



Promoting Child Nutrition in East and South Asia Regional Parliamentary Seminar

**Landmark Mekong Riverside Hotel
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**Welcome Remarks of Dr Isiye Ndombi, UNICEF Deputy Regional Director, East Asia
Pacific Regional Office**

Distinguished parliamentarians and colleagues

It is a great honour to be here with you today at this important event. I am delighted to see delegations representing so many countries across Asia, reflecting your interest and commitment to the vital issue of nutrition.

I thank the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the host Lao National Assembly for organizing this seminar. UNICEF is proud to work with the IPU, and we have been doing so for a number of years now, across the world, working together to improve the lives of children.

In Laos, UNICEF works closely with Government, lawmakers and many other stakeholders to advance nutrition, and I would like to acknowledge some key areas of progress, such as the maternity leave law passed last year, multi-sectoral round table discussions on nutrition and multi-sectoral nutrition plans developed; as well as a significant increase in exclusive breastfeeding rates.

UNICEF is deeply concerned at the persistent high rates of undernutrition across so many countries in Asia, which affects so many young lives, blights their futures, and transmits its grim legacy to the next generation. Stunting is so common that, in some places, it is mistaken for genetic heritage rather than the preventable condition we know it to be. Despite the enormous scale and multiple, long-term consequences of this critical issue, it has until very recently been one of the most under-reported... under-prioritized...under-estimated...and

least understood topics in development. It is also one of the greatest opportunities we have to help children – and nations – reach their potential.

However, the good news is that over the past four or five years, stunting - and the importance of interventions within the “1000 days” window of opportunity to prevent it before it becomes largely irreversible – has gained much more prominence on the global development agenda.

The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement has helped focused global attention on nutrition. In the 54 countries which are “SUN countries”, UNICEF works closely with Governments and partners to use SUN as a platform to raise nutrition much higher on the political agenda, obtain increased commitment and enhanced partnerships and refocus attention on the prevention of undernutrition.

Distinguished delegates, UNICEF has had the opportunity of working with your governments on various high impact nutrition programmes. These include breaking the cycle of undernutrition by improving women’s nutrition, especially during adolescence and pregnancy; providing mothers and caregivers with counseling and support on good infant and young child feeding practices, ensuring children receive adequate micronutrients and those with severe acute malnutrition receive treatment.

UNICEF also prioritizes the strengthening of integration of nutrition with other key sectors, such as water, sanitation and hygiene, education, social protection, as well as early childhood development. Recent evidence has highlighted the crucial importance of linking nutrition and early childhood development interventions, both for the development of the child’s brain and for the success of nutrition interventions: The science has demonstrated that high levels of stress in the earliest years undermine the body’s ability to absorb key nutrients that support healthy brain development. Early stimulation and reduction of stress is therefore beneficial for the absorption of nutrients.

Breastfeeding is also one of the most critical measures to ensure that infants have the best start in life. The science is clear and compelling. Yet the world has made slow progress in raising the global breastfeeding rate since 1990, with less than 40 per cent of children aged less than six months exclusively breastfed globally. However, rapid progress in raising breastfeeding rates is possible. I understand we will be hearing about the success stories from some of these countries during this meeting

Why are we not seeing systematic progress in more countries? Seeking answers to this question, UNICEF conducted a landscape analysis in 2012 to assess political commitment and priority for breastfeeding interventions globally and in selected countries. An executive summary of the report is in your folders. Diverse stakeholders uniformly agreed that breastfeeding has not benefited from political and donor commitments commensurate with its potential to save lives and promote children's and national development.

UNICEF and WHO, along with a range of other partners, have since formed a global advocacy initiative to increase political commitment and investment for breastfeeding as the cornerstone of child nutrition, health and development.

Distinguished delegates, I am grateful for this opportunity to urge that when all of you return home to your constituents and your governments, you advocate for measures to combat the effects of under-nutrition and increase commitment to support breastfeeding. Your commitment to help push the momentum further is so important.

As parliamentarians, you are in a unique position to advocate for nutrition policies...to influence pro-nutrition and pro-breastfeeding legislation...to increase budget allocations for nutrition programmes...and to hold governments and partners accountable.

UNICEF looks forward to the outcome and recommendations from this seminar as it will surely impact on how we all work together in addressing under-nutrition of children. I wish you a very successful and inspiring meeting. I thank you.