



Report of the South Asia 'Stop stunting: Improving Young Children's Diets' conference

Report summary¹

The third regional conference on stunting hosted by the Secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) was held in September 2019. The conference focused on young children's diets and the importance of complementary feeding. Country representatives together with researchers, UN partners, civil society organisations and other development partners across the region were brought together to exchange regional analyses, share new evidence and experiences, and identify critical actions across key systems of health, food, social protection, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to improve young children's diets.

The conference also provided an opportunity for participants to input into the draft SAARC regional multi-system action framework for improving young children's diets, as well as devel-

oping country priorities for the improvement of young children's diets in each country's context. Key actions to accelerate progress were subsequently agreed. These included:

1. Position the diets of young children as a priority in national development agendas.
2. A multi-system/multi-sector response involving the health, food, social protection and WASH systems.
3. Purposeful engagement with multiple stakeholders at national and sub-national level.
4. Regularly updated situational analyses (on status, trends and drivers) to inform policies and programmes.
5. Social and behaviour-change communication to improve feeding practices, combined with actions to improve access to affordable, safe and nutritious foods.
6. Utilisation of multiple delivery platforms, including at the community level, to ensure the reach and uptake of interventions.

7. Effective government regulations and policies to protect young children in light of the growing influence of the food and beverage industry.
8. National routine information systems and surveys, including appropriate indicators to inform actions, build accountability and track progress.
9. Implementation research to understand barriers, enablers and pathways to improving children's diets.
10. Regional platforms to support country-level actions and facilitate learning exchange.

A 'call to action' for member states was developed, noting the need for countries to utilise opportunities to improve children's diets in policies, regulatory measures, strategies, plans and budgets. SAARC was called on to support countries in these efforts through advocacy, regional guidance, training packages and support for formative research. The conference concluded with a reflection on the urgency of the need to improve children's diets across the region and a commitment by ROSA and SAARC to work with member countries to support the implementation of the key actions identified.

¹ www.unicef.org/rosa/sites/unicef.org/rosa/files/2020-06/Stop%20Stunting%202019.pdf

Wasting in South Asia: Building the evidence on policy and programme response

A one-day consultation organised by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was held in New York in 2018 to examine the evidence and guide the direction of future collaborative efforts on wasting in South Asia. The consultation was attended by 32 individuals, including members of the Council of Research and Technical Advice on Acute Malnutrition (CORTASAM), researchers and academics. Participants identified unique characteristics of child wasting in South Asia that need closer exam-

ination, including high wasting prevalence at birth and in the early months of life, lower associated mortality with wasting, persistent wasting, and lower and slower response to treatment. Proposed adaptations of India's national guidelines were seen as an opportunity for learning around the sustainability and cost-effectiveness of alternative models of care for severely wasted children. Participants identified the need for research to inform a greater range of treatment options tailored to the region with potential for greater coverage, quality and

sustainability of care and treatment of severe wasting. Areas of research identified include identifying effective approaches to prevent and manage wasting in the under-six months age group; modifications to the use of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF); use of home-based foods and home-augmented foods to treat severe wasting; and transitioning from treatment foods to family diets. Follow-up actions included formation of a sub-working group of CORTASAM on wasting in South Asia (profiled in this edition of *Field Exchange*) and production of this special edition of *Field Exchange* on child wasting in South Asia.

Read more about this consultation in a news article in *Field Exchange* issue 59, available online at www.enonline.net/fex/59/wastinginsouthasia

Low birth weight estimates: Levels and trends 2000–2015

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have published global low birth weight (LBW) estimates that summarise levels and trends between 2000 and 2015.¹ The report highlights that babies born at a healthy weight are more likely to survive and thrive, while babies born with LBW, defined as weight at birth below 2,500g regardless of gestational age, are more likely to die during their first month of life or face lifelong consequences such as growth failure and lower IQ.

Nearly 15% of all infants worldwide are born with LBW. Almost all of them (95%) are born in

less developed regions, where LBW is primarily caused by poor foetal growth linked to poor maternal nutrition before and during pregnancy. Of the 20.5 million LBW babies born in 2015, more than half were born in Asia. The prevalence of LBW varied widely across regions, from 7.2% in more developed regions to 17.3% in Asia, with variations across sub-regions. In Southern Asia, the prevalence of LBW was 26.4% in 2015 – more than five times higher than the 5.1% prevalence in Eastern Asia. These two sub-regions of Asia had respectively the highest and lowest LBW prevalence of all sub-regions in the world. In other regions, there was greater homogeneity between sub-regions.

Progress in reducing LBW prevalence has stagnated since the year 2000. The annual average rate of reduction (AARR) in LBW was 1.00% per year in the most recent period from 2010 to 2015. An AARR of 2.74% per year between 2012 and 2025 is required to meet the global target of 10.5% LBW prevalence. Because the availability and quality of LBW data vary widely among countries, estimates were derived using a peer-reviewed approach to improve comparability across countries and years. This is the first time such LBW data have been made available globally. The estimates fill a data gap, allow the tracking of progress and support various initiatives that aim to improve newborn survival and growth.

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization. UNICEF-WHO Low birthweight estimates: Levels and trends 2000–2015. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2019 Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. <https://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/UNICEF-WHO-lowbirthweight-estimates-2019/en/>