

# FOOD SYSTEMS FOR CHILDREN

UNICEF in Action for Food Systems Transformation



# EVERY CHILD HAS THE RIGHT TO NUTRITION



Every child has the right to nutrition, and today the need for diets, services and practices that protect, promote, and support good nutrition for all children has never been greater. In the previous two decades, the world has reduced the proportion of children under 5 suffering from undernutrition by one third and the number of undernourished children by 55 million. This remarkable achievement proves that positive change for nutrition is possible and is happening at scale across regions and countries. But there is more work to be done. Our latest data indicate that at least one in three children is not growing well because of malnutrition, and at least two in three children are not eating the minimum diet they need to grow, develop, and learn to their full potential. This hurts not just children – it hurts us all.



# CHILD MALNUTRITION TODAY

## A triple burden.

In the last two decades, the world has reduced the proportion of children under 5 suffering from stunting by one third and the number of stunted children by 55 million. This remarkable achievement proves that positive change for nutrition is possible and is happening at scale – but there is more work to be done. In the last two decades, the burden of malnutrition remains unsolved, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where about 200 million children are affected by stunting and wasting and at least 340 million suffer from deficiencies in vitamins and other essential micronutrients. At the same time the number of children with overweight and obesity continues to rise, increasingly affecting children from poorer households in all regions and countries. Together, these problems are a triple burden of malnutrition facing the world's children: undernutrition, in the form of stunting and wasting, widespread micronutrient deficiencies, and a growing prevalence of overweight and obesity.

## A new reality.

The backdrop of nutrition has evolved, and new forces drive the nutrition situation of children. Globalization and urbanization have changed food availability, food environments, and food practices. Millions of families have left the countryside and moved to cities, leaving behind traditional diets for processed foods that are frequently high in salt, sugar, and saturated fat, and are low in essential nutrients and fiber. Socio-economic inequities are increasing in most parts of the world and many families are changing the way they eat or feed their children because of poverty and the rising cost of healthy diets. Finally, the climate crisis, the damage done to water, air and soil, and the loss of biodiversity pose critical challenges to feeding children sustainably today and for generations to come. The evolving face of child malnutrition demands a new multi-faceted response that supports nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets at every stage of life while sustaining nutrition- and planet- responsive development for all children.

## Very poor diets.

Globally, millions of children and adolescents do not benefit from diets that support healthy development. More than half (56 per cent) of infants under 6 months of age are not exclusively breastfed and more than two in three (72 per cent) children aged 6–23 months are not fed even the minimum diverse diet needed to grow and develop. While most children (more than 75 per cent) are fed breastmilk and grains (wheat, rice, corn or others), 46 per cent are not fed any fruits or vegetables and 60 per cent are not fed nutrient-dense foods such as eggs, fish or meat. Further, far too many school-age children are eating too few fruits and vegetables and consuming too many unhealthy foods that are high in sugar, salt and saturated fat and are often marketed to them: 21 per cent of school-going adolescents consume vegetables less than once a day, 34 per cent consume fruit less than once a day, 42 per cent consume soft drinks daily, and 46 per cent consume fast food at least weekly.



**At least  
1 in 3 children  
is not growing well  
because of malnutrition**



**At least  
2 in 3 children  
are not fed the minimum diet  
they need to grow up healthy**

# UNICEF NUTRITION STRATEGY



## A new strategy.

The UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030 sets forth UNICEF’s strategic intent to support national governments and partners in upholding children’s right to nutrition and ending child malnutrition in all its forms, everywhere.

Our **vision** is *a world where all children, adolescents and women realize their right to nutrition*. This vision is inspired by the Convention on the Rights of the Child – the world’s most widely ratified human rights treaty – which recognizes the right of every child to adequate nutrition, from birth to 18 years of age.

The **goal** of our Strategy is *to protect and promote diets, services and practices that support optimal nutrition, growth and development for all children, adolescents, and women*. It aims to contribute to the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, ensure children’s access to nutritious diets, and end child malnutrition in all its forms.

## Prevention first, always.

The vision of the UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030 is universal, applying equally to all children, adolescents, and women everywhere. This vision is implemented through context-specific programmes that share a universal premise across regions and countries: prevention comes first, in all contexts; if prevention fails, treatment is a must, in all contexts.

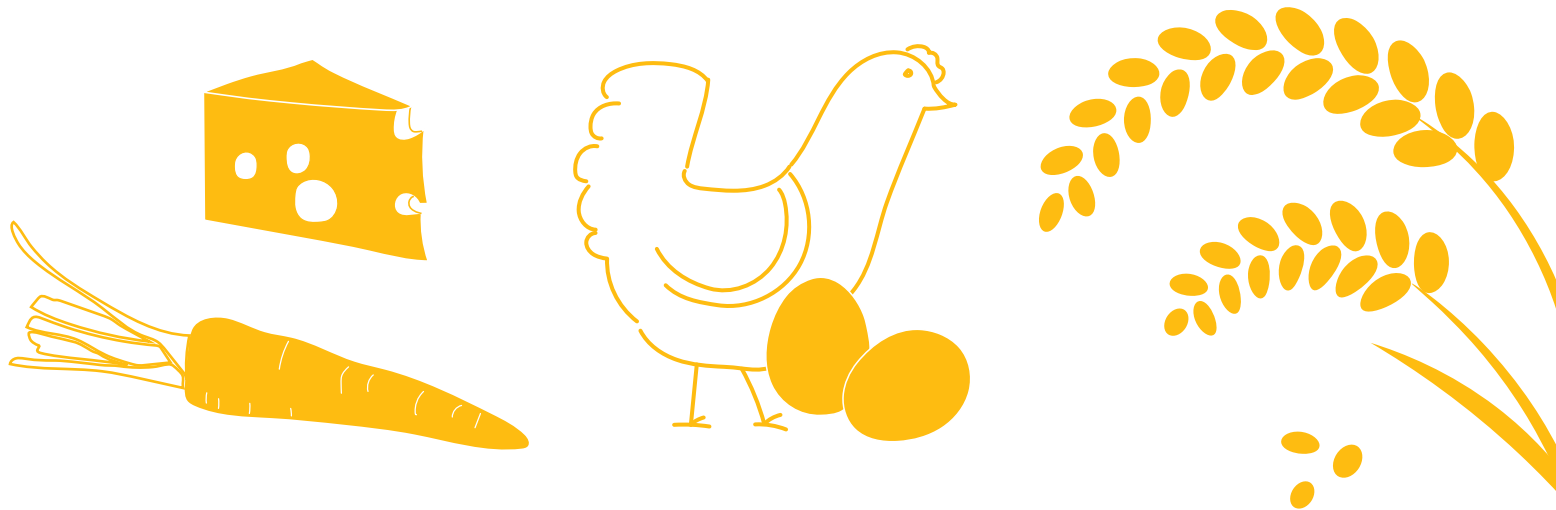
Prevention comes first everywhere, including in fragile and humanitarian settings: the primary objective of UNICEF nutrition programmes is to prevent malnutrition in all its forms across the life cycle, from early childhood, through middle childhood and adolescence.

If prevention fails, treatment is a must, everywhere: when efforts to prevent malnutrition fall short, UNICEF nutrition programmes aim to ensure the early detection and treatment of children with life-threatening malnutrition through facility- and community-based approaches in both humanitarian and non-humanitarian settings



FIGURE 1

**The goal of the UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030 is to protect and promote diets, services and practices that support optimal nutrition, growth and development for all children, adolescents and women**



### Systems first, everywhere.

To support this vision and goal, the UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020-2030 calls for a systems approach to improving nutrition outcomes. We engage the five systems with the greatest potential to deliver nutrition results for children and women: food, health, water and sanitation, education, and social protection. We aim to make these systems better equipped and more accountable for addressing malnutrition in all its forms. Our Strategy acknowledges the central role of the food

system – working together with the health, water and sanitation, education, and social protection systems – in providing nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets for children, while supporting adequate nutrition services and positive nutrition practices across the life cycle. Achieving nutrition results depends on the capacity of these five systems to deliver essential nutrition interventions at every stage of life and contribute to nutrition responsive development at scale.

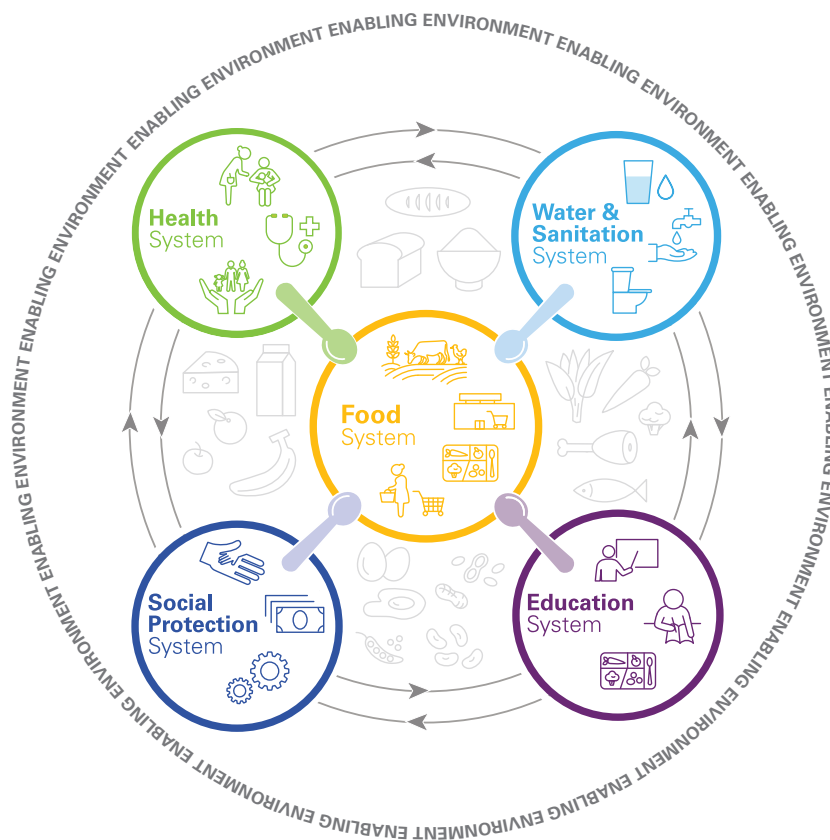


FIGURE 2

**A systems approach to maternal and child nutrition.** UNICEF's systems approach to nutrition acknowledges the central role of the food system – working together with the health, water and sanitation, education, and social protection systems – in providing nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets for children, while supporting essential nutrition services and positive nutrition practices across the life cycle.

# UNICEF Conceptual Framework on Maternal and Child Nutrition, 2020

The UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030 is guided by UNICEF’s Conceptual Framework on the Determinants of Maternal and Child Nutrition, 2020. The Framework builds on previous conceptual work by UNICEF, acknowledges the triple burden of malnutrition, and highlights the role of diets and care as immediate determinants of maternal and child nutrition. Diets and care influence each other. The co-occurrence of good diets and good care leads to adequate nutrition for children and women across the life course. Using a positive narrative about what contributes to good nutrition in children and women, the Framework provides conceptual clarity on the enabling, underlying and immediate determinants of adequate nutrition, their vertical and horizontal interconnectedness, and the positive survival, growth, development, learning, economic and social outcomes resulting from improved maternal and child nutrition.

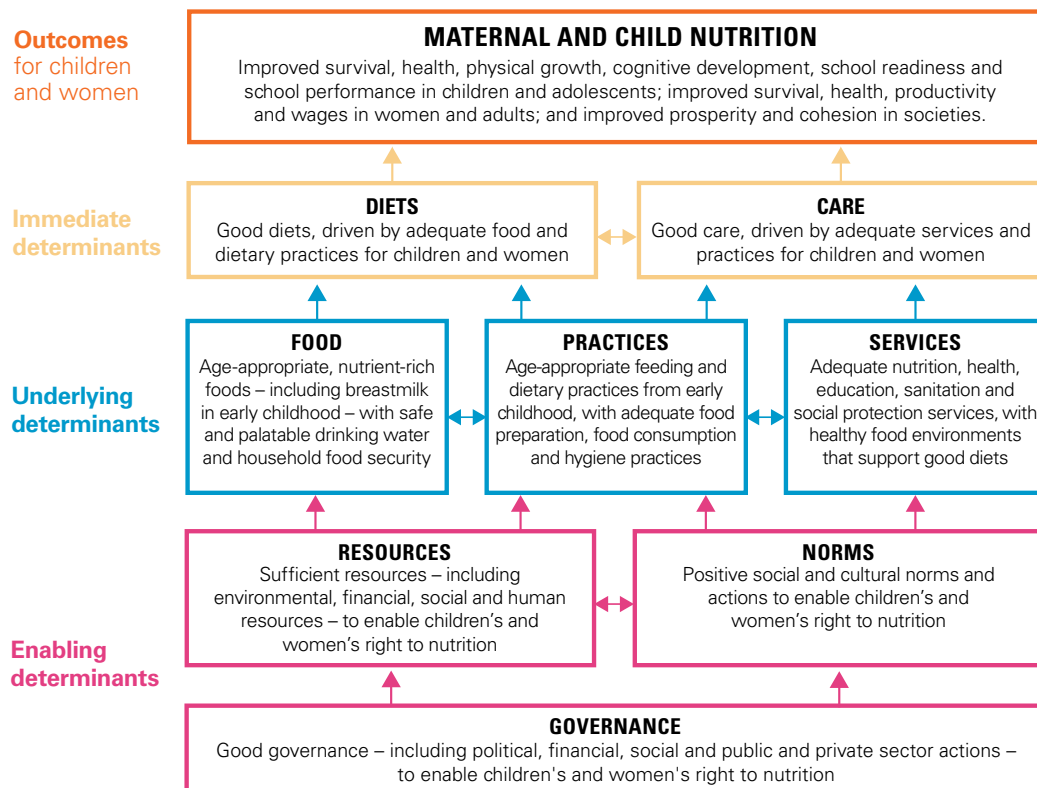
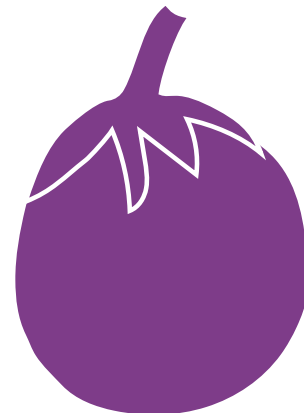


FIGURE 3  
UNICEF Conceptual Framework on the Determinants of Maternal and Child Nutrition, 2020.  
A framework for the prevention of malnutrition in all its forms.





# THE FOOD SYSTEM



**The food system** comprises the policies, actors and services needed to ensure children's access to good diets, defined as diets that are nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable. Food systems bear critical responsibility for the nutritional quality, safety, affordability and sustainability of children's diets. However, food systems often fail to account for the nutrition rights and special nutritional needs of children and adolescents when determining what foods need to be produced, processed, packaged and marketed. Therefore, the food system needs to operate in ways that ensure that nutritious, safe and sustainable diets are available and affordable. Secondly, it needs to empower children, adolescents and families to demand foods that are nutritious, safe and sustainable. Finally, it needs to create healthy food environments for children; evidence shows that when nutritious and safe options are affordable, convenient, and desirable, children and families make better food choices.

**Public and private.** Food systems require public and private sector actors to take full responsibility for their unique roles in shaping children's diets. Governments have primary accountability for upholding the right to food and nutrition for their children. Governments must set standards that are aligned with children's best interests and create a level playing field for food producers and suppliers. Producers and suppliers need to ensure that their actions – including food production, transformation, distribution, labelling, marketing and retailing – are aligned with such standards. Food systems must deliver nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable food options for children, and the private sector has a key role to play: as provider of food and essential goods and services for children and adolescents; as source of employment and livelihoods for women and families; as a shaper of food markets, food prices, and consumer demand; and as a driver of climate and environmental change.

## **Food system transformation.**

The urgent need for a food system transformation to ensure the health of people and the planet is now globally recognized. However, the special dietary and nutrition needs of children and adolescents have not been sufficiently considered in this global agenda. Yet, today's food systems are driving pervasive undernutrition – both stunting and wasting – widespread micronutrient deficiencies, and rising rates of overweight, obesity and diet-related diseases among children and adolescents, whilst also being the single largest pressure on the environment, threatening the right of children to nutrition and a sustainable planet. Collaboration across diverse disciplines has increased our understanding of the linkages between people, food, and the planet, but analyses and narratives rarely include children and adolescents as nutrition rights holders nor the unique role children, adolescents and young people can play in transforming food systems.





# UNICEF AND FOOD SYSTEMS FOR CHILDREN



We believe that children's right to nutrition must be at the heart of food systems transformation. The UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030 calls for UNICEF programmes to engage strategically with food systems and their public and private sector actors to advocate for policies, practices and products that support good nutrition for all children. UNICEF is well positioned to mobilize public and private sector actors across food systems to tackle the global challenge of child malnutrition given:

- UNICEF's multi-sectoral mandate for children and long-standing role as a trusted adviser to governments and partners at national, regional, and global levels.
- UNICEF's wide on-the-ground presence, with over 12,000 staff and nutrition programmes for children and women in more than 130 countries.
- UNICEF's nutrition mandate for every child – including children affected by humanitarian crises – through our role as sector and cluster lead agency for maternal and child nutrition.

UNICEF works to improve the quality of children's foods, food environments and food practices. Our intended result is that food systems protect, promote and support diets, services and practices that prevent child malnutrition in all its forms. This involves leveraging the policies, resources, and actors – public and private – of the food system to make food systems more accountable for improving the quality of children's food, food environments and food practices globally and locally.

UNICEF's work on food systems for children focuses on three action areas:

- **Improving children's foods** through actions in public policy, guidelines and standards, and food supply chains – including fortified foods, food supplements and therapeutic foods.
- **Improving children's food environments** where children live, learn, and meet through actions in public sector policies and programmes and in private sector products and practices.
- **Improving children's food practices** through policies, strategies and programmes that promote positive individual behaviors, caregiver practices and social norms.



# Action Area 1: Improving children's foods

**Food guidelines:** UNICEF advocates for and supports the implementation of national guidelines on breastfeeding, age-appropriate complementary feeding, nutrition of school-age children and adolescents, and maternal nutrition. We support food-based dietary guidelines that address the nutrition rights of children, adolescents and women and are environmentally sustainable.

**Food standards:** UNICEF advocates for and supports the implementation of national standards for foods aimed at children including breastmilk substitutes, complementary foods, and foods and meals for children in early childhood development centers and school-based programmes, as well as nutritionally adequate foods for children in public sector and social protection programmes.

**Fortified foods:** UNICEF advocates for and supports mandatory large-scale fortification of complementary foods for children aged 6–23 months as well as salt, cereal flour, rice, cooking oil and other context-specific foods and condiments to address nutrient intake gaps in children, adolescents and women where nutrient-poor diets and micronutrient deficiencies are common.

**Therapeutic foods:** UNICEF advocates for and supports the sustainable and cost-effective production of ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF) for children with wasting. We expand and diversify production capacity at regional and national levels to build ownership and sustainability; and facilitate the evolution of RUTF formulations to improve cost, acceptability, and effectiveness.

**Foods supplements:** UNICEF advocates for and supports the sustainable and cost-effective production of balanced protein-energy supplements for undernourished women as well as lipid-based nutrient supplements and multiple micronutrient powders for home-based fortification of young children's foods in settings where nutrient poor diets, micronutrient deficiencies, and anemia are common.

## Country highlights of UNICEF's work in improving children's foods

**In China,** UNICEF supported the development of national guidelines for improving the quality of young children's diets in infancy and early childhood. This included the updated Chinese Dietary Guidelines for Children Aged 0 to 5 Months and 6 to 23 Months and the National Infant and Young Child Feeding Core Messages to counsel and support parents, families, and communities.

**In Moldova,** UNICEF supported the development of National Food-Based Dietary Guidelines for preschools and schools based on the latest global recommendations by UNICEF, WHO and FAO. In addition, food and nutrition standards and menus for pre-schools were aligned with the Guidelines and were approved by the Ministry of Health Labor and Social Protection in 2020.

**In Tajikistan,** UNICEF is working with the national government, multiple private sector producers of salt and cereal flours, and development partners to scale-up the national Salt Iodization Programme and Flour Fortification Programme, which aim to reduce the burden of iodine deficiency, iron deficiency, anaemia and neural tube defects in children, women and communities.

**In Kenya,** UNICEF supported local production of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF). Kenya's locally produced RUTF is now integrated in the government's supply chain system for essential commodities and is used by Kenya's national programme for children with severe forms of wasting as well as by other national programmes in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

**In Ethiopia,** UNICEF is working with the University of Addis Ababa and several local private sector companies to produce egg powder as a locally-produced nutritious, safe and affordable food supplement to improve the nutrient quality of young children's diets: 2.5 grams of egg powder can meet 42 per cent of a child's daily protein requirement for less than US\$0.05.

## Action Area 2: Improving children's food environments

**Healthy foods:** UNICEF advocates for and supports public sector policies and programmes that facilitate children's access to nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable food choices, including through food subsidies and financial incentives that facilitate children's access to healthy foods and taxes and other financial disincentives that limit or discourage consumption of unhealthy and ultra-processed foods and beverages.

**Healthy water:** UNICEF advocates for and supports public sector policies and programmes that facilitate children's access to free, safe and palatable drinking water – in households, communities, neighborhoods, schools, and public spaces – as a human right and a central component of healthy, nutritious and a safe diets for children, adolescents and women.

**Food in schools:** UNICEF advocates for and supports policies, standards and services that improve the availability of nutritious, safe, and affordable foods in schools, including fortified foods. This includes policy and guidance to serve nutritious and safe meals in schools and protect children from unhealthy foods and beverages in children's food environments in and around schools.

**Food marketing:** UNICEF advocates for and supports policies that protect children from harmful food marketing practices, including through digital media. This includes the effective implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and WHO-led global recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children.

**Food labelling:** UNICEF advocates for and supports legislation that mandates consumer-friendly front-of-package labelling that discourages the consumption of processed foods containing high amounts of sugar, salt, saturated and trans-fatty acids, which contribute to excess energy intake, helping children, adolescents and families identify and choose healthy foods at point of purchase.

### Country highlights of UNICEF's work in improving children's food environments

**In Malaysia,** UNICEF joined forces with WHO to support the government adopt and implement a sugar-sweetened beverage tax. UNICEF and WHO helped generate the local evidence to show that the policy would be cost-effective in raising revenue for government programmes, reducing the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverage, and addressing the rapid rise in childhood overweight,

**In Mexico,** a study supported by UNICEF found that only 8% of schoolers had access to free and safe drinking water from school water fountains. The study supported the integration of water fountains in the Guidelines for Safe Return to School. The Study also led to the prohibition to sell/distribute sugar-sweetened beverages in the upcoming National Guideline on Food and Beverages in Schools.

**In Nepal,** UNICEF supported the Health and Education sectors with the development and implementation of the National Health and Nutrition Guidelines for School-Age Children. These guidelines set standards for the provision of nutritious and safe meals in schools, prohibiting that community schools include 'junk' food and beverages in the meals offered to children in schools.

**In Argentina and the Philippines,** UNICEF commissioned studies to map harmful marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages to children in social media and describe the strategies used by popular brands to shape what foods children prefer, request, and eat. The studies are informing national advocacy efforts to regulate the harmful marketing of food to children.

**In Uruguay,** UNICEF advocated for a consumer and child-friendly front-of-package nutrition labelling policy. UNICEF's support included joined-up technical guidance to government with FAO and PAHO, convening of ministers and decision-makers, public statements, and a social and mass media campaign highlighting the benefits of front-of-pack labelling to help families make informed decisions.



## Action Area 3: Improving children's food practices

**Feeding practices:** UNICEF supports the design and implementation of information, communication, and counselling programmes that support optimal feeding practices in infancy and early childhood including breastfeeding, age-appropriate complementary foods and feeding, and related maternal and child nutrition and care. We support women to breastfeed their children anytime and anywhere.

**Feeding data:** UNICEF strengthens national capacities to collect and analyse child feeding and nutrition data and supports its use to inform national nutrition policies and programmes. We are the custodian of the Global Database on Infant and Young Child Feeding and lead reporting on the key child nutrition indicators and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

**Food education:** UNICEF supports the design and implementation of school curricula to improve knowledge and skills about food, healthy diets, and good nutrition among school-age children and adolescents in primary and secondary education. This includes improving the capacities of teachers and school managers to deliver nutrition education and promote good nutrition.

**Food practices:** UNICEF supports the design and implementation of large-scale multi-channel social and behaviour change communication programmes that use innovative, memorable, and engaging communication approaches to promote healthy food and eating practices, leveraging the cultural and social aspirations of children, adolescents, families and communities.

**Hygiene practices:** UNICEF supports policies, strategies and programmes that aim to improve hygiene practices, particularly where undernutrition and hygiene-related diseases are prevalent. This includes social and behaviour change communication to promote hygienic food handling and handwashing with soap at critical times, as central to food preparation, adequate feeding and maternal and child nutrition.

### Country highlights of UNICEF's work in improving children's food practices

**In Pakistan,** UNICEF supported provincial governments in creating more than 11,000 mother support groups and 7,000 father support groups, reaching 1.4 million caregivers in their communities with counselling on infant and young child feeding while more than 48 million caregivers were reached with information on child nutrition and care through social media.

**In Thailand,** UNICEF provided technical support to the national government to design, plan and implement the collection and analysis of child feeding and nutrition data as part of the national Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS 6), which was fully funded by the Government of Thailand, and guided the development of recommendations for Thailand's National Nutrition Policy.

**In the Democratic Republic of Congo,** UNICEF supported the national government to integrate child feeding indicators into the national information system (DHIS-2) and strengthen the capacity of health workers to collect and analyze child feeding data in 24 of the country's 26 provinces.

**In India,** UNICEF supported the development of the national training curriculum and capacity building of teachers for the school health and nutrition programme, which is rolled out jointly by the Ministries of Health and Education. The curriculum builds children's competencies to eat healthy, read nutrition labels, avoid eating ultra-processed foods, and engage in physical activity.

**In Ecuador,** UNICEF supported a healthy habits toolkit to reach 2 million school-age children and their families with an edutainment strategy through television, radio, social media, and online platforms. The toolkit focused on promoting healthy diets, physical activity, sleep hygiene, healthy breakfasts, and COVID-19 prevention measures.

**In Indonesia,** UNICEF supported the government to reach more than 10 million people in 2020 with key messages on the importance of hand washing with soap at critical times, regular disinfection of food preparation areas, and safe food-hygiene practices by mothers and caregivers. Multiple communication channels were used including mass media, digital networks, and social media.

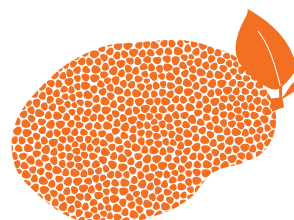








# FOUR REASONS FOR UNICEF'S LEADERSHIP AGENDA ON FOOD SYSTEMS FOR CHILDREN



## 1

### **Children's rights as an imperative.**

All children have a right to good nutrition and a sustainable planet. Current food systems do not support the diets all children need to survive, grow, develop, and learn to their full potential. Further, food systems are a major driving force behind environmental degradation and climate change, making the world children inherit increasingly unsustainable. Unhealthy and unsustainable diets undermine children's rights, everywhere.

## 2

### **Children's unique nutrition needs.**

Children have specific dietary and nutrition needs. They require a high diversity of foods and foods of higher nutrient density than adults. UNICEF data indicate that globally, two in three young children do not consume a minimally diverse diet to grow, develop, and learn to their full potential. Delivering nutritious, safe, affordable, and sustainable diets for all children must be central to the food systems transformation agenda both at national and global levels.

## 3

### **Unacceptable cost of inaction.**

The burden of child undernutrition – stunting and wasting – and micronutrient deficiencies, combined with the growing burden of overweight, obesity and diet-related diseases will result in massive individual and societal costs. In addition, because of the impact of current food systems on climate change and environmental degradation, this is the first time a global generation of children will grow up in a world made far more dangerous and uncertain.

## 4

### **Children as agents of transformation.**

Children bear the greatest burden of the detrimental effects current food systems have on diets, people, and the planet. As the future stewards of our planet, children can and must be empowered to understand the crucial role of food systems for human and planetary health. Children can and must be part of the food system transformation agenda – locally and globally – the same way they are inspired and engaged to take action against climate change and environmental degradation.

*Adapted from: Diets of children and adolescents: Unlocking current and future gains for human and planetary health. UNICEF and EAT, 2020.*



# UNICEF'S WORKFORCE: LEADING FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION FOR CHILDREN



To deliver on the Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030, UNICEF counts the largest nutrition workforce globally. In 2020, our workforce for nutrition included more than 2100 staff and consultants leading and supporting the design and implementation of policies, programmes and advocacy for maternal and child nutrition in development and humanitarian settings, across 7 regions and 130 countries worldwide. Further, more than 3,600 programme staff lead and support the design and implementation of

policies, programmes and advocacy for health, water and sanitation, education, child protection and social policy. As highlighted above, UNICEF's multisectoral mandate for children, wide on-the-ground presence, and long-standing role as a trusted adviser to national governments position UNICEF to mobilize national, regional and global partners – across public and private sectors – to advocate for and support the transformation of local and global food systems in the best interest of all children.

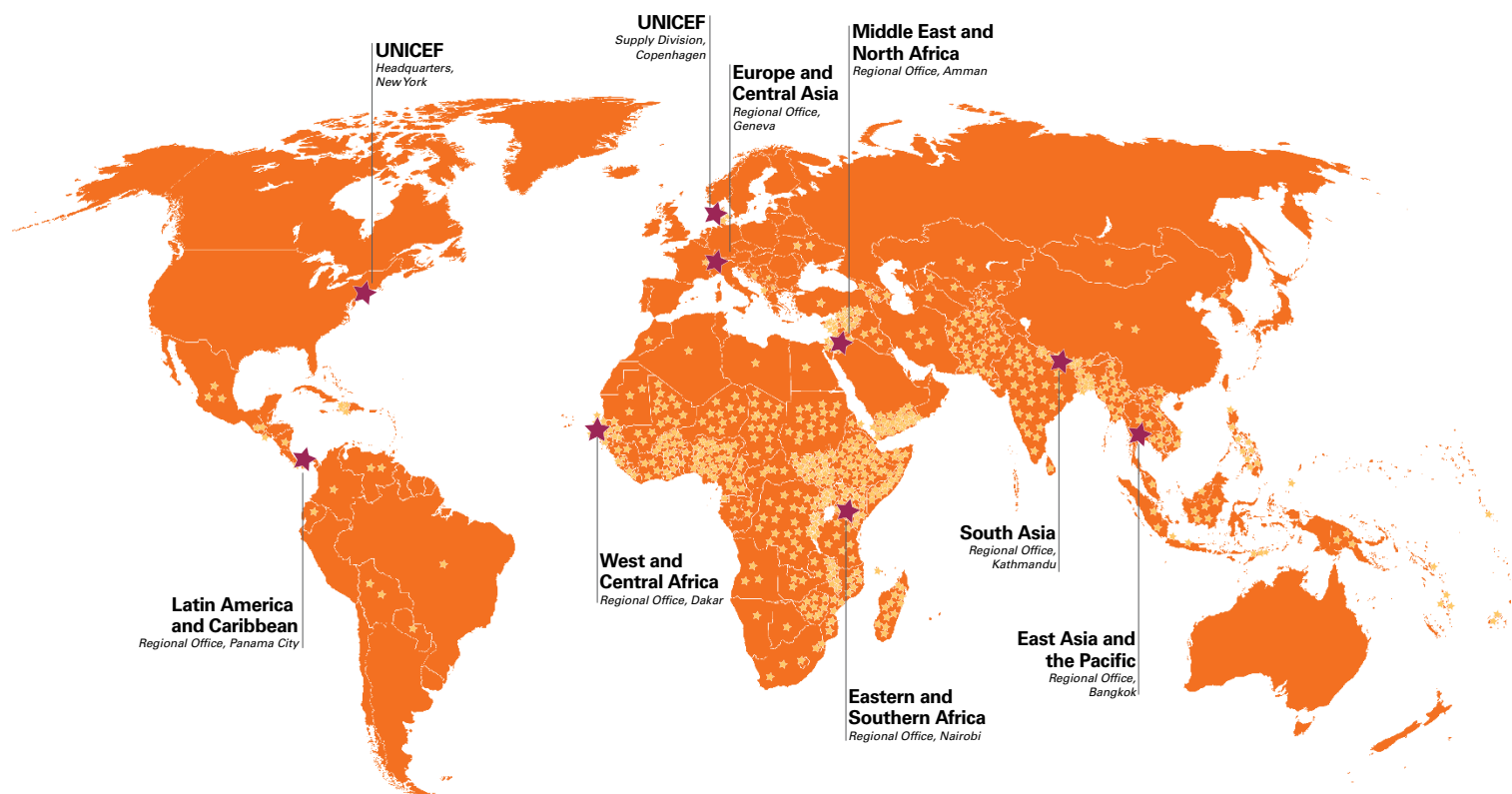


FIGURE 5  
UNICEF's global nutrition workforce, 2020

Please note: This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontier.

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