SYRIA

Evaluation of the Infant and Young Child Feeding Programme:

How has UNICEF reflected on and responded to the ongoing nutrition needs of infants and young children in Syria?
THE PROGRAMME

Malnutrition is one of the most serious issues facing vulnerable children in Syria, impacting on the health and wellbeing of infants and young children. There is a strong link between malnutrition and sub-optimal infant and young child feeding in the first two years of life, including failure to initiate and maintain breastfeeding. Maternal health and infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices have been negatively affected by the protracted crisis in Syria due to food insecurity (food availability, quality, and diversity), erosion of livelihoods and coping strategies, destruction of health facilities and exodus of healthcare workers. In particular, women in poor and disadvantaged communities are unable to obtain adequate amounts of nutritious foods for themselves or their children and many young children do not receive the diverse diet that they need.

In Syria, only a third (36.4%) of new-borns receiving lifesaving breastfeeding within the first hour of their life (SMART, 2019) and less than a third (29%) received the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of life, with this rate decreasing from 43% to 29% between 2014 and 2019 (Child Nutrition Report, 2021). From 6 months of age, the diets of young children in Syria are failing with respect to timeliness, frequency, and diversity; 3 in 4 children aged 6–23 months are not fed the diverse range of foods they need for healthy growth and development. While at least one out of three children in Syria is chronically malnourished, this ratio is worse in areas affected by displacements, returns and over-burdened communities such as in north-east Syria, Rural Damascus, Idlib and Aleppo.

In response to this, in November 2018, the UNICEF Syria Health and Nutrition programme undertook an internal strategic programme analysis and realignment to help strengthen the programme in response to the ongoing evolving and complex situation in Syria, drawing on UNICEF staff experience. The IYCF programme was designed to address some of the causes as well as impacts of malnutrition. Activities included scaling up counselling and nutrition education in terms of quality and coverage to promote breastfeeding initiation for infants and diverse diets for young children, and utilized a range of outreach methods such as mothers support groups and community health workers, alongside the targeted provision of multiple micronutrient powders to help prevent micronutrients deficiencies and stunting. UNICEF worked both downstream with implementing partners as well as upstream as the UN co-lead Agency of the nutrition sector to strengthen the enabling environment for implementing the IYCF programme.

| PARTNERS | 16 NGOs, INGOs, Syrian Arab Red Crescent & Palestinian Arab Red Crescent and coordination with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Higher Education |
| LOCATIONS | 14 GOVERNATES through UNICEF 6 Field Offices |
| BUDGET (2019-2020) | $8 million |

1 Child Nutrition Report, 2021
THE EVALUATION

**Purpose:** The focus of this evaluation was to assess how much and in what ways the IYCF programme investments that UNICEF made have been used effectively and efficiently to improve results, following the low rates shown in the SMART (Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions) survey conducted in 2019 to generate understanding on quality aspects of the IYCF programme and help inform UNICEF programme strategy, and also has the potential to inform sector partners.

**Approach:** This evaluation was conducted by an international company alongside a Syria-based organization between February – December 2021. The methods used included a desk review of documentation including use of secondary data (mostly quantitative) as well as some primary data collection including interviews and a quantitative study to help generate information on the current levels of knowledge, attitudes, practices, and norms on IYCF and the coverage and reach of UNICEF counselling and awareness activities.

| 35 communities and health facilities | 606 mothers/caregivers surveyed |

**Limitations:** Data collection by the evaluation team was restricted by the ongoing crisis in Syria and the limited availability of comparative data, so pre-existing data was used as much as possible. Some data collection was possible but restricted to UNICEF supported facilities and did not cover Ministry staff or government-run service centres. There were also challenges in IYCF programme documentation - no programme design document or log frame for the IYCF Programme 2019 – 20 was available, so the evaluators used the annual work plans and also the Country Office Annual Reports for 2019 and 2020 to reconstruct the Theory of Change (ToC) and intended results of the programme.
KEY FINDINGS

IYCF is a human rights-based programme that encompasses the direct provision of services for vulnerable women and children and at the same time endeavours to build the capacity of duty-bearers to fulfil their responsibilities. The evaluation highlighted how UNICEF strives to strengthen and develop systems and policies for child-friendly basic service delivery with sensitivity towards the specific vulnerabilities of the different groups of women and children, with consideration towards refugees, IDPs and returnees, and to mainstream gender and human rights. The evaluation found that UNICEF has supported decentralized delivery of basic services at community levels and that the programme considered local realities and the needs of target groups in its approach. The programme helped significantly improve the quality of provision of counselling, largely due to capacity-building interventions, as well as increased access to services for beneficiaries, improved infrastructure, provided numbers of qualified providers (especially female), used local languages, and did not discriminate in attending to beneficiaries.

Most beneficiaries felt that the IYCF Programme was unique and filled a key gap.

UNICEF and partners provided 772,977 caregivers with IYCF counselling….including 64,093 male caregivers

The programme’s activities also provided an opportunity for beneficiaries to gather with other mothers for peer support, and the provision of micronutrient supplies provided additional entry points for counselling and communication as mothers came to the centres to receive supplies and were then able to receive information on IYCF and connect to other services that were also available in the facilities, including antenatal care for expectant mothers. Connecting with more services is an opportunity for future programming.

In 2020, over 623,000 children and pregnant and lactating women received micronutrients (a decrease from 891,000 in 2019) and…..³ ⁴ ⁵

785,000 caregivers benefited from community outreach and awareness-raising sessions, local media campaigns, and social mobilization activities (an increase from 385,000 in 2019⁴)

The evaluation felt that programme has been effective and mostly provided in a timely manner and found evidence of inclusion of a range of marginalised group in UNICEF programme activities which put children and women at the centre of humanitarian action⁵.

3 UNICEF Country Office Annual Report, 2019
4 UNICEF Syria, end of the year 2020, Summary Report
5 The evaluation was not able to assess the programme’s efforts on inclusion, reach and equity due a lack of data from non-UNICEF facilities to use to compare performance
A key achievement by UNICEF was building trust with key Government stakeholders and forming strong relationships with volunteer groups, NGOs and the community. In particular, the evaluation identified that UNICEF’s collaboration with local NGOs familiar with local communities was key to the programme’s success and that NGOs helped to ‘open doors’ for UNICEF interventions in several areas and the trust built with the government was essential for UNICEF given the political complexity.

The evaluation recommended a more strategic approach to capacity building including engaging implementing partners during planning stages, which could speed up implementation and increase coverage as well as promote joint ownership of programme activities and contribute to enhanced effectiveness and efficiency.

UNICEF Syria efforts to establish structures like the IYCF Technical Working Group are another achievement and should be built on to promote government ownership and resource sharing at central and local levels, helping to make activities more efficient when taken to scale and add value to resilience approaches.

The absence of a clear programme results document and the difficulties faced in conducting surveys to assess the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of IYCF limited understanding of the programme’s goals and how progress towards achieving results could be tracked and measured. The lack of baselines meant that the evaluation had to rely on programme’s own reports to understand how it had contributed to changes in knowledge or behaviour of mothers and health outcomes amongst children. It also meant that the evaluation was not able to identify any unintended results of the programme or any programmes modifications during implementation.

While partners understood performance expectations, the programme did not have a mechanism for assessing the performance of service providers; improvements in monitoring partner performance and understanding how meeting service standards are needed.

The evaluation found evidence that beneficiary feedback was being collected by the programme staff and facilitators during UNICEF
monitoring field visits and focus groups were conducted by some partners before and after awareness sessions with beneficiaries, but that was limited. Engaging with beneficiaries is important for a programme’s success and UNICEF accountability to affected populations. The evaluation recommended that a more systematic use of beneficiary feedback would strengthen the programme and make it more responsive to beneficiaries’ needs.

The programme faced a number of challenges which are relevant for child health and nutrition programmes in the future: high staff turnover; impact of Covid-19 restrictions on community activities; distance for some beneficiaries to access services. Micronutrient distribution in particular faced challenges, it did not work well in 2019, improved significantly in 2020 but again faced challenges in 2021; success was linked to supplies being in place in a timely manner and when distribution is made using a number of partnerships with local organizations.

There is appetite among staff and partners for learning and the programme should harness the knowledge generated by the programme, documenting best practices from the programme, and actively share them.
UNICEF Syria will respond to the evaluation by

- Strengthening results-based management through developing and adopting the theory of change and a results framework by key stakeholders to track progress and ensure its monitoring as well as promoting learning around best practice in service delivery.

- Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) be considered at health facilities for protecting, promoting, and supporting breastfeeding - early initiation and maintenance of breastfeeding

- Strengthening programme quality through strategic capacity building, monitoring of quality standards, service delivery and staff knowledge.

- Planning approaches for advocacy and awareness raising including strengthened a social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) programme to support IYCF through mapping of existing capacities and contextualize relevant SBCC strategy to cover audience, messaging, media landscape and community engagement, frequency, and communication channels.

- Scale up Community Health Volunteer programmes on improving the knowledge and practices of caregivers on IYCF

- Stakeholder engagement to collaborate on development of key IYCF strategies at the national level.

- Evidence-based programme design including adoption of IYCF strategy and engagement with partners in planning, alongside enhanced coordination and partnership including improved communication, engagement and feedback.
SYRIA: EVALUATION OF THE INFANT AND YOUNG CHILD FEEDING PROGRAMME

HOW HAS UNICEF REFLECTED ON AND RESPONDED TO THE ONGOING NUTRITION NEEDS OF INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN IN SYRIA?