



UNICEF and the European Union announce new support to help improve nutrition for millions in Africa

Brussels, 5 October 2011 – Millions of children throughout Sub-Saharan Africa are not getting the nutrition they need for proper physical and mental development during childhood or to maximize their productivity as adults, according to UNICEF. To help fight this, the European Union has today announced a €14.95 million grant to UNICEF to tackle under-nutrition in the region. 25 million children and 5.5 million pregnant and lactating women are expected to benefit from the programme.

The Nutrition Strategy in West and East Africa programme will benefit the entire region but place special emphasis on Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali and Uganda, where help is particularly needed.

More than a third of child deaths and 11 percent of the total disease burden worldwide are due to maternal and child undernutrition, according to data presented in *The Lancet* in 2008.

In terms of global stunting, UNICEF's 2009 nutrition report *Tracking Progress on Child and Maternal Nutrition: A Survival and Development Priority* revealed insufficient progress in the nutrition status and unacceptable prevalence of malnutrition rates in Africa in recent years. In Sub-Saharan Africa, among children under 5 years of age, stunting prevalence is still at 42%, wasting at 15%, and underweight at 23%.

Stunting is the irreversible outcome of chronic nutritional deficiency during the first thousand days of a child's life. And the damage it causes to a child's development is permanent. That child will never learn, nor earn, as much as he or she could have if properly nourished in early life. Under-nutrition is not exclusive to the lowest-income countries or the poorest communities. It can occur in children who live in food-secure households and in food-secure countries.

"The global community has begun to recognize that nutrition is – and must be – more than a footnote in the food security debate", said Antony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director in Brussels. He added that *"nutrition security should be an essential element of every national development plan – as critical as clean water, as indispensable as education"*.

"Thanks to European Commission aid, more than 70 million people, especially women and children, have benefited from direct support to have access to food" said EU Commissioner for Development Andris Piebalgs. *"Food security and nutrition are part of the priorities of EU development policy. That's why I am pleased to announce our new package of support today - our partnership with UNICEF is vital in enabling us to reach even more people on the ground where our help is most needed."*

For years, under-nutrition -- recognizable in a child by low height for age (stunting), low weight for age (underweight), low weight for height (wasting), and/or deficient in vitamins or minerals (micronutrient deficiencies) -- has been a persistent problem, but one which has received little attention in the past.

The link between economic progress and under-nutrition has become a focus for economists in recent years, and this is putting the problem on the global agenda.



“Under-nutrition leads to increased mortality and morbidity and hence reduced economic output and increased healthcare spending,” wrote three economists in a 2008 paper on hunger and malnutrition for the Copenhagen Consensus. *“The combined effects on mortality, morbidity and productivity are estimated to result in economic losses of billions of dollars.”*

During the four-year programme, UNICEF will work with governments and partners to directly benefit 25 million children and 5.5 million pregnant and lactating women. It will also work to increase knowledge and understanding of what good nutrition means among policy makers, medical professionals and families.

With a focus on improvement of nutrition security among women and young children in Africa, the initiative will add value at continental and regional levels and cross-fertilise what is being done at country level to improve nutrition security. At continental level, the action will build on the African Union Commission (AUC) and its Task Force on nutrition as coordination mechanism.

In addition to direct nutrition interventions, the EU is providing support to national governments' own plans and policies to fight child and maternal under-nutrition. Our ultimate goal is to prevent it in from happening in the first place, avoid its devastating consequences and break the cycle of poverty and malnutrition.

The programme aims to innovate and build on current policies and practices in countries and by doing so highlights nutrition as an Africa priority in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

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