

Improving maternal nutrition: The UNICEF acceleration plan

This is a summary of the following paper: *UNICEF (2024) Improving maternal nutrition: An acceleration plan to prevent malnutrition and anaemia during pregnancy (2024–2025)*. <https://www.unicef.org/media/153581/file/Maternal%20nutrition%20acceleration%20plan.pdf>



Appropriate nutrition is fundamental to the health and well-being of women and girls. Well-nourished women have better health and safer pregnancies. They also positively influence the survival, growth, and development of their children, influencing nutrition and health status throughout life and into the next generation.

“The evidence is clear: insufficient nutrient intake before and during pregnancy and while breastfeeding has debilitating and even deadly consequences for children.”

Recently, progress has been made to advance the rights of adolescent girls and women. However, many still struggle to access the nutritious diets, essential nutrition services, and positive nutrition and care practices needed to live full and healthy lives. There has been almost no change to the high rates of underweight and anaemia in

adolescent girls and women for the past two decades. In the countries most affected by the global food and nutrition crisis, acute malnutrition in mothers has risen by 25% since 2020. To see improvements in the nutritional status of pregnant adolescent girls and women, nutrition policies and programmes must confront the inequalities that create, reinforce, and perpetuate the immediate nutritional problems.

UNICEF and partners have launched a US\$320 million acceleration plan to improve maternal nutrition. This aims to prevent anaemia and malnutrition in pregnant women over the next two years (2024–2025), across 16 priority countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Venezuela, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Rwanda, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania.

If fully funded, the plan will reach a total of 16 million pregnant women with a package of five essential nutrition services: nutrition infor-

mation, education, and counselling; healthy weight gain monitoring; multiple micronutrient supplementation; deworming prophylaxis and malaria control (according to context); and nutritional screening and referral for supplementation with balanced energy-protein if needed. The essential package of services will largely be delivered via antenatal care, with strong links to community systems. The five essential nutrition services included in the acceleration plan are not new, but they have not yet been implemented as a high-quality package and successfully taken to scale.

UNICEF and partners aim to support the implementation of the essential package of services by: strengthening advocacy and policies; improving the delivery of maternal health and nutrition services; increasing the capacity of service providers; increasing the supplies of essential commodities; and harnessing data and generating evidence and learning in both development settings (implementation research) and humanitarian settings (emergency preparedness and response).

Through this acceleration plan, UNICEF aims to harness the current momentum and commit to working closely with national governments and partners in scaling up the package of services across these 16 priority countries. These efforts will amplify women’s rights and voices at the country and community levels through the delivery of proven services, while documenting experiences and sharing learning on how to take these services to scale most effectively.

Making food systems work for complementary feeding

This is a summary of the following paper: *Micronutrient Forum (2024) Making food systems work for complementary feeding in low- and middle-income countries*. https://micronutrientforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Making-food-systems-work-for-complementary-feeding-in-LMICs-Meeting-report_FINAL.pdf



While breastfeeding provides a critical foundation, it alone cannot meet the high nutrient needs of children aged beyond six months. Nearly half of all children globally are not fed enough of the right complementary foods at the right time. Limited national supply, high levels of food loss and waste, high prices relative to household incomes, low appeal, and safety concerns are leaving nutritious, complementary foods for children aged 6–23 months unavailable, inaccessible, unaffordable, and unappealing. These barriers not only jeopardise children’s immediate health but can also have a profound impact on long-term health and well-being.

In response to this issue, the Micronutrient Forum convened an expert meeting in December 2023 to discuss the question: “how can we make food systems work for complementary feeding?” The experts made recommendations in four core areas that currently limit the availability, affordability, accessibility, and appeal of safe and nutritious complementary foods: 1) knowledge and evidence gaps; 2) limited lo-

cal capability and capacity; 3) implementation barriers due to business constraints and supply chain inefficiencies; and 4) an unfavourable enabling environment. These recommendations serve as a roadmap for action to transform food systems and ensure access to nutritious complementary foods for young children.

The recommendations cover a wide range of topics, including reducing food loss and waste, using native, underutilised, and biofortified crops, and adopting complementary food composition standards. Adopting a “research and development as a service” model was also highlighted to support small- and medium-sized enterprises. This model, typically offered by suppliers, aims to lessen research and development expenses and facilitate market entry by providing technical assistance and capacity strengthening. Developing an investment pipeline for these enterprises to produce safe, high-quality complementary foods, is also necessary. To realise this vision, a systems approach must be taken by governments, food producers, suppliers, businesses, researchers, investors, and technical agencies.

Importantly, bold initiatives are already underway. The World Health Organization and UNICEF have established the Global Complementary Feeding Collective to foster global and regional cooperation. Technical organisations are providing support to improve the technical and business capacity of small- and medium-sized enterprises, enabling local food production and fostering sustainable business models. For example, in Cambodia and Zambia local initiatives are in place to produce fish powder, which can be used in homemade porridges. Egg production hubs have also been established in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, and India, as another example.

Ultimately, transforming food systems to deliver safe and nutritious complementary foods through sustainable business models requires collaborative efforts and innovative solutions from both public and private sector actors. Networks and coalitions are set up to create an ecosystem that supports operational efficiencies, growth, innovation, and sustainability for small- and medium-sized enterprises. The Scaling Up Nutrition Business Network and the Alliance for Inclusive and Nutritious Food Processing are examples of this. Local food system actors also need access to patient capital and innovative financing mechanisms that will ‘de-risk’ their own investments.

The detailed findings of this report are beyond the scope of this summary. However, we encourage readers to explore the 51-page report and case studies found within.