Concept note

The problem
We live in a world where some 40 per cent of the population is malnourished, where more than 800 million people go to bed hungry every night. A world where more than 2 billion people suffer from vitamin and mineral deficiencies while 1.9 billion are overweight or obese. A world where 6 of the top 11 risk factors for the global burden of disease are diet-related (1). Malnutrition in all its forms is a problem of global proportions, and it needs urgent action. One of the main causes of malnutrition originates from the food we eat; too little, too much or not the right quality. How do these dietary deficiencies affect children? How will they impact their growth and development, and the development and prosperity of their families, communities and nations?

In many parts of the world, most children are not fed the minimum they need - in quantity, frequency and quality - to survive, grow and develop to their full potential (2). In parallel, processed, less nutritious, less healthy foods are skillfully marketed and widely attainable and affordable, while nutritious, fresher foods are more expensive and unaffordable to many (3, 4). Whether we are in the Sahel or urban New York, we are faced with the intersecting challenges of knowing what our children should eat, being able to obtain the right foods, and ensuring that children consume them. The consequences of our interactions with the food system include not only undernutrition and overweight, but also greater susceptibility to non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and stroke, which are largely preventable with better diets.

The systems that grow, produce, distribute, regulate, market and sell food have the potential to deliver healthier diets to children and adolescents. Governments can make it easier for caregivers, children and adolescents to procure healthier food, and businesses can help to produce, market and distribute it. Effective behavior change programs can influence what people eat, the foods and diets they demand, and what they feed their children (1, 5). How can this be achieved? A first and crucial step is to look at the problem through the lens of the food system and its goals, to understand what food gets – or doesn’t – on to a child’s plate, and how it gets there – or doesn’t. Once the points of tension are identified, we can begin to create a framework that can help address them.

Finding solutions
Good nutrition is an investment in the future of children and nations. Nutritious diets fuel children’s growth, drive brain development, strengthen learning potential, enhance productivity in adulthood and pave the way to more sustainable and prosperous societies (6). With the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the world is preparing to tackle the ambitious objective of ending all forms of malnutrition by 2030, as part of Goal 2 to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture (7).

Given that different forms of child undernutrition – stunting, wasting or micronutrient deficiencies - often co-exist with rising rates of overweight in the same country — and at times within the same households and individuals — there have been calls for comprehensive solutions to address these nutritional challenges (6, 8, 9). Such solutions must recognize the interconnectedness of food supply chains, food environments, and consumer behavior and therefore follow a true systems approach (5).
To this end, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) are co-hosting a global consultation on children, adolescents and food systems in partnership with the Government of the Netherlands. The consultation aims to align food systems and nutrition priorities for children by developing a new, common narrative in which a main goal of global and national food systems is to produce and supply nutritious, safe, and affordable diets for children, accessible to all, in a sustainable manner. The consultation will explore how children and food systems interact, looking at the existing and potential challenges and identifying ways to address them.

This meeting will bring together public and private sector experts, development partners and academia and media specialists with interests in improving the quality of child diets to look at how their work can be leveraged to give more attention to children and what they eat. Participants will develop insights into how food systems can be re-focused around the dietary needs of children. They will work together to find new ways of overcoming points of tension in order to provide children and adolescents with nutritious, safe, affordable, and sustainable foods. Participants will also seek to identify programmatic and research gaps, facilitating creation of a clear road map of what must be done.

Specific objectives include:
1) Reviewing the state of child diets (by age) across food system types and related consequences
2) Identifying drivers of child diets (by age) across food system types
3) Elucidating priority areas of intervention within food systems to improve child diets
4) Sharing successes and failures and innovations
5) Identifying knowledge gaps
6) Creating a road map for the future

Topical review papers related to the meeting objectives will be submitted as a journal supplement after the meeting; furthermore, the organizers will aspire to publish a short paper in a high-impact journal. The content of these papers will also serve to inform the 2018 UNICEF State of the World’s Children Report. A shorter advocacy-focused report will also be developed to support future action. The event will bring together some 60 invited participants from governments, development partners, business, and academia to represent food system issues faced in low-, middle-, and high-income settings. A more detailed agenda and a logistical note will be shared shortly.

Work Cited