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## NEWS ITEMS

## Double burden of malnutrition – a common agenda

The 33rd session of the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition focussed this year on the double burden of malnutrition. As it was expressed in the working group of NGOs/Civil society, this new approach is a first step to convince participants that tackling malnutrition in all its forms represents an integrated single agenda addressing the root causes of malnutrition at all stages of the life course. It is not an option to say “let us concentrate on under-nutrition first” because preventing death in young children should take precedence over avoiding premature death of adults from nutrition-related chronic diseases. This argument undoubtedly responds to the moral/ethical imperative of prioritizing saving children from avoidable death but in practice present knowledge indicates that doing this correctly is the first step in preventing adult malnutrition-related chronic disease. This issue is not about choosing between addressing under-nutrition in the poor versus over-nutrition in the affluent. It should be recognized that the interventions required to address stunting are different from those needed to reduce underweight and wasting. One must also realize that in most developing regions there is a co-existence between underweight and stunting in infants and children with overweight in the adult population.

The final statement of the SCN clearly describes the problem and proposes solutions.

*Final statement of the 33rd annual session of the United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN).*

“The participants in the 33rd Annual Session of the SCN agree current actions to combat malnutrition in all its forms are insufficient. Also agree that an adequate response to ensure that malnutrition is no longer a major impediment to human development in the next generation requires unprecedented collaboration. It means that the UN

family, national governments, civil society and the private sector must come together in a broad based alliance with one vision. This collaboration should be developed within the promotion and protection of all human rights, especially the right to adequate food and the right to the highest attainable standards of health.

### The problem

We live in a world of great and increasing inequity between and within countries. This is unacceptable. In this world, 800 million people are suffering from under-nourishment and about 170 million infants and young children are underweight. More than 5 million children die each year as a result of under-nutrition. And further, billions of people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies (so-called “hidden hunger”) especially of iron, vitamin A, iodine and zinc. Under-nutrition is the main threat to health and well-being not only in middle- and low-income countries but also globally. At the same time, childhood obesity is becoming a recognized problem even in low and middle-income countries. More than a billion adults worldwide are overweight, of which 300 million are obese.

These issues are still perceived to be separate. In reality both are often rooted in poverty and co-exist in communities, and even the same households, in most countries. While under-nutrition kills in early life, it also leads to a high risk of disease and death later in life.

This is the double burden of malnutrition.

This double burden of malnutrition has common causes, inadequate foetal and infant and young child nutrition followed by exposure (including through marketing practices) to unhealthy energy-dense nutrient-poor foods and lack of physical activity. The window of opportunity lies from pregnancy to around 24 months of a child’s age. Schools provide a natural setting for effective interventions for older ages and to promote adequate nutrition to future mothers. Malnutrition in all its forms amounts to an intolerable burden not only on national health systems but the entire cultural, social and economic fabric of nations, and is the

greatest impediment to the fulfillment of human potential. Yet, despite the impact of malnutrition in all its forms on mortality, morbidity and national economies only 1.8% of the total resources for health-related development assistance are allocated to nutrition activities. Of the World Bank's total assistance to developing countries only 0.7% is for nutrition and food security. At country level, the financial commitment is even less.

Adequate food is a human right and good nutrition is essential to achieve the aims of the Millennium Declaration, including those expressed by the Millennium Development Goals. Without progress towards tackling malnutrition, these goals will not be achieved.

### The solution

UN agencies, bilateral partners and civil society have come together to help put nutrition at the centre of development. We collectively urge:

- National governments, in their internal policies, and also through their foreign policies and development assistance, to promote nutrition actions that reduce under and over-nutrition and diet-related chronic diseases. They should do this within the context of respecting, protecting and fulfilling the right to adequate food, and should ensure that these actions are adequately funded.
- UN agencies to act together through the UN system SCN in the context of the UN reform to accelerate the prevention and mitigation of all forms of malnutrition throughout the life cycle, towards the achievement of the MDGs and beyond. The UN agencies should also promote the integration of nutrition programmes at country level and mainstream them into national development policies.
- Civil society and non-governmental organizations, to advocate and adopt policies and practices that tackle the double burden of malnutrition and hold governments accountable at all levels.
- The private sector, especially those in the food and beverage business, to support the achievement of the MDGs including by adopting responsible marketing practices on breastmilk substitutes and energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and drinks.

All constituents of the SCN will work together to raise the profile of nutrition and to increase the investments in nutrition at global, national and local levels to tackle the double burden of malnutri-

tion with one shared vision. The top priorities are to:

- Empower all women and protect their nutrition, human rights and entitlements and those of their children, through knowledge, skills, policies and regulations.
- Focus on the window of opportunity from pre-conception to around 24 months of age, the critical period when the foundation for life long health is set.
- Urge schools, including pre-schools, to be nutrition and physical activity-friendly, in order to promote health and well being throughout life.
- Promote the production and consumption of culturally appropriate foods that are rich in micronutrients, and promote micronutrient supplementation when and where needed.
- Recognize that the basic determinants of health and disease are social and environmental, and ensure healthy choices are accessible, affordable and safe.
- Target the poor and socially marginalized, including indigenous populations, people living in emergencies and those affected by HIV/AIDS.
- Build awareness, institutional capacity and leadership at national, sub-national, community and global levels for accelerating action on nutrition.

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## FIFTY-NINTH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

### Agenda item 11.8.

## Infant and young child nutrition: Quadrennial report Statement from the International Association for the Study of Obesity

Made on behalf of the International Association for the Study of Obesity, in conjunction with the International Pediatric Association, the Interna-