The partnership

The Fat Truth Campaign was a three-month awareness-raising initiative in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) developed and implemented by UNICEF and multiple government and private-sector partners in order to sensitize children, adolescents and parents to the risks of childhood obesity and the benefits of a healthy diet and regular physical exercise. Carried out in mid-2009, the campaign was also meant to lead to the development of policies and programmes promoting a healthy lifestyle, particularly in schools.

The challenge

Childhood and adolescent obesity has become a major public health problem in the United Arab Emirates. According to the 2010 Global School Health Survey, approximately 40 per cent of children in the UAE are overweight or obese; the country ranks second highest in the world for the prevalence of diabetes.¹ Childhood obesity is of major concern, as it has both immediate and long-term effects on health and well-being. Among other immediate health effects, obese youth are more likely to have risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as high cholesterol or high blood pressure. Obese adolescents are also more likely to have pre-diabetes, a condition in which blood glucose levels indicate a high risk for development of diabetes. Obesity also affects mental health, with a greater risk for social and psychological problems such as stigmatization and poor self-esteem.

Childhood obesity is an extremely sensitive topic anywhere. In the UAE, where someone who is overweight is perceived to be ‘healthy’, it was exceedingly challenging to change public perception of what is a healthy weight and what is overweight or obese.

¹ Comparative prevalence of diabetes
Background

As part of the implementation of the UAE’s strategic plan to combat obesity, UNICEF initiated a national awareness campaign to bring the issue of childhood obesity to the forefront of social concern, influence political dialogue, spur collective action and result in changes in individual behaviour. The initiative was developed by UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Health (MoH), with the support of the Ministry of Education (MoE), and under the patronage of HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, wife of HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai.

During the development phase of the campaign, UNICEF approached a wide range of public and private partners to enlist their support for the initiative. Along with the World Health Organization and the main government partners, other local government and semi-government partners were involved, including the General Women’s Union; the Princess Haya Initiative for the Development of Health, Physical Education and School Sports; and the Government of Dubai’s Knowledge and Human Development Authority. In addition, support was obtained from several private companies, including Virgin Megastores, Fitness First, Right Bite, My Gym, and InMotion.

Activities

Launched on 20 April 2009 under the umbrella slogan ‘Get Involved So They Can Too’, the Fat Truth Campaign consisted of a series of joint school and community events and communications activities (creation and dissemination of TV and radio spots, newspaper and magazine ads, posters, leaflets and so on) organized with the partners and carried out over a period of three months. These events and activities aimed at reaching a wide audience, particularly children, adolescents and parents, showing the risks of future illness linked to childhood obesity and the benefits of a healthy diet and physical activity.

In terms of awareness raising, the partners endeavoured to reach a wide segment of the UAE community by using a combination of communications media involving a number of public and private sectors. Key activities undertaken by partners included school seminars to raise awareness on childhood obesity and various community events including community days in public parks – for example, the Community Sports Day – that involved physical activity and competitions for students, their parents and school staff.

Similarly, corporate partners organized physical fitness sessions in schools and during the community events and distributed healthy food and beverages during these events.
It should be noted that, given the sensitivity surrounding the topic of obesity in the UAE, all communications materials had to be designed in a culturally appropriate manner so that, especially in schools, they would not offend the children or their families.

Mass media partners contributed by providing coverage of campaign events, by incorporating obesity content in their regular programming and by disseminating special campaign-related messages in radio and television shows and magazine articles providing educational and useful tips about healthy lifestyles. Furthermore, information booths in shopping malls, posters in stores, a cookbook, a comic book, a dedicated website and a variety of leaflets all carried healthy eating messages as part of the campaign.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the Ministries of Health and Education, also organized workshops with health, education, corporate and media partners to provide recommendations for policymakers regarding proper nutrition and physical activity.

**Results**

By utilizing a variety of means of communication, the Fat Truth Campaign reached a large number of children and parents living in the United Arab Emirates, including both UAE nationals and expatriates. As though to demonstrate its success as well as its impact in the political sphere, the campaign was selected to receive the Best Health Project award by the Gulf Cooperation Council for Health Ministers in 2010.

Following the campaign, policymakers have implemented new strategies to address health issues in school. In September 2010, the Ministry of Education passed a law banning the sale of unhealthy items such as chocolate and high-sugar drinks in school canteens. New health policies have also been developed requiring schools to shift focus from ‘education only’ to include health promotion as well. Health education sessions are now a mandatory part of the new school curriculum.

Further, the Ministry of Health has developed the School Health Committee, a group consisting of representatives from various government and non-government entities whose role is to meet regularly to discuss the status of health in schools and make recommendations for adjustment.
Lessons learned and way forward

In 2009, the global financial crisis particularly affected UNICEF programmes in the UAE. However, by working closely and in an innovative way with various private-sector partners, UNICEF was able to successfully leverage the available resources to achieve the programme results.

Each of the Fat Truth Campaign partners contributed expertise, services and products to the effort. Moreover, given the in-kind support and donations received from the companies involved, costs related to the implementation of the campaign were significantly reduced, by approximately US$1.4 million.

In turn, the campaign gave its private-sector partners high visibility, which was a real incentive for a company eager to have its contributions to global humanitarian efforts recognized by the United Nations.

Building on the success of the 2009 campaign, UNICEF and its partners developed a follow-up, the Childhood Obesity Prevention Project. This one-year project was implemented in eight schools in the UAE during the 2011–2012 academic year with the objective of teaching students, school staff and parents how to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

The project includes health and physical education, nutrition services and psychological and social services. By providing a safe and supportive environment that encourages healthy behaviours, schools play a critical role in achieving the project’s goals. They also provide opportunities for students not only to learn about healthy eating and physical fitness but also to put their new behaviours into practice.