices involves the development of guidelines, standards and regulations on foods for children, promoting adequate foods in schools, regulating the marketing of foods and beverages to/for children, and appropriate labelling of foods and beverages.

For example, in Rwanda, UNICEF is supporting the Government to target public works participants with financial education, savings groups, agricultural extension support, and small livestock as part of a broader set of transformative actions to improve the income and food security of the most vulnerable families.

- **Identifying synergies with other programme areas** – especially early childhood development – is important to address challenges associated with caregiving and the care agenda, including the establishment of family-friendly policies. This is especially relevant given the increasing number of women in employment.

For example, in Egypt and Thailand, UNICEF is supporting programme synergies between social protection and nutrition at multiple levels through a broader early childhood development framework, given the national Governments’ commitment to early childhood development and positive parenting.

+ 3. Anticipating, maintaining and scaling up capacity for risk-informed maternal and child nutrition and social protection programmes in fragile and humanitarian contexts

UNICEF commits to scaling up and adapting social protection and nutrition programming to address urgent humanitarian needs and strengthen the resilience of communities for the prevention of worsening vulnerability and malnutrition for children and women in humanitarian and fragile contexts.

Political, climatic, economic and social crises have a devastating and compounding impact on children and their communities. These contexts are often characterized by a deteriorating food and nutrition security situation that in the worst of scenarios can lead to pre-famine or famine. Children, women and their families, particularly the most vulnerable, are likely to be pushed further into poverty – including food poverty – in such contexts, which will lead to even greater risk of hunger and severe malnutrition. These situations require early, multisectoral responses that include life-saving interventions, as well as medium- to long-term social protection and nutrition responses to build systems to address the multiple causes of poverty and malnutrition and respond to new challenges that emerge ([Link to Famine Prevention and Mitigation: UNICEF Position Paper](#)). This means:

- **Using early warning systems**, such as the IPC, to trigger the scale-up and adaptation of shock-responsive nutrition and social protection programmes to ensure that they reach the most nutritionally vulnerable to prevent further deterioration.
- **Delivering and scaling up cash transfers, including humanitarian cash transfers**, through national social protection systems wherever possible and/or through direct UNICEF implementation where needed. Where national systems cannot be used to deliver humanitarian cash transfers (because they are non-existent or nascent), UNICEF has the operational capacity to rapidly deliver humanitarian cash through a parallel system using a direct implementation modality. Cash transfers should be large enough to meet basic nutrition needs for families, including nutritious foods suitable for children.
- **Delivering and scaling up programmes to prevent and treat child malnutrition in humanitarian crises.** Humanitarian cash transfers will be combined with nutrition interventions to prevent malnutrition by protecting, promoting and supporting access to nutritious and diverse foods, essential nutrition services and positive nutrition and care practices for children, including the early detection and treatment of child wasting as per UNICEF Core Commitments for Children to achieve good nutrition outcomes in Humanitarian Action.

For example, in Yemen, in response to the protracted conflict, UNICEF, together with the World Bank, established the Yemen Emergency Cash Transfer programme, to continue regular cash transfers to the 1.5 million participants of the national Social Welfare Fund, and later to additional participants. UNICEF has also been supporting the national programme by initiating a complementary ‘proof-of-concept’ programme that includes a ‘plus’ component – which includes social and behaviour change interventions and complementary cash vouchers – to prevent child malnutrition and facilitate access to services for the treatment of life-threatening malnutrition.

- **Preventing the relapse of severe wasting.** Cash transfers can help prevent children from relapsing following treatment for severe wasting. By aligning nutrition and social protection information systems, families can receive the longer-term socioeconomic support they need to prevent future episodes of wasting.
- **Strengthening linkages with other systems for a multi-dimensional response.** UNICEF will coordinate with the delivery of in-kind food assistance, where cash alone is inadequate and food availability is scarce. Furthermore, UNICEF nutrition programmes will proactively strengthen linkages with other systems that are critical for the prevention of malnutrition – such as health and water and sanitation – especially in situations where these systems are likely to have been disrupted or collapsed.
- **Investing in social protection and nutrition initiatives to meet emerging challenges**, including those associated with the increasing intensity, frequency and duration of **population displacement**, such as children on the move (within and across borders), urbanization and associated complex urban environments.

4. Strengthening implementation capacity to make it happen in practice

UNICEF commits to investing in capacities at decentralized local levels – within governments and communities – to build skills, ownership and sustainability and ensure that good policies and programmes lead to tangible reductions in child poverty and malnutrition.

UNICEF strengthens the enabling environment for positive long-term transformative change. This includes strengthening the relevant governance, institutions – formal and informal – so that capacities at the local level are in place to deliver programmes. This requires:

- **Building the implementation capacity of local governance systems, community-level workforces and informal institutions.** The capacities of maternal and child nutrition and social protection workforces must be built at the local level, and local authorities must be empowered to understand the interconnectedness of nutrition and social protection.
- **Building and refining monitoring, evaluation and accountability systems** to determine if programmes are helping children and families when they need it, and to inform programme adjustments. UNICEF invests in technological solutions, including information system efficiencies and cohesion across social protection and nutrition programmes, particularly in relation to strengthening case management and referrals.
- **Enhancing knowledge management** through systematically sharing lessons and best practices.

For example, in Mozambique, UNICEF is developing the capacities of community level social protection staff to support implementation of social and behaviour change and case management alongside cash transfers. This has involved the strengthening of systems and mechanisms for training, supportive supervision, incentives, and information-sharing and coordination with other cadres of staff at local level.

5. Investing in gender-transformative programmes to achieve sustainable results in social protection and nutrition

UNICEF commits to investing in gender-transformative work that has a positive impact on poverty reduction and the nutrition of children, adolescent girls and women.

Investing in gender equality is central to achieving and reinforcing positive outcomes in nutrition and social protection. For example, evidence shows women who benefit from cash transfers are more likely to make good nutrition choices for themselves and for their children, particularly with respect to dietary diversity. Women who have access to resources are less likely to be malnourished and are less likely to have malnourished children. Prioritizing gender equality means:

- Investing in **gender-transformative nutrition and social protection programmes** that explicitly respond to the differentiated needs of girls and women, alongside those of boys and men, to tackle the underlying and root causes of gender inequality, including discriminatory gender norms and practices; and
- Putting in place **longer-term transformative programmes that reach women**, such as family-friendly policies, employment and livelihood programmes, and social and behaviour change programmes that benefit women's and children's nutrition. These programmes aim to support workers as parents and family members, promote women's agency in their role as primary caregivers of children, strengthen women's skills and decision-making power, and positively impact diets, caring practices and services.

For example, in Ethiopia, UNICEF supported the Productive Safety Net Programme to enhance the critical role of mothers in child nutrition. Pregnant women can access social transfers without being required to engage in public works activities until their child's first birthday; childcare is in place at public works sites to support breastfeeding and early childhood development; and mothers can be recruited as community nutrition champions or as public works childcare providers as their public works contribution after their child turns 1 year of age.

ENDNOTES

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