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Promoting child nutrition in East and South Asia

Regional parliamentary seminar hosted by the National Assembly of the Lao People's Democratic Republic and organized jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

4-6 November 2014, Vientiane (Lao People's Democratic Republic)

The Vientiane recommendations

Presented by the Rapporteur for the seminar, the Honourable Farkhunda Zahra Naderi (Ms.), MP Afghanistan, representative of the IPU

We, members of parliament from 10 countries in East and South Asian and Pacific region, gathered at a regional workshop held in Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic, from 4 to 6 November 2014 to discuss ways in which parliaments can contribute to improved nutrition and, more specifically, to the enjoyment of every child's right to survive and thrive by promoting and providing support for optimal nutrition during the first 1,000 days from conception to the child's second birthday.

Our debates focussed on five main themes: (1) The significance of nutrition security for development; (2) The persistent high rates of undernutrition (stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies) and examples of success in addressing it, as well as the emerging challenge of overnutrition in Asia; (3) Overcoming structural and environmental barriers to nutrition; (4) Parliaments' role in advancing nutrition; and (5) Budgeting for nutrition.

At the outset, we recognized the critical importance of nutrition security to economic development, the healthy growth and survival of children and the effort to break intergenerational cycles of poverty that continue to entrap so many individuals, families, communities and countries in Asia. We agreed that urgent action was needed.

Undernutrition is caused by a lack of adequate nutritious food, poor care and feeding practices and low access to health and sanitation, especially during the first 1,000 days, and leads to stunted growth (height for age) and impaired cognitive development. This directly reduces human capital formation, stifles economic development and has serious consequences for individuals and nations: a substantially increased risk of death and disease for children, a 20 to 25 per cent reduction in income for adults and a 2 to 3 per cent loss of gross domestic product (GDP) for nations.

In the developing world, over 162 million children suffer from undernutrition and in some countries, more than half of the children are affected. At the same time, 44 million under-5 children in developing countries are overweight and at risk of chronic illnesses, such as diabetes. Of great concern to the assembled parliamentarians was the fact that two thirds of the world's children with stunted growth live in Asia, where malnutrition rates remain unacceptably high. While stunting is largely irreversible, it can be prevented if action is taken during the first 1,000 days; the evidence and the solutions are clear.

We also recognized that:

- the first 1,000 days from conception to the child's second birthday offer a critically important window during which improved nutrition and feeding practices, particularly breastfeeding (initiated early, exclusive for the first six months and continued until the age of 24 months or beyond) must be protected, promoted and supported;
- empowering women by providing access to information and to services outside the home is key to improving nutrition outcomes; involving men at all levels in addressing child nutrition is also essential;
- rapid economic growth does not necessarily result in rapid reduction of undernutrition; improvements in nutrition require the implementation of nutrition interventions; good nutrition contributes to economic growth while undernutrition perpetuates poverty;
- food security is not the same thing as nutrition security; while many of our countries have adequate food supplies, feeding and care behaviours are such that our children are not receiving adequate nutrition; thus, some communities are food secure but nutritionally insecure;
- nutrition policies and outcomes will only improve if there is sufficient political commitment and will; overcoming institutional, legal, fiscal, political, environmental, and administrative barriers is essential;
- a multisectoral approach that encompasses and coordinates action in areas such as health, water, sanitation, agriculture, finance and trade will be required in order to move the nutrition agenda forward effectively;
- investment in nutrition offers one of the highest financial returns of all development interventions;
- change can happen relatively quickly in the course of a single electoral term; evidence shows that breastfeeding rates can expand and stunting rates fall rapidly;

1. Parliaments' role in advancing nutrition

We discussed the various roles that parliaments can play in advancing nutrition, including adopting relevant legislation; helping to shape or oversee national plans; partnering with people and organizations in civil society to hold governments accountable; and ensuring that laws and policies are actually implemented. We stressed the importance of pro-nutrition legislation; the 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 International Labour Organization (ILO) Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183).

Priority actions for parliaments and their members

On the basis of our debates, we made the following recommendations and pledged to follow up on them on a priority basis:

- 1. Legislation and policy:** We undertake to review our existing legal and policy frameworks from a nutrition-sensitive perspective and to ensure that a comprehensive legal framework on nutrition is in place. Particular emphasis should be placed on:

- a. adopting legally enforceable legislation to ensure improved implementation, monitoring and enforcement of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and all relevant subsequent World Health Assembly Resolutions ;
 - b. adopting maternity protection legislation based on the 2000 ILO Maternity Protection Convention and Recommendation in order to support women’s efforts to follow recommended infant and young child feeding practices;
 - c. addressing the problems of overnutrition and obesity by establishing regulations that require nutrition labelling, food fortification and the establishment of subsidies for healthy foods and disincentives for unhealthy foods.
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 that the ministries responsible for the delivery of such programmes and for the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of pro-nutrition legislation receive their fair share of the budget. We acknowledge our own role in monitoring expenditures and making sure that funds are used properly.
 3. **Oversight:** We agree that it is essential to use our powers of scrutiny and oversight. We will continue to hold governments accountable for the enforcement of existing laws and policies and will monitor compliance with and implementation of approved budgets and policies by making use of existing parliamentary committees and caucuses or establishing appropriate subcommittees.
 4. **Representation and awareness-raising:** We undertake to become advocates for nutrition and for children and families, especially the most vulnerable among them. We will use our position 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 Asia.
 5. **Development of nutrition-friendly parliamentary mechanisms:** We acknowledge that more needs to be done within our parliaments to ensure a better response to the nutritional needs of children, especially the most vulnerable among them. We undertake to identify ways to build our capacity to address infant and young child nutrition issues in our daily work.
 6. **Coordination and cooperation:** We pledge to coordinate our activities and work in partnership with other actors, including civil society, donors, development stakeholders and international organizations, such as UNICEF, the IPU, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement. We will explore effective coordination frameworks that harmonize the activities of governments, audit offices, parliaments and civil society. We emphasize the importance of coordinating our actions as parliamentarians across party lines, as well as the activities of the committees and caucuses on which we serve. We also undertake to expand regional coordination, pursue parliamentary exchanges and cooperation, share best practices and inspire each other to speed up implementation of the nutrition agenda.

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