

Evaluation of UNICEF Strategies and Programmes to Reduce Stunting in Children under 5 years of age

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Evaluation Office

Background and Purpose

- 155 million of the world's children under 5 are stunted, a condition which contributes to child mortality, morbidity and disability, including impaired physical and cognitive development
- In recent years, scientific developments have pointed to a cause and effect relationship between stunting and impaired short-term childhood development, as well as long-term intergenerational effects on individuals and families.
- As a result, the global nutrition community has increased its focus on stunting.
- Over the past decade, UNICEF investment in nutrition has more than doubled; there have also been increases in areas with significant implications for nutrition (e.g. health; WASH; education)
- Given global commitments and growing investments, UNICEF conducted its first formal, global assessment of its global strategies and country programme performance to reduce stunting among children.

Objectives

- The evaluation covers the period 2010-2015 when the global community was shifting its focus in the SDG era - from reducing the number of underweight children to reducing the number of stunted children.
- In most countries, UNICEF prioritized stunting relatively recently, therefore, the evaluation considered plans and progress in light of this transition and provided forward-looking recommendations.
- The objectives of the evaluation were to assess the:
 - relevance, appropriateness and coherence of UNICEF strategies and plans to address stunting in young children
 - effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNICEF country programmes to address stunting, with particular attention to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups
 - UNICEF leadership and technical support and the adequacy of its capacities to play the lead role expected of it in contributing to sustainable and equitable reduction of stunting.

Key Findings

- While COs might have an overarching strategy or framework to address stunting, they rarely included stunting as an outcome or output, and no country offices had a formal theory of change to address stunting.
- These findings are expected, as UNICEF's programmes of cooperation with national gov'ts. align with national priorities. During the period under review, those priorities were geared towards the MDGs which did not include reducing the prevalence of stunting.
- There was clear evidence of relevant leadership activities undertaken by UNICEF and of the significance that it places on strengthening partnerships and strategic alliances at the global, regional and country levels.
- However, both external stakeholders and UNICEF staff agree that UNICEF often misses opportunities related to stunting because it takes a siloed approach to planning, incentives, accountability and sectoral priorities.

Key Findings (ii)

- The evaluation identified multiple examples of successful advocacy for improved policy frameworks, increased government commitment and other upstream achievements related to addressing stunting.
- Although most COs specified vulnerable populations, few included nutrition indicators disaggregated for those groups. It was thus difficult to consistently assess whether results were being achieved in reducing stunting in disadvantaged and marginalized groups.
- Technical and institutional considerations relevant to sustainability were integrated in all UNICEF programmes, including upstream work, capacity-building and system strengthening.
- However, key risks to sustainability and scale-up were common to all countries studies. These included general resource constraints and funding unpredictability; lack of government commitment, lack of stability; and limited infrastructure and capacity.
- UNICEF demonstrated commitment to knowledge, evidence and data generation and use at all levels with significant contributions to support data generation including innovations (e.g. use of mobile and cloud-based technologies).

Recommendations

- **At HQ level:**
 - Formulate a more concrete UNICEF strategy for maternal and child nutrition (2030) that aligns closely with the 2030 Agenda, to eliminate stunting and all forms of malnutrition.
- **At all levels:**
 - Promote and support concrete processes to clarify the roles & responsibilities of strategic partners within and outside the UN, especially in multi-sectoral approaches.
 - Develop and promote a theory of change and guidance to inform strategies in regions and countries with high prevalence of stunting.
 - Focus deliberately on stunting reduction in nutrition plans through inclusion of nutrition-specific interventions, nutrition-sensitive approaches, stunting-specific indicators and strategic multi-sectoral approaches.

Recommendations (ii)

- **At all levels (continued):**
 - Invest more systematically in knowledge generation on determinants and interventions in differing contexts and use it as evidence for advocacy, resource mobilization and planning.
 - Improve documentation and sharing of evidence, tools, and lessons within and across regions.
- **At country and regional office levels:**
 - Assess capacity gaps & needs in countries with high stunting prevalence. Mobilize partners & leverage UNICEF's role in upstream work to further expand/diversify capacity-building.
 - Detail equity-focused approaches in policy, strategy and programmes to reduce stunting, with specific approaches, targets and indicators for most vulnerable children.
 - Incorporate accountability across sections to improve cooperation for better results and use it to assess the achievement of country programme targets.
 - Leverage resources & expertise in tracking country financial resources for nutrition to improve availability of reliable country budget data and facilitate dialogue with national gov'ts.