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**Evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programmes to reduce stunting in children under 5 years of age****Executive Summary\*\****Summary*

Stunting in early childhood is a major global concern given its links to child mortality and morbidity, irreversible loss of cognitive development, and loss of productivity, wages and national income. Despite progress made in recent decades, estimates suggest that about 156 million children under 5 years of age (about one in four) have stunted growth. There is considerable momentum for accelerating progress to reduce stunting in young children. Most importantly, target 2.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls for ending “all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age.”

For many decades, UNICEF has been a lead organization in advocacy, policy and programme response for improving maternal and child nutrition both in emergency and development contexts. The report evaluates the organization's global stunting-reduction strategies and efforts. UNICEF is shown to have global strategies to reduce stunting that are coherent and largely aligned with global goals, priorities and initiatives. However, gaps and challenges remain. Inadequate political commitment and capacities represent a challenge in most countries and are most evident in the fragile countries included in the evaluation, where UNICEF may need to concentrate on more individual approaches to meet immediate needs.

\* [E/ICEF/2018/8](#).

\*\*The executive summary of the evaluation report is being circulated in all official languages of the United Nations. The full report, entitled “Reducing stunting in children under 5 years of age: A comprehensive evaluation of UNICEF's strategies and programme performance – Global synthesis report,” is available in English from the UNICEF Evaluation Office website.

*Note:* The present document was processed in its entirety by UNICEF.



## I. Introduction

1. Approximately 156 million of the world's children under age 5 are stunted, with an estimated 80 per cent of these children concentrated in only 14 countries.<sup>1</sup> Stunting jeopardizes child survival and development by contributing to child mortality, morbidity and disability, including impaired or suboptimal physical growth and cognitive development.<sup>2</sup> A child's rights to survival, growth and development are vital to the mission of UNICEF, whose work is underpinned by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore, reducing stunting among young children fully aligns with the organization's core mission.

2. In recent years, the global nutrition community has increased its focus on stunting. Scientific developments support the causal relationship between stunting and impaired short-term childhood development, as well as long-term intergenerational effects on individuals and families. These relationships highlight the importance of adequate nutrition during the first 1,000 days between a woman's pregnancy and her child's second birthday, a period associated with risks of irreversible effects among children.<sup>3</sup> In addition, research provides evidence identifying effective, cost-efficient and scalable interventions to address stunting.<sup>4</sup> Concurrently, the international community recognizes lessons learned and models to support multisectoral approaches to reduce stunting.

3. UNICEF funding and investment in nutrition has more than doubled over the past decade and the nutrition programme expenditure reached \$484 million in 2014. In addition, there has been significant growth in funding for health; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); education; and social protection, areas that have significant implications for preventing stunting in young children. Given global commitments and growing investments by UNICEF, the organization has conducted an evaluation of its stunting-reduction strategies and efforts.

4. The evaluation is the first formal, global attempt to assess UNICEF global strategies and country programme performance in reducing stunting among children under age 5. The evaluation consists of three related components: a desk review of documents from a sample of 24 countries reflecting all seven UNICEF regions and including data from a survey; in-depth case studies of UNICEF stunting-reduction strategies and activities in six countries; and a global synthesis report of UNICEF efforts.

5. The evaluation period (2010–2015) represents a transitional time when the global community was gradually shifting its focus from efforts to reduce the number of underweight children to efforts to reduce the number of stunted children. In most countries, UNICEF has prioritized stunting only relatively recently. Therefore, the evaluation is formative: it considers plans and progress in light of this transition, and presents findings and forward-looking recommendations.

6. The evaluation addresses three objectives:

(a) Assess the relevance, appropriateness and coherence of the UNICEF global, regional and country strategies and plans to address stunting in young children.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, World Health Organization and the World Bank, '2015 Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates'; World Health Organization, 'Moderate Malnutrition: 2015', [www.who.int/nutrition/topics/moderate\\_malnutrition/en/](http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/moderate_malnutrition/en/), accessed 11 March 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Olofin, I., et al., 'Associations of suboptimal growth with all-cause and cause-specific mortality in children under five years: A pooled analysis of ten prospective studies', *PLoS One*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2013, e64636.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Bhutta, Z. A., et al., 'Evidence-based interventions for improvement of maternal and child Nutrition: What can be done and at what cost?', *The Lancet*, vol. 382, no. 9890, 2013, pp. 452–477.

(b) Assess the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNICEF country programmes in addressing stunting in young children, with particular attention to less-reached, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups; [and] draw lessons on equitable progress in reducing stunting in various programme contexts.

(c) Assess UNICEF leadership, guidance and technical support at all levels, as well as the adequacy of UNICEF staffing and its institutional capacity to respond to the lead role the organization is expected to play in contributing to the sustainable and equitable reduction of stunting.

7. The synthesis report draws evidence and recommendations for each of the issues covered, including operational aspects, to strengthen advocacy, policies, guidance and programme response to further reduce stunting in young children.

## II. Evaluation approach

8. The evaluation's broad purpose is to contribute to meeting the accountability needs of UNICEF, to learn about its contributions to the global stunting-reduction targets, and especially to provide sound evaluation evidence and conclusions that can be used to strengthen programme performance. The evaluation conclusions and recommendations will inform future global strategies, regional priority setting and country-level programme development and response.

9. The evaluation relied on a regionally and globally selected sample of countries, and includes an in-depth look at selected countries to assess UNICEF country programme performance and regional and global support. The in-depth evaluation emphasizes South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, two regions that have a high stunting prevalence in children younger than 5 years old, and identified middle-income countries where stunting levels remain high despite gains in other socioeconomic indicators. The countries selected represent diverse programme contexts and experiences.

10. The evaluation also examined UNICEF efforts at regional and global levels in the context of support given to country programmes, as well the organization's contributions to global knowledge and stunting prevention. The evaluation focused on programmes operational from 2010 to 2015 and incorporated strategic documents issued from 2014 to 2015 that reflect recent acceleration in advocacy and programmatic efforts to reduce stunting. The evaluation considered all areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 and how each area contributed to reducing stunting. However, the analysis of the effectiveness of the results focuses on the nutrition programme and the programme's linkages to and from the relevant sectors.

11. In terms of the relevance, appropriateness, adequacy and coherence of strategies and plans, the evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

(a) How relevant, appropriate, adequate and coherent are UNICEF programmes, strategies and plans to reduce stunting at the global, regional and country levels?

(b) How appropriate are strategies for multisectoral efforts to reduce stunting globally and in country contexts?

12. In terms of leadership and leveraging partnerships, the evaluation sought to answer:

(a) Is UNICEF effective in leading and leveraging partnerships to reduce stunting?

(b) What is the role of UNICEF related to global leadership and leveraging of partnerships to reduce stunting, including through the SUN [Scaling Up Nutrition] Movement and the REACH [Renewed Efforts against Child Hunger and undernutrition] initiative?

(c) How effective is the UNICEF partnership role globally and in regions with high rates of stunting?

(d) How effective is UNICEF in leveraging national Government and country-level partnerships to effectively promote strategies and implement country plans?

13. In terms of effectiveness of country programmes in addressing stunting, the evaluation examined:

(a) How effective are UNICEF country programmes in addressing stunting and its immediate and underlying causes?

(b) Which strategies and interventions (nutrition-specific as well as broad-based upstream policy work, multisectoral work and partnerships) have been used effectively by UNICEF to reduce stunting in various contexts?

14. To examine knowledge/data generation, management and use, the evaluation asked:

(a) Does UNICEF sufficiently and appropriately promote the generation and utilization of knowledge and data to realize its stunting-reduction strategies and programmes?

(b) How has UNICEF contributed to relevant knowledge, the establishment or strengthening of effective nutrition information systems, data collection and analysis, and to monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and impact in relation to stunting, including a focus on equity?

(c) What areas of data use or dissemination of the results of research and evaluation require strengthening at the global, regional and country levels, and how can UNICEF contribute to the strengthening efforts?

15. To examine the efficiency of management and operations, the evaluation addressed:

(a) Are the UNICEF management and operations approaches and resources adequate and efficiently utilized for its stunting-reduction strategies and programmes?

(b) Do country programmes support the efficient implementation of programme actions, build commitment and strengthen leadership and governance for improved nutrition?

(c) How adequate and efficient is UNICEF internal coordination, including integration and convergence of various programme components/sectors?

(d) Are financial and staff resource allocations for addressing stunting at the global and country levels adequate and well managed?

### **III. Selected findings**

16. The evaluation used a mix of qualitative and quantitative data and analytical methods. Qualitative data allowed for an in-depth understanding of key issues related to UNICEF efforts to address stunting. Quantitative data collection and analysis allowed inclusion of information not consistently available in previous documents and helped to systematically capture the relevant indicators across countries. The evaluation employed a formative approach to assess progress on the implementation of strategies and approaches to achieve the outputs outlined in the Strategic Plan.

17. The evaluation used global, regional and country-level data from seven sources:

(a) In-depth fieldwork in six case-study countries, including site visits and key informant interviews with a variety of UNICEF staff and national partners;

- (b) Detailed review of documentation and secondary data from 24 programme countries;
- (c) An online survey of the 24 UNICEF country offices;
- (d) An online survey of 51 external stakeholders in the 24 programme countries;
- (e) Broad-based consultations and key informant interviews at UNICEF New York headquarters;
- (f) Key informant interviews with regional nutrition officers in six regions; and
- (g) Key informant interviews with 10 external partners at the global level.

18. The selection of the 24 countries ensured a diverse representation of countries with a stunting prevalence greater than 20 per cent, or countries with relatively high expenditures in nutrition. Every region was represented by a minimum of two and a maximum of five countries.<sup>5</sup>

19. The 24 countries selected reflect all seven UNICEF regions, including three from South Asia; four from West and Central Africa; five from Eastern and Southern Africa; four from East Asia and the Pacific; three from the Middle East and North Africa; three from Latin America and Caribbean; and two from Europe and Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> The 24 countries selected are classified as both low- and middle-income countries. Ten (42 per cent) of the 24 evaluation countries are low-income and the remaining 14 (58 per cent) countries are middle-income. Additionally, 11 (46 per cent) of the 24 countries selected are fragile.

20. The six countries selected for the case studies, by UNICEF region, were Cambodia (East Asia and the Pacific), Mozambique and Rwanda (Eastern and Southern Africa), Haiti (Latin America and Caribbean), India (South Asia) and the Niger (West and Central Africa).

## **A. Relevance, appropriateness, adequacy and coherence of strategies and plans**

### **Global level**

21. Global stakeholders remark that UNICEF is well respected for its leadership on issues regarding children. Stakeholders concur that UNICEF consistently brings children's issues to the forefront of discussions, especially with respect to infant and young child feeding and other nutrition-specific programming.

22. As the global conversation has changed from a focus on infant and young child feeding or other nutrition-specific programmes to a focus on a multisectoral approach with common objectives and framing common results, stakeholders are mixed as to the UNICEF response. While some stakeholders believe that UNICEF is focusing on the correct activities and broadening global understanding of nutrition to include a more multisectoral approach, the evaluation finds that, overall, UNICEF is widely regarded as still being strongly geared towards nutrition-specific interventions.

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<sup>5</sup> With guidance from the UNICEF Evaluation Office, specific countries were excluded from selection due to their recent inclusion in multiple Evaluation Office-commissioned evaluations. Their inclusion might have increased the risk of respondent fatigue, particularly since a wealth of information had already been extracted from these countries. Contributions from the regional offices helped to identify programmes of particular interest or concern for study.

<sup>6</sup> The name of the region was formerly Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States and was in effect during the period of the evaluation. Effective 1 August 2017, the name of the UNICEF region was changed to Europe and Central Asia.

23. External stakeholders note significant gaps in understanding and coordination across the sectors (e.g., WASH, social protection and education) needed to further nutrition-sensitive initiatives. These gaps exist across stakeholder groups (Governments, donors and civil society organizations) at the global and country levels and within UNICEF. Staff note that UNICEF has not maintained pace with the shift from a focus on underweight to stunting prevalence. They note that since all nutrition outcomes, including obesity, are interlinked, UNICEF should consider a programme that focuses on the prevention of multiple nutritional deficits.

24. The discussion paper entitled ‘UNICEF’s approach to scaling up nutrition for mothers and their children’<sup>7</sup> provides guidance to facilitate understanding of the issues and responses to stunting and other nutritional outcomes. However, the evaluation identifies a gap in understanding of the definition and implementation of nutrition-sensitive approaches to stunting reduction across all levels at UNICEF. Staff note an internal lack of knowledge about nutrition-sensitive approaches and the need to create linkages and discussions across different viewpoints.

25. The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 supported multisectoral approaches to improving nutrition and includes a specific outcome: “improved and equitable use of nutritional support and improved nutrition and care practices.” These approaches are supported by identified programme actions and operational steps – which depend on the local context and take into account knowledge of previous engagements with country partners and communities – and together provide the directives to strategically and continually improve programme performance.

26. However, while some strategies exist to incorporate multisectoral approaches into the work of UNICEF work to reduce stunting at the country level, these strategies are generally limited to bisectoral approaches with education, social protection, maternal health, or WASH. Even if multisectoral approaches are implemented, difficulties may arise in the absence of true collaboration and understanding of responsibilities. Both external stakeholders and UNICEF staff agree that UNICEF often misses opportunities related to stunting because it takes a siloed approach to planning, incentives, accountability and sectoral priorities. Many staff note that the organization’s structure does not align with the global Common Results Framework approach of the SUN Movement, making it difficult to fully understand how the approach can best be implemented at the country level.

27. Staff note that, because strategic goals largely reflect past plans and country programmes mirror the structure of the Strategic Plan, 2014–2017, there tends to be little change in activities over time. This process and approach to planning is criticized by those desiring more multisectoral work and innovation.

28. Stakeholders and staff remark that UNICEF needs to broaden its understanding of nutrition at the global level to include more multisectoral approaches, including additional ways to accomplish the same outcomes across different contexts. This includes expanding research and analysis into the pathways from investment to impact, especially to glean an understanding of the impacts of multisectoral approaches as opposed to single-sector approaches. There is insufficient guidance within UNICEF on working in an integrated and multisectoral manner; while the Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 acknowledged the need to work in a multisectoral manner, it did not operationalize how such work can be performed.

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF’s approach to scaling up nutrition for mothers and their children, Discussion paper, Programme Division, UNICEF, New York, June 2015, [www.unicef.org/nutrition/files/Unicef\\_Nutrition\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/nutrition/files/Unicef_Nutrition_Strategy.pdf).

29. Staff and stakeholders agree that, while multisectoral approaches are necessary to provide a sustainable environment to prevent adverse nutrition outcomes, treatment remains necessary while enabling environments are put in place. In particular, UNICEF should not neglect treatment of severe acute malnutrition and wasting at the family and household level.

30. UNICEF global strategies to reduce stunting are coherent and largely aligned with global goals and priorities (i.e., the Millennium Development Goals, the World Health Assembly Global Nutrition Targets and the Sustainable Development Goals) and global initiatives such as the SUN Movement and the 2014 Rome Declaration on Nutrition and Framework for Action.

31. Overall, UNICEF demonstrates understanding of the importance of an enabling environment to improved and equitable use of nutritional support, improved nutrition and care practices, and use of defined outputs and output indicators. However, while the discussion paper entitled ‘UNICEF’s approach to scaling up nutrition for mothers and their children’ provides a framework and approaches for stunting-reduction programmes, these approaches are not reflected in the Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 in a manner that clearly promotes coordination of activities to reduce stunting or improve other nutrition outcomes across sectors.

### **Regional level**

32. A review of regional planning documents shows evidence of the inclusion of stunting reduction as a regional priority or programmatic focus area in most regions. Among the UNICEF regions, the Regional Office for South Asia has most clearly articulated a focus on stunting reduction, and its planning documents discuss multisectorality and nutrition-sensitive approaches. In light of the high prevalence (38 per cent) and the large burden (about 40 per cent of the global burden) of child stunting in South Asia, the Regional Office for South Asia has clearly identified child stunting as a top priority. The Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, on the other hand, has a relatively low stunting prevalence (11 per cent), hence, the lack of a specific focus on stunting in the region’s plans is not surprising.

### **Country level**

33. At the country level, most survey respondents indicate that their country offices have an overarching strategy or framework to address stunting. However, a review of country planning documents shows that countries rarely include reduction in the prevalence of stunting as an outcome or output, and no country offices had produced a formal theory of change to address stunting. These findings are expected, because country programmes are programmes of cooperation with national Governments, and from 2010 to 2015, national Government priorities were aligned with the Millennium Development Goals rather than focused on reducing the number of underweight children or the prevalence of stunting.

34. An analysis of the alignment of country plans with the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 outputs generally shows more emphasis on increased capacity for availability of, access to and use of nutrition services, support and supplies for the prevention of stunting and the treatment of severe wasting. Country offices in fragile countries emphasize delivery of services and nutrition interventions instead of higher-level policy and advocacy work. Middle-income countries are more comprehensive in addressing outputs specified in the Strategic Plan and more likely to focus on upstream outputs.

## **B. Leadership and leveraging partnerships for addressing stunting**

35. Leadership and leveraging partnerships are essential to the work of UNICEF to support host Governments, development stakeholders and communities to sustainably reduce stunting, particularly among vulnerable populations. Enhanced collaboration through active partnerships helps to ensure that resources are efficiently utilized, duplication and waste are avoided, and shared targets are set and supported to address the immediate and underlying causes of stunting.

36. UNICEF has served as a lead agency for the global nutrition cluster, a group that enables country coordination mechanisms to support timely, quality and appropriate nutrition responses to emergencies. In 2014, UNICEF New York worked closely with the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme, the Emergency Nutrition Network and other partners to develop guidance on different aspects of nutrition in the context of the Ebola epidemic. UNICEF also played a key role in a regional inter-agency consultation on emergency food security and nutrition preparedness and response in the Horn of Africa, with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

37. The evaluation found clear evidence of relevant leadership activities undertaken by UNICEF and of the significance that UNICEF places on strengthening partnerships and strategic alliances at the global, regional and country levels. UNICEF has a leadership role in most of the relevant global partnerships and initiatives. Leadership activities vary across regional offices due to differing contextual factors. UNICEF leadership in nutrition and stunting is widely respected, and stakeholders believe the organization can effectively unite partners for strategic planning to improve child nutrition. Working through partnerships, UNICEF led or co-led the development of mechanisms and guidelines relevant to nutrition and stunting. UNICEF hosted and/or led multiple high-visibility events that brought together partners across multiple sectors.

38. However, according to the evaluation, UNICEF is sometimes viewed as reluctant to engage with stakeholders outside of the United Nations. This reluctance could reflect an unwillingness to involve non-United Nations parties in ensuring the well-being of children. It could also be a result of the lack of a clear vision on how to incorporate nutrition-sensitive strategies into conventional nutrition-specific approaches. In addition, while there is collaboration with other United Nations agencies, there appears to be a lack of cohesion and coordination in the United Nations system.

39. With regard to country-level collaborations and partnerships, the evaluation found that UNICEF cooperates with key country counterpart institutions to implement programme interventions to address stunting. All country offices identify at least one counterpart institution, and most countries report three or more. The most commonly cited partners are government ministries or departments<sup>8</sup> and non-governmental organizations.

40. At the country level, all countries identified potential stakeholders as currently having little or no involvement in stunting-reduction efforts. In some countries, government ministries that could be included are regularly involved in other country efforts, such as agriculture, social protection, education and WASH. Their non-involvement in stunting-reduction efforts is indicative of existing gaps in translating global stunting-related guidance to the country level. Other ministries, including finance, industry and labour, show a growing understanding of the multisectoral integration needed to reduce stunting. Country offices also identified non-governmental organizations and donor organizations that could play a larger

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<sup>8</sup> Ministries in the national Governments are considered by UNICEF as implementing partners.



role in local stunting-reduction efforts. Several countries express a need for more private sector engagement. Religious and environmental groups are also named as potential partners.

## **C. Effectiveness of country programmes in addressing stunting**

### **Upstream approaches**

41. The evaluation found that while there exist multiple examples of successful advocacy for improved policy frameworks, increased government commitment and other upstream achievements related to addressing stunting, the need for additional progress is consistently reported by both country offices and external stakeholders. Country offices in low-income and fragile countries are less likely to report upstream approaches.

### **Capacity-building**

42. The evaluation produced mixed findings on capacity-building. All countries reported capacity-development activities, largely related to specific interventions such as infant and young child feeding, micronutrients, community management of acute malnutrition, and various aspects of monitoring and evaluation and data and knowledge generation. Middle-income countries more often focused on data collection, whereas low-income countries concentrated their training efforts on direct interventions.

43. It was important to note that only a small number of country offices considered these activities a key component in the approach to addressing stunting. However, external stakeholders are much more likely to view UNICEF capacity-building actions as critical to addressing stunting. These findings indicate that while UNICEF is clearly investing in capacity-building, the efforts in this area may need to be strengthened either through diversification of the types of capacity-building activities, or increasing their scale, or both.

### **Improved nutrition and care practices**

44. In most of the countries selected, nutrition-specific interventions are among the key approaches to addressing stunting, and infant and young child feeding and prevention of micronutrient deficiencies are common. All of the country offices whose programmes were evaluated reported implementation of nutrition-sensitive interventions, either through the Micronutrient Initiative or infant and young child feeding activities. The evaluation also documented a growing focus on multisectoral approaches and support of nutrition-sensitive interventions.

45. However, clear examples of implementing such approaches and support as part of country office approaches to stunting reduction were found in only half of the countries, and initiatives were often limited to specific populations or geographic units, indicating that while progress in this area has been made, significant gaps remain.

### **Capacity and delivery of services in humanitarian situations**

46. The evaluation found that fragile countries have a strong focus on the management of severe malnutrition. Country offices in fragile countries are also more likely to report that multiple preventive nutrition-specific interventions are key to their approach to address stunting. This may be indicative of UNICEF being overstretched to meet the greater needs of fragile countries, where a focus on severe acute malnutrition may eventually detract from more preventive interventions due to funding and capacity constraints.

## **D. Equity and reaching the most disadvantaged children**

47. Inequalities may prevent disadvantaged populations from accessing nutrition services or adopting optimal nutrition practices, hence increasing the likelihood of stunting among children. While the global prevalence of stunting is declining, poor children remain more likely to be stunted than their wealthier counterparts. The evaluation reported that the latest statistics from the Global Health Observatory of the World Health Organization showed that globally, the median prevalence of stunting in children aged 5 years or younger was 35.2 per cent in the poorest quintile and 15.5 per cent in the richest quintile in 2006–2015.<sup>9</sup> Parental schooling was also consistently associated with improved nutrition outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

48. UNICEF utilizes an equity-focused approach to programme design and implementation, thereby enabling vulnerable populations to better benefit from access to nutrition services and information. The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 included an equity strategy on the disadvantaged and excluded to promote and protect children's rights. Gender equality is a key element in the refocus on equity, and UNICEF promotes gender-sensitive and gender-transformative approaches.

49. The UNICEF equity focus requires an understanding of poverty, vulnerability and marginalization as the causes and consequences of malnutrition, and a recognition that good nutrition practices will place all children at the same starting line. The equity focus also aims to ensure that girls and women have equitable access to proper nutrition, and demonstrates the organization's recognition that undernutrition is most rampant in settings where girls and women suffer from violence and discrimination.

50. Although most country offices specified the vulnerable population or populations in their country (with children living in extreme poverty being the most common category), only seven country offices included nutrition indicators disaggregated for the vulnerable populations. Children with disabilities were specified as a vulnerable group in three countries, with one country including specific indicators for children with disabilities.

51. Country offices documented successes, particularly in the areas of data generation and community-based approaches. Results from the case study countries showed that all countries focused on specific geographic areas or populations. However, scant disaggregated data do not allow a consistent assessment of whether these approaches yielded results in reducing stunting in disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Most country offices reported challenges in addressing the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Country offices and stakeholders agreed that inadequate systems and lack of coordination are the main challenges in working to address the stunting-related needs of vulnerable children. The evaluation further documented that availability of data at subnational levels and for specific population groups remains a challenge that can affect the ability to identify vulnerable populations and to track their progress.

## E. Sustainability and scale-up

52. UNICEF coordination and partnerships are likely to be sustainable given current global attention to child stunting. Global attention helps keep stunting on the agenda of UNICEF and its partners. Improvements are needed in defining roles and ensuring multisectoral coordination; however, global partners appear committed to work together to address stunting. In addition, new global financing opportunities, such as the Power of Nutrition fund and the UNTLIFE financing mechanism, are expected to significantly increase revenue

<sup>9</sup> See: Global Health Observatory (GHO) data, Inequality in child malnutrition, [www.who.int/gho/health\\_equity/outcomes/stunting\\_children/en/](http://www.who.int/gho/health_equity/outcomes/stunting_children/en/), accessed 14 March 2018.

<sup>10</sup> 'Executive Summary of *The Lancet* Maternal and Child Health Series', *The Lancet*, June 2013, [www.thelancet.com/pb/assets/raw/Lancet/stories/series/nutrition-eng.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pb/assets/raw/Lancet/stories/series/nutrition-eng.pdf).

streams for nutrition in the coming years. UNICEF provided substantial support to the initiation of both of these funds.

53. The evaluation found that, at the country level, UNICEF integrated upstream policy, capacity-building and promotion of enabling environments through system strengthening in programme design and implementation. Upstream policy approaches were reported in 13 out of 24 countries and capacity-building activities were implemented in all 24 countries. In addition, the work of UNICEF with national Governments and its partnerships with other country stakeholders indicate the inclusive involvement of national stakeholders, thus promoting national ownership. This, in turn, is an important component of programme sustainability.

54. The evaluation found that technical and institutional considerations relevant to sustainability had been integrated in all UNICEF programmes, including upstream work, capacity-building and system strengthening. Although evidence on actual increases in national budgets for stunting was not consistently available, there are examples of an increased emphasis on financial planning and an indication that the dialogue with national Governments related to funding allocations has begun.

55. Risks to sustainability and scale-up of efforts to address stunting were found across all sample countries. Key risks common to all 24 countries include general resource constraints and funding unpredictability; lack of government commitment and a lack of stability; and limited infrastructure and capacity. In addition, lack of funding and staff coordination between UNICEF and other actors may exacerbate the risks to sustainability and scale-up of efforts to reduce stunting.

56. Funding, government commitment and capacity issues were reported by all countries, with very little variation by region, income level, or whether a country was experiencing fragility. All 24 country offices stated that there are potential challenges to scale-up of UNICEF-supported interventions to address stunting. These challenges are similar to the risks related to sustainability (weak integration into nutrition and health services; unpredictable long-term funding; insufficient governance structures and stability; low governmental prioritization of stunting reduction; resource constraints; and lack of understanding of multisectoral work).

## **F. Knowledge/data generation, management and use**

57. The evaluation found that, at the global level, UNICEF had produced several reports and other documents to generate knowledge and evidence related to stunting. Through these efforts, UNICEF leveraged learning from its nutrition and stunting work in more than 120 countries through the implementation of the Strategic Plan, 2014–2017, which also served as a global knowledge-generation tool. Key documents produced include (but are not limited to) the following: the discussion paper ‘UNICEF’s approach to scaling up nutrition for mothers and their children’; the publication *Improving Child Nutrition: The achievable imperative for global progress*; and the *Annual Results Reports* on nutrition.

58. Improved data and knowledge are key to addressing child stunting and UNICEF has demonstrated a commitment to knowledge, evidence and data generation and use at all levels. The evaluation documented examples of significant contributions made by UNICEF in supporting data-generation activities, which often provided the most up-to-date information on key nutrition indicators.

59. The evaluation also found examples of UNICEF innovations in data-collection methodologies, such as use of mobile and cloud-based technologies and sampling designs to quickly and efficiently identify priority target areas. UNICEF also made significant progress

in knowledge generation, including through mapping exercises to obtain a clear picture of the existing methods, roles and responsibilities, strengths, gaps and bottlenecks; studies aimed at understanding country-specific causes of malnutrition and documenting inequities; and economic and financial analyses.

60. The knowledge generated has been used to establish the evidence base for advocacy and policy, to determine additional data needs, and to develop country-specific strategies to address stunting. This was generally very much appreciated by external stakeholders. In addition, the publication of UNICEF research in several peer-reviewed publications is indicative of the quality of the organization's research.

61. Nonetheless, in many countries insufficient data and knowledge remain a constraint to more effective advocacy and programming for the reduction of stunting. The amount and quality of data often fall short of requirements, especially in terms of disaggregation at subnational levels and for specific vulnerable populations. Some gaps in indicators in country planning documents, especially as relates to measuring progress in equity, are likely related to the fact that the data necessary to track these indicators are not available, or at least not available with sufficient frequency to facilitate a meaningful measurement of progress.

62. There are also clear differences among countries in terms of the volume and types of knowledge generated. Even in countries that generated a significant body of knowledge, evaluations and research into the effectiveness of specific approaches and interventions were limited during the evaluation period. Continued work by UNICEF in closing the gaps in data and knowledge generation is important, given the progress to date and a strong sentiment from external stakeholders that UNICEF plays a significant role in making advances in this area.

## **G. Efficiency of management and operations**

### **Financing**

63. The evaluation found that nutrition accounted for approximately one tenth of the UNICEF budget for 2014–2017<sup>11</sup> (\$1,708 million). UNICEF nutrition expenditures increased 25 per cent, from \$484.2 million in 2014 to \$603.5 million in 2015.<sup>12</sup> In both years, these amounts represented approximately 13 per cent of total spending. An analysis of regional data for 2014 and 2015 shows the largest nutrition allocations in sub-Saharan Africa: the West and Central Africa and Eastern and Southern Africa regions. During the two-year period, the largest increases were observed for the Europe and Central Asia region, followed by the Eastern and Southern Africa, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia regions, while the East Asia and the Pacific region had a 15 per cent decrease in nutrition expenditure.

64. Evidence suggests that UNICEF programmes use resources efficiently through targeted use of funds (e.g., a focus on specific geographic areas). However, a detailed allocation analysis was not possible because resources are not specially earmarked for stunting. The lack of stunting-specific budgets/financial information is likely to present challenges in assessments related to cost-effectiveness and country planning. The lack of reporting on some

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<sup>11</sup> Stunting-specific financial information was not available. In addition, the evaluation analysed only nutrition budget and expenditure information as it was not possible to isolate expenditures that might have been relevant for stunting under nutrition-sensitive sectors. The evaluation did examine funding in other sectors (e.g., water, sanitation and hygiene) that may have shared joint programming with nutrition.

<sup>12</sup> These amounts include UNICEF headquarters funding.

core indicators might affect the capacity of UNICEF to attract funds for stunting-reduction activities.

65. In countries experiencing budget shortfalls, underfunding affected essential activities in all areas supporting stunting reduction (nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive areas, coordination, governance, monitoring and evaluation). In several countries, by focusing on particular geographic areas or populations with a higher prevalence of stunting, UNICEF could more efficiently allocate limited funds.

#### **Human resources and internal coordination**

66. Most nutrition programmes are sufficiently staffed. The evaluation found that most countries made progress in integrating staff from sectors other than nutrition into their stunting-reduction efforts across a range of activities. Such collaborations helped to ensure multisectoral approaches to reducing stunting among children.

67. However, a lack of internal processes and incentives to operationalize and successfully implement integration sometimes hinders these efforts. In addition, although evaluation shows some evidence of progress in nutrition-sensitive areas, progress is not widespread. This result suggests that challenges in internal coordination may adversely affect UNICEF contributions to stunting reduction.

#### **Coordination at headquarters and regional offices**

68. The evaluation assessed support provided by headquarters and regional offices, and coordination between country offices and UNICEF headquarters and regional offices. Regional offices and headquarters support of country programme efforts to address stunting varied widely across and within regions from 2014 to 2017. In all but the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office, the regional office was as or more likely than headquarters to provide direct support. Only three countries: the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Ghana and Yemen, received support from headquarters without also receiving regional office support.

69. Countries received support in resource mobilization and funding coordination, bottleneck analysis, knowledge generation and dissemination, preparation of guidance documents, organization of regional meetings and workshops, and collaboration across countries (including shared evidence and South-South collaboration).

70. While human resources at the regional level are inadequate to effect substantial improvements at the country level, regional offices play an increasing role in supporting country office efforts to address stunting, and in coordinating activities among countries within and across regions. Additional support is warranted, especially in the areas of cross-country and cross-regional sharing of information and resources, modelling collaborative behaviour across sectors, and more systematic guidance on multisectoral approaches to address stunting. Closer collaboration with other United Nations entities may be necessary to improve coordination at both regional and global levels.

71. The most frequently reported challenges for cross-sectoral involvement include the following:

- (a) Limited guidance and leadership;
- (b) Lack of joint planning, accountability and supervision across sectors; and
- (c) Siloed sections.

72. Country offices reported that the regional offices could do more. In many instances, the support received in one country – e.g. evidence generation, technical support and sharing of

best practices across countries – is needed by another country in the same region. Three common themes emerged across regions: (1) regional coordination with other United Nations entities would help to eliminate overlaps and ensure assistance when needed at the global level; (2) the need for continued sharing of evidence, tools and information across countries in a region; and (3) the availability of more guidance, technical support and training on planning, partnering and developing nutrition-sensitive strategies. Other suggestions include additional linkages to global knowledge and developments at headquarters, and improved fundraising assistance (including in emergency contexts).

## **IV. Conclusions**

73. The evaluation was conducted during a transitional period when the global community was gradually shifting its focus from efforts to reduce the number of children who are underweight to those aimed at reducing the number of children who are stunted. In most countries, UNICEF has only prioritized stunting since 2016, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The conclusions outlined in the evaluation report distil the evidence in accordance with the evaluation questions and are presented in a formative manner. The recommendations are forward-looking, and aim to further consolidate ongoing work by UNICEF and its partners to address stunting in a systematic manner.

### **Relevance, appropriateness and coherence**

74. The evaluation found that UNICEF global strategies to reduce stunting are coherent and largely aligned with global goals, priorities and initiatives, such as the SUN Movement and the 2014 Rome Declaration on Nutrition and Framework for Action. This demonstrates an understanding by UNICEF of the important role of an enabling environment in improved and equitable use of nutritional support and services, improved nutrition and care practices, and the use of defined outputs and output indicators. The discussion paper ‘UNICEF’s approach to scaling up nutrition for mothers and their children’ provides a framework and approaches for stunting-reduction activities. However, the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 does not reflect these approaches in a manner that clearly promotes coordination across sectors for the reduction of stunting. At the regional level, stunting reduction is included as a regional priority or programmatic focus area, although, with the exception of the Regional Office for South Asia, stunting-specific plans or commitments are not clearly defined in regional documents. At the country level, country programmes are aligned to country contexts as presented in situational analyses and with the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014–2017 outputs relevant to stunting. However, deliberate planning to address stunting as an outcome is lacking across the global, regional and country levels, although improvements were introduced during the evaluation period. This is primarily because the country programmes of cooperation with national Governments reflect government priorities, which, from 2010 to 2015, were aligned with Millennium Development Goals, which focused on reducing underweight among children.

### **Leadership and partnerships**

75. The evaluation found clear evidence of relevant leadership activities undertaken by UNICEF and of the significance placed by the organization on strengthening strategic partnerships and alliances at the global, regional and country levels. Key factors that determined success include technical expertise and recognized credibility in the areas of children and nutrition. Generally, stakeholders are likely to view UNICEF as a leader in bringing nutrition issues to the forefront and often mention the SUN Movement as a valuable mechanism through which stunting can be addressed. However, leadership and advocacy related to stunting-reduction efforts vary considerably across regions and countries, and there

are indications that a lack of cohesion and coordination exists within the United Nations system and within UNICEF. In addition, UNICEF is sometimes viewed as reluctant to engage with non-United Nations stakeholders and to involve them in areas related to children and nutrition.

### **Effectiveness**

76. During the evaluation period, 21 of the 24 countries included in the evaluation reported progress in reducing stunting, while 3 reported that the rates of stunting had worsened. UNICEF country programmes provide multiple examples of successful advocacy and progress towards achieving relevant results, such as improving policy frameworks; increasing government commitment to address stunting; building capacities at national, subnational and front-line worker levels, and addressing the needs of children and women affected by humanitarian situations.

77. The evaluation documented a growing focus on multisectoral approaches and support of nutrition-sensitive interventions, although clear examples of implementing these multisectoral approaches as part of the country programme approaches to stunting reduction are found in only half the countries assessed. Gaps and challenges remain. Inadequate political commitment and capacities represent a challenge in most countries and are most evident in the fragile countries included in the evaluation, where UNICEF may need to concentrate on more downstream approaches to meet immediate needs.

### **Equity and reach of disadvantaged children**

78. Most UNICEF country offices identified specific vulnerable populations in their country programme and planning documents. Children living in poverty were the most commonly specified category. Of the 24 sample countries, only 7 country offices included nutrition indicators disaggregated for the identified vulnerable population or populations. The most commonly documented successes related to data generation and community-based interventions. However, most country offices report challenges in addressing the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

79. The main challenges are inadequate systems and a lack of coordination; lack of government commitment; and lack of infrastructure, resulting in difficulties reaching specific vulnerable populations. In addition, there is a need to disaggregate data to identify vulnerable populations, measure results and progress, and ensure equitable approaches to stunting reduction.

### **Sustainability and scale-up**

80. The evaluation found that the global initiatives led and supported by UNICEF are likely to be sustained due to partner commitment and a strong global focus on nutrition. At the country level, sustainability of technical and institutional considerations is integrated in the design of UNICEF country programme. The findings indicate that dialogue has begun with national Governments related to funding allocations for scale-up of interventions to prevent stunting.

81. However, risks to sustainability and scale-up of efforts to address stunting exist across all countries. Key risks include general resource constraints; funding unpredictability; suboptimal government commitment and instability; and limited infrastructure and capacity.

### **Knowledge and data generation, management and use**

82. UNICEF demonstrates a commitment to knowledge, evidence and data generation and use at the global, regional and country levels. The evaluation documented examples of significant contributions made by UNICEF in supporting data-generation activities that often

provided the most up-to-date information on key nutrition indicators. UNICEF also made significant progress in knowledge generation, including through mapping exercises to obtain a clear picture of the existing methods, roles and responsibilities, strengths, gaps and bottlenecks; studies aimed at understanding country-specific causes of malnutrition and documenting inequities; and economic and financial analyses.

83. Nonetheless, knowledge generation remains a barrier to stunting reduction. Fewer than half of the countries reported that data related to stunting outcomes and outputs are sufficient to meet the country's needs. There is a need for evidence providing proof of the interventions that are most effective at reducing stunting in different contexts.

#### **Efficiency of management and operations**

84. Evidence suggests that, despite low levels of global funding for nutrition, UNICEF nutrition programmes achieve efficiencies through the targeted use of funds. Stunting-specific budget and financial information will be important to document the cost-effectiveness of interventions as well as for country planning purposes.

85. The regional offices play an increasing role in supporting country office efforts to address stunting. All but three countries have made some progress in integrating staff from sections other than nutrition in their efforts to address stunting across a range of activities, and have embraced the notion of such collaborations. However, these efforts are hindered by the lack of internal processes and incentives to operationalize and successfully implement such coordination. Closer collaboration with other United Nations entities at both the global and regional levels may be necessary to avoid overlaps and address gaps.

#### **Evaluation limitations**

86. Several factors constrained the evaluation design options and the ability of the evaluation team to fully address the evaluation questions and produce the clearest and most accurate findings.

(a) Although systematic efforts were made to ensure robust country selection to represent as many country contexts as possible, the global and regional findings may be influenced by the specific countries included in the evaluation. In addition, the evaluation aimed to assess efforts to reduce stunting between 2010 and 2015, but the country plans and the development of global guidance for stunting prevention did not fully align with this time period. Thus, in some cases, the evaluation assessed more than one country programme, and, where applicable, weighted recent country programme findings more heavily.

(b) Lack of counterfactual information did not allow attribution of the UNICEF contribution to any observed changes in stunting reduction. Such analysis was outside the scope of the evaluation.

(c) The available documents included a mix of self-reported and independent reports. However, these documents were complemented by additional independent sources of information collected by the evaluation team.

## **V. Recommendations and management response**

87. The summary and conclusions presented in various chapters of the evaluation report include examples of work that provides learning opportunities, as well as challenges and concerns that need to be addressed to further strengthen efforts to address stunting by UNICEF and its partners. The recommendations constitute key actions that need to be undertaken by the organization to move the stunting agenda forward, especially in light of



the stunting-reduction targets included in the World Health Assembly Global Nutrition Targets and the Sustainable Development Goals. The recommendations are as follows:

88. Building on the document, 'UNICEF's approach to scaling up nutrition for mothers and their children', formulate a more concrete UNICEF strategy for maternal and child nutrition (2030) that aligns closely with the narrative, goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda, to eliminate stunting and all forms of malnutrition (New York headquarters).
89. Define and articulate approaches in the next Strategic Plan, 2018–2021<sup>13</sup> that enable the UNICEF Nutrition Section, Programme Division to convene cross-sectoral coordination for the reduction of stunting with agreed-upon roles and contributions (New York headquarters).
90. Promote and support concrete processes that help to clarify the roles and responsibilities of strategic partners within and outside the United Nations, especially in the areas of nutrition-sensitive programming and multisectoral approaches to reduce stunting (New York headquarters, regional and country offices).
91. Develop and promote a theory of change and guidance that informs stunting-reduction strategies in regions and countries with a high prevalence of stunting. Such strategies should operationalize context-specific, multisectoral approaches with strategic sectors and partners (New York headquarters, regional and country offices).
92. Include a deliberate focus on stunting reduction in global, regional and country plans for nutrition through the inclusion of nutrition-specific interventions, nutrition-sensitive approaches, stunting-specific indicators and strategic multisectoral approaches (New York headquarters, regional and country offices).
93. Assess capacity gaps and needs in countries where stunting prevalence is high. Mobilize partners and leverage the niche of UNICEF in the area of upstream work to further expand/diversify capacity-building activities (country offices).
94. Include concrete and detailed equity-focused approaches in the context of policy, strategy and programme actions for the reduction of stunting, with reference to specific approaches, targets and indicators for the reduction of stunting among the most vulnerable children (regional and country offices).
95. Invest more systematically in improving knowledge generation about the determinants of stunting and the interventions that are most effective in reducing stunting in different contexts. Use this knowledge as the evidence base for advocacy, resource mobilization and programme planning (New York headquarters, regional and country offices).
96. Improve documentation and sharing of evidence, data, information, tools, good practices, and lessons for advocacy, policy development, strategy design, programme scale-up and knowledge generation, across countries in a region and across different regions (New York headquarters and regional offices).
97. Incorporate accountability across sections to improve collaboration and cooperation towards better results orientation to reducing stunting and use it as the basis in assessing the achievement of country programme targets (country offices).
98. Leverage resources and expertise in tracking country financial resources for nutrition to improve availability of reliable country budget data and facilitate dialogue with national Governments related to funding allocations for stunting reduction (country offices).

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<sup>13</sup> The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 was approved by the Executive Board at its 2017 second regular session.