

## **Statement by UNICEF Representative, Bilal Aurang Zeb Durrani**

### **Launch of Timor-Leste Food and Nutrition Survey 2020, and Timor-Leste National Health Sector Nutrition Strategic Plan 2022–26**

Dili, Timor-Leste, 5 May 2022

My respects to Your Excellency, Honorable Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak,

Your Excellency, Honorable Doctora Odete Maria Freitas Belo, Minister of Health,

Your Excellency Ministers or representatives from line Ministries,

Ambassadors and Members of the diplomatic corps,

President of Authorities and Municipality Administrators,

General Directors and National Directors from Line Ministries,

Director of Municipality Health Services,

Staff and colleagues from the Ministry of Health and other government authorities,

Development partners, representatives of the UN Country Team, and civil society organizations,

Friends from the media,

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to take you on a short journey and introduce you to a child in Timor-Leste to emphasize the important of the nutrition for children and mothers, and why the two documents we launch today are so important to reversing the alarming trends in nutrition in the country.

---

This is Maria.

Maria was born chronically malnourished (stunted) in a remote Aldea in the Ermera



municipality. She is one of 63% of children in Ermera (an alarming 47% nationally) that are born stunted. Like 53% of other Timorese mothers, Maria's mother did not initiate breastfeeding her when she was born. She thought that her yellowish milk at birth is dirty which would make Maria sick. Instead, Maria was given sugary water and porridge water.

Sadly, she also started feeding Maria with solid foods even before Maria turned 6 months old, joining the 22% of the other Timorese mothers. When Maria turned 6 months old, her mother did not give her any affordable nutritious local foods, or the micronutrient powder, joining the appalling 86% of the other Timorese mothers. Maria was fed only plain porridge. Maria's mother did not know how to use local produce to cook affordable nutritious complementary foods, although she can afford most of the ingredients. She also did not know that the Primary Healthcare Centre in her municipality can provide her free-of-cost micronutrient powder containing the essential iron, vitamin A and zinc. Even if she knew, she had to walk for hours to get to the Primary Healthcare Centre to get them, which is extremely challenging in her condition.

Their neighbour brought them a box of formula milk. Everyone said that the formula milk is better than breastmilk for infants. Maria's mother could not read that the box she received was for 1-year old children and not for the newborn. She also could not understand the instructions on the box on how much powder to mix with how much water. What's worse, they did not have access to clean water or the washing materials to clean the milk bottle properly.

Maria's mother did not know that compared with breast-fed infants, non-breast-fed infants are more likely to die from acute respiratory infection (ARI) and diarrhea. Formula also makes children more prone to acute infections, asthma, meningitis, obesity and diabetes. Breastfeeding on the other hand could protect Maria against Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), allergies, ARI, and ear infections.

There was no toilet in Maria's home. Her mother, father and siblings open defecated in the nearby bushes. They did not have a handwashing place in their home nor the supply of water to clean their hands. Even if they did have water, they did not know how to maintain hygiene and how to properly wash hands. 94% of Timorese do not wash their hands after disposing child's faeces and the same percentage of people do not wash their hands before breastfeeding/feeding children. Maria's mother came home after open defecating and started feeding her. Maria got sick with diarrhea and pneumonia. Her already malnourished condition further worsened.

Because Maria was stunted, her body did not grow according to her age. Her brain also did not grow like nourished children, limiting her cognitive development. She was always scolded by her parents and teachers for her poor performance, for being the careless one, for not being bright, smart or intelligent. She dropped out of school when she was 9. Maria was frequently sick as her body was physically weak, making her more susceptible to deadly diseases. She worked in a factory but was not productive as she lacked education as well as cognitive ability and critical thinking. As a result, she did not earn much.

Maria got married when she was 19. She had her first child when she was 21. As she was already undernourished when she entered pregnancy, her child was also born with low birth weight and chronically malnourished (stunted) condition – continuing the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition.

---

## **With small steps, Maria's life could have been different!**

Maria's life would have been very different if Timor-Leste had already implemented the National Health Sector Nutrition Strategic Plan that we are launching today. If this plan was launched and implemented ten years ago, hundreds and thousands of girls like Maria would have lived a different life – a happier life. Let's see how Maria's life would have been if we had the National Health Sector Nutrition Strategic Plan in place.

This is Maria.

Maria was born chronically malnourished (stunted). The Nutrition Focal Point in the Health Post close to her home - who was trained in malnutrition screening – informed her mother that Maria is malnourished. With the support of the Community Health Worker during her pregnancy, Maria's mother already knew that if she wants Maria's body and brain to grow like a well-nourished child, she should start breastfeeding her child within the first hour of birth and continue 'exclusive' breastfeeding for the first six months of her life, which she did.

When Maria turned six months old, her mother started giving her affordable nutritious local foods together with micronutrient powder and continued breastfeeding her upto her second birthday. The Community Health Worker had taught Maria's mother on how to cook affordable nutritious foods using local produce. She also received some money through the social safety net scheme of the government to buy ingredients that she could not afford.

Because the Nutrition Focal Point was based in her Suku, he made regular follow-up visits to Maria's home after she was born.

The Community Health Worker had taught Maria's mother that hygiene and handwashing are important to make sure that Maria stays healthy. Their Suku was declared open-defecation-free because now they had a toilet.

The government approved the decree law on Breastmilk Substitutes, limiting the accessibility and inappropriate marketing of formula milk.

By the time Maria celebrated her second birthday, she was no more stunted. A happy, smiling child, she performed well in school and finished her studies. Maria is now the Nutrition Focal Point in her Suku's Health Post. She makes a living for her family, including her 1 year old child who is healthy and thriving.

**Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen:**

We have a long way to go to reduce stunting and wasting among children in Timor-Leste. Half of Timorese children are stunted RIGHT NOW – we only have 24 months to do something. Stunting and wasting are almost impossible to reverse after a child turns two. Nearly 80% of a human's brain develops by the age of two. This would mean that half of the population of Timor-Leste will not have fully grown brains to contribute to the economic development of the country. Undernutrition depresses Timor-Leste's economy by \$41 million annually. This loss amounts to 1% of GDP, 2% of non-petroleum GDP, and a quarter of the projected 8% annual growth in non-petroleum sectors.

---

I would like to congratulate Your Excellency, Honorable Prime Minister, for your leadership in prioritizing maternal and child nutrition as one of key priorities for the government. I am also grateful to Your Excellency, Honorable Minister of Health, for your support in launching the Food and Nutrition Survey, as well as National Health Sector Nutrition Strategic Plan today. Under your leadership Excellency, the Ministry of Health has increased its nutrition budget by 10 times (or 900%) from only \$200,000 to \$2 million in the last three years. Let me also take this thank the leading development partners who have invested in the critical first 1000 days of a child's life, especially the European Union, and the government of Japan, which has contributed to the reduction in stunting by 11% in the last ten years.

---

The launch of the National Health Sector Nutrition Strategic Plan today is an important milestone to reduce malnutrition in Timor-Leste. The next step is to make sure that sustainable and adequate funding is allocated for the implementation of this Plan. The implementation of this plan will ensure

- that Maria survives and thrives in her life,
  - that there are adequate human resources to detect and treat malnutrition,
  - that her mother has the awareness that breastfeeding prevents malnutrition in all its forms, and the awareness to breastfeed her immediately after birth and exclusively in the first six months, and then feed her with breastmilk and affordable nutritious local foods after she turns six months old,
  - that her mother has awareness to wash her hands, and they have access to a improved toilet and clean water.
- 

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen. UNICEF and UN agencies stand ready and reiterates its pledge to reducing maternal and child malnutrition in Timor-Leste, for every child.

---

I thank you for your kind attention.

Obrigadu barak ba ita boot sira hotu nia atensaun