

## Plenary 2: Nutrition for Childhood and Adolescence

### Global policy towards improving nutrition and health in childhood and adolescence

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**Background** - UNICEF has recently highlighted the fact that there are 146 million children under 5 yr of age five who are underweight (<-2SD W/A) (1). Whereas the proportion of under-weight children has decreased globally, the numbers in sub-Saharan Africa have actually increased. Over a third of births in South Asia are low weight predisposing to increased morbidity, mortality and intergenerational stunting. Of the 102 countries for which UNICEF have data, only 42 (45.1%) are on track to reach the 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target to halve by 2015 the prevalence of underweight children under-five years of age. At the same time, there is an increasingly strong evidence base for proven and promising interventions that improve nutrition and child health, with an estimate of over 60% of the 11 million annual child deaths able to be prevented if these known interventions were to be implemented (2). Over 50% of these deaths have undernutrition as the underlying cause of death. On the other hand, increasing attention is directed to the growing epidemic of childhood obesity and the subsequent development of nutrition-related chronic diseases.

**Review** - There have been many public multilateral policy responses to nutrition issues since 1976 when the FAO boldly targeted the elimination of famine. Thirty years later there are still an estimated 830 million people 'hungry'. In 1990, the UN held the Summit for Children that endorsed a series of nutrition and other goals. In 1992, FAO and WHO hosted the International Conference on Nutrition in Rome with equally ambitious targets. A decade later, in the absence of achievement of the goals, but a perception that they had been useful in getting government and donor commitment, a UN Special Session for Children refined the goals, including the ones for nutrition. The six main goals of the MDGs have been a major boost for nutrition-related policy and programming. The single largest investor in global nutrition, the World Bank has recently recognized nutrition as key to its development agenda. The UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) has developed an action plan to address the double burden of malnutrition i.e. the co-existence of underweight (usually the infants and children) and overweight (usually mothers) which has become common, especially in disadvantaged populations. The World Food Programme and UNICEF have sponsored a global initiative, aimed at increasing country implementation, 'Ending Child Hunger and Undernutrition'. There has been joint action in harmonizing interventions to address severe mal(under-)nutrition by several UN agencies with Emergency NGOs and bilaterals, especially Canada and the USA. WHO has just released the new child growth standards, based on optimally fed infants and children, which re-enforce the fact that all young children have the same growth potential. Industrialized countries, including Australia, are starting to take a national policy approach to obesity in their young populations. The private sector, alone and in co-operation with large philanthropic foundations are seeking coordinated and sustainable solutions, with existing partners and Governments, to nutrition problems in developing countries.

**Conclusions** - These many efforts provide an enormous and potentially unprecedented potential to leverage the content and direction of global health and nutrition policy towards improving nutrition and health in childhood and adolescence. The challenge will now be to have these harmonized, funded and implemented.

#### References

1. UNICEF. Progress for children. A report card on nutrition. New York:UNICEF. 2006;4:1-33.
2. Jones G, Steketee RW, Black RE, Bhutta ZA, Morris SS, and the Bellagio Child Survival Study Group. How many child deaths can we prevent this year? Lancet 2003;362:65-71.