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Reports on recent IPU specialized meetings

(e) Regional Seminar on Promoting child nutrition in Western and Central Africa

Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), 27-29 June 2017

Globally, undernutrition is one of the most serious and most neglected problems in public health and development. It causes 45 per cent of all deaths among children under the age of 5 in low- and middle-income countries. For children who survive, the damage it causes to their physical and cognitive development is irreversible.

Addressing stunting is understood as being fundamental to achieving national commitments to global agendas, including at least eight Sustainable Development Goals and the World Health Assembly (WHA) Global Nutrition Targets. In this regard, fighting malnutrition is one of the most cost-effective investments a country can make.

Parliaments play a critical role in addressing stunting. They have the power to enact laws and regulations, influence national development plans, determine national budgets and allocations, monitor and oversee the implementation of government commitments to children and hold the government (i.e. the executive branch) to account. Parliaments can use their platform as respected opinion leaders to educate constituents on healthy practices.

Concretely, this means that parliaments can pass legislation to restrict the marketing of breastmilk substitutes; provide maternity protection entitlements; boost micronutrient programming; scale up programmes to promote, protect and support infant and young child feeding; and measure stunting and wasting rates against benchmarks.

In this respect, to galvanize national parliaments into taking action, the IPU, UNICEF, and Alive&Thrive, with the collaboration of the National Assembly of Burkina Faso, co-organized a two-and-a-half-day inter-regional parliamentary seminar on *Promoting Child nutrition in Western and Central Africa* in Ouagadougou from 27 to 29 June 2017 attended by 145 participants including 60 parliamentarians from 20 parliaments.

It aimed to sensitize the parliamentarians and their staff on issues related to malnutrition and stunting and the deleterious effects they can have on their countries. In this view, they were encouraged to take robust parliamentary actions to promote nutrition.

The seminar ended with concrete recommendations annexed to this report.

#IPU137



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Promoting maternal and child nutrition in Western and Central African

Inter-regional parliamentary seminar hosted by the National Assembly of Burkina Faso and co-organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Alive & Thrive.

27-29 June 2017, Ouagadougou

OUAGADOUGOU DECLARATION

Rapporteur: Ms. Marlyse Rose Douala Bell
Member of the Parliament of Cameroon

We, members of parliament from 20 countries¹ in Western and Central Africa gathered at a regional workshop in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, from 27-29 June 2017, to discuss how parliaments can contribute to improving maternal and child nutrition and more specifically to ensuring every child's right to survive and thrive through the protection, promotion and support of optimal nutrition from the time of conception up to the age of 24 months (known as the first 1,000 days).

Our debates focussed on four main themes: (1) The significance of nutrition security for development and economic growth; (2) The problems of undernutrition (stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies), the emerging concern of childhood overweight and obesity in the region and examples of success in addressing them; (3) Overcoming structural and environmental barriers to nutrition and how parliaments can leverage their powers to effect legislative, budgetary and policy advances in the promotion of maternal and child nutrition; and (4) Creating political commitment in taking a pro-nutrition agenda forward.

Globally, undernutrition is one of the most serious and most neglected problems in public health and development. It causes 45 per cent of all deaths among children under the age of 5 years in low- and middle-income countries. For children who survive, the damage it causes to their physical and cognitive development is irreversible. A stunted five-year old is inches shorter compared to a well-nourished peer. Stunted children are more vulnerable to disease—they are as much as five times more likely to die from diarrhoea than a non-stunted child. And perhaps most importantly, a stunted child will never reach his or her full cognitive capacity, with fewer IQ points, fewer years of school completed, and as much as 10 per cent fewer earnings over the course of their lifetime. Nutrition should be viewed as the foundation for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the Sustainable Development Goals.

Each year an estimated one million children under the age of five years die from causes related to undernutrition in the Western and Central African Region (WCAR). Among the 15 countries in the world with the worst under-five mortality statistics, 11 are in WCAR. The prevalence of child stunting equals or exceeds 40 per cent in eight countries within the region. The most recent estimates indicate that the stunting rate declined from 36.6 per cent in 2010 to 34.9 per cent in 2016 (UNICEF/WHO/WB global estimates), as substantiated by success stories in countries such as Ghana and Liberia. Nevertheless, only three of 24 countries are on track to meet the World

¹ Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Togo.

Health Assembly targets for stunting (40 per cent reduction in the number of stunted children by 2030) while the entire region has shown an increase in the overall number of stunted children during the last two decades. Similarly, slow progress was reported for other WHA targets.

We learned that progress is possible and that the evidence and solutions are clear.

We also recognised that:

- Everyone has the right to adequate nutrition, and infants and young children are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition in all its forms;
- There is a critically important window of opportunity between conception and the age of two years (the first 1,000 days) in which stunting can be prevented. Thereafter, the negative effects of stunting are irreversible;
- Preventing stunting requires adequate nutrition and feeding practices, particularly breastfeeding (early initiation, 6 months exclusive, and continued up to 24 months or beyond with safe and adequate complementary food);
- Investment in nutrition offers one of the highest financial returns of all development interventions (a sixteen dollar return for every dollar invested), but to our dismay, on average, only a very small fraction of national budgets are allocated to nutrition;
- Empowerment of women through access to information and access to services outside the home is key for improving nutrition outcomes; engagement of men at all levels in addressing child nutrition is essential;
- Rapid economic growth does not necessarily result in rapid reduction of under-nutrition; improvements in nutrition require implementation of nutrition interventions; good nutrition contributes to economic growth while undernutrition perpetuates poverty;
- A multi-sectoral approach that encompasses and coordinates areas such as health, water, sanitation, agriculture, finance, and trade will be required to move the nutrition agenda effectively; social protection programmes such as cash transfers, for example, generate a documented reduction in stunting. Similarly, improved sanitation results in reduced stunting;
- Nutrition policies and outcomes will only advance if there is sufficient political commitment and will; overcoming institutional, legal, fiscal, political, environmental, and administrative barriers is essential as is supporting robust accountability mechanisms for achieving meaningful cost-effective results;
- The SUN Movement has offered to facilitate the establishment of a global community of parliamentarians active on nutrition issues, in collaboration with the IPU, UNICEF, Alive & Thrive and supportive civil society organisations and development partners. This will allow more timely support to parliamentarians and provide a platform whereby we can learn and share from one another, across countries and regions, virtually and through face-to-face capacity development opportunities. To this end we have established an Inter-regional Network of Parliamentarians for Nutrition;
- Change can happen relatively quickly—in the course of a single electoral term. Indeed evidence shows that stunting rates can fall quickly and breastfeeding rates expand rapidly.

Parliament's role in advancing nutrition

We discussed the various roles parliaments can play in advancing nutrition, including adopting relevant legislation; helping to shape or oversee national plans; engaging constituencies at community level; partnering with people/organizations in civil society to hold governments accountable; and ensuring that laws and policies are actually implemented. In terms of pro-nutrition legislation, implementation and enforcement of effective national regulations to implement the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent relevant World Health Assembly Resolutions (the Code) and the adoption of maternity legislation based on the ILO Maternity Protection Convention 2000 were emphasised. In addition, we emphasized:

Priority Actions for Parliaments and their Members

The following recommendations which we pledge to follow up as a priority came out of the debates:

1. **Legislation and policy:** We commit to review our existing legal and policy frameworks through a lens that is nutrition sensitive, ensuring there is a comprehensive nutrition legal framework in place. Particular emphasis should be given to:
 - (a) Adoption and implementation of maternity protection legislation based on the 2000 ILO Maternity Protection Convention and Recommendation, providing sufficient support to all categories of women in the workplace, including those in the informal sector, to follow recommended infant and young child feeding practices.
 - (b) Improved implementation, monitoring and enforcement of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and all relevant subsequent World Health Assembly Resolutions, through the adoption of legally enforceable legislation.
 - (c) Addressing the burdens of overweight and obesity by establishing regulations that require nutrition labelling, mandatory food fortification, incentives, such as subsidies, for healthy foods and disincentives, such as taxation, for unhealthy foods, and that prohibit the inappropriate marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages.
2. **Budget allocation and expenditure:** We agree that budget allocation is crucial for the enforcement of legislation and the implementation of policies and programmes aimed at improving infant and young child nutrition. It is also essential to ensure key ministries responsible for the delivery of such programmes and for the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of pro-nutrition legislation are allocated their fair share of the budget. Equally, we have a role to play in monitoring expenditures and making sure monies are properly expended.
3. **Oversight:** We agree that it is essential to use our powers of scrutiny and oversight to hold governments to account for the enforcement of existing laws and policies. We will continue to hold governments to account and track compliance and implementation of the approved budget and policies either by making use of existing parliamentary committees and caucuses, or by establishing appropriate sub-committees. We undertake to schedule once per year, a full-fledged debate on the status of nutrition in our country. We also undertake to make data collection and interpretation an inclusive and transparent process including the SDG Voluntary Reviews, and to report to the High Level Political Forum (HLPF).
4. **Representation and awareness-raising:** We commit to being champions for nutrition and for children and families, especially those most at-risk. We will use our positions and platforms to galvanize action and draw attention (using current evidence and data) to the unacceptably high rates of malnutrition that continue to afflict so many of our nations in Western and Central Africa.
5. **Coordination and cooperation:** We pledge to ensure that we coordinate our activities and work in partnership with other actors, including civil society, donors, development actors and international organizations, such as UNICEF, the IPU, Alive & Thrive, and other development partners. We underscore the importance of coordinating actions between ourselves as parliamentarians, across party lines, as well as the activities of the committees and caucuses on which we serve. We furthermore commit to expanding regional coordination and to pursue parliamentary exchanges and cooperation, to share best practices, and inspire each other to accelerate the nutrition agenda.

We commit to taking these recommendations back to our respective national parliaments and constituencies and will draw on the support of UNICEF, the IPU, the SUN Movement, Alive & Thrive and relevant civil society organizations as we endeavour to meet or exceed global nutrition targets.