



PRESS RELEASE

Most young children in Lebanon not getting the diversity and frequency of nutrition they need to thrive

Lebanon Nutrition Sector calls for action

BEIRUT, 25 Feb 2022 – Lebanon’s Nutrition Sector group warned today that results from a recent survey of children showed a risk of an increase in malnutrition, potentially leading to life-long negative consequences. The survey found that over 94 per cent of children aged 6-23 months are not fed adequate diets, with 80 per cent not eating frequently enough and the diets of 70 per cent not diverse enough for their growth and development.

The report *Nutrition in Times of Crisis* estimates that 200,000 children under 5 in Lebanon are suffering from some form of malnutrition or micro-nutrient deficiency, including anaemia, stunting and wasting¹. Given the convergence of crises that have plunged the majority of the population into poverty, the report also warns that malnutrition could further surge unless swift action is taken.

The Lebanon Nutrition Sector, led by UNICEF and Action Against Hunger called on stakeholders from all sectors to take concerted action to scale up a comprehensive response, stressing the need to prioritize the prevention of malnutrition, and to provide treatment when prevention fails. The call to action aims to mobilize efforts to improve diets, as well as nutrition practices and services for all children under 5 and women. The Sector also highlighted the importance of meeting nutrition needs throughout the life cycle, with special attention to the period between a mother’s pregnancy and her child’s second birthday.

“The months, and now years, of compound crises have left many families in Lebanon unable to afford the nutrition their young children need, leaving them more vulnerable to malnutrition and attributable diseases and hampering their ability to learn and grow. The consequences of this preventable tragedy will be generational and irreversible unless all stakeholders take action – today, to ensure every child and every woman in Lebanon gets the nutrition they require to survive and thrive.” Ettie Higgins, UNICEF Lebanon Representative a.i..

¹Malnutrition can co-exist in children in different forms. While 7% of children are stunted (considered as chronic malnutrition), over 40% are suffering from anaemia which can originate from micronutrient deficiencies (such as iron deficiency). Micronutrient deficiencies are also called cellular hunger, meaning that children get enough energy, but their diets lack the quality needed for their growth and development.

The report's findings indicate: ²

- 7 per cent of children under age 5 are stunted – an indicator of chronic malnutrition – with rates reaching 25 per cent among Syrian refugees and 10.5 per cent in Palestinian camps.
- 41 per cent of children under 5 and 42 per cent of women of reproductive age are affected by some degree of anaemia, an indicator of both poor health and poor nutrition. Anaemia is often caused by diets with low levels of iron and other micronutrient deficiencies. Anaemia among pregnant women can have inter-generational impacts by increasing the risks of pregnancy complications, including premature birth.
- 70 per cent per cent of infants in Lebanon are not exclusively breastfed in the first six months of their lives. Breastfeeding is an important practice that provides the best start in life, protects babies against malnutrition, many childhood illnesses, and reduces the risk of newborn deaths.
- Over 94 per cent of children aged 6-23 months are not fed adequate diets, lacking the minimum diversity and meal frequency needed for their growth and development. In 60 per cent of cases, children's diets do not have sufficient vitamin A and proteins, while 80 per cent of children miss Minimum Meal Frequency³ and the diets of 70 per cent are not well diversified from five food groups. As children grow, they need a greater amount and variety of food. Poor dietary status during early childhood could be a reason for the identified levels of stunting and micronutrient deficiencies, which have irreversible lifelong impacts on brain development, cause low immunity – a major concern amid the COVID-19 pandemic – and threaten a child's survival.

When compared to 2013-2014 data, the report shows deteriorating trends for children of Syrian refugees – more of them are now stunted, more mothers are anaemic, less children are receiving the lifesaving benefits of breastmilk and almost all young children are failing to receive the diets they need to thrive.

A multisystem approach involving food, health, water, sanitation, education and social protection is needed to address malnutrition in Lebanon, including by making nutritious and healthy diets more accessible and affordable, enhancing the coverage and quality of essential nutrition services and healthy practices, and promoting healthy practices and choices across the country.

“Improving nutrition has the power to protect the health of children and their mothers by reducing disease and mortality. It improves cognitive development, school performance and physical work capacity. So, clearly, investing in nutrition not only fulfils children's right to health

² The survey was conducted in the third quarter of 2021 by Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), supported by nine partners as part of the Nutrition Sector led by UNICEF and Action Against Hunger (AAH). The nutrition sector also includes FAO, WHO, UNHCR, UNRWA, WFP, International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), Mercy USA and Save the Children

³ Defined as twice a day for breastfed infants aged 6-8 months, three times for breastfed children aged 9-23 months and four times for non-breastfed children aged 6-23 months.

and nutrition, but it's also a smart, cost-effective investment in the socio-economic development of Lebanon.” - Amirhossein Yarparvar, Lebanon Nutrition Sector Coordinator

“Scaling-up nutrition requires a multi-sectoral partnership to support the government while collectively addressing the direct and underlying causes of malnutrition and strengthening capacities of nutrition actors in Lebanon” . - Mira El Mokdad, Deputy Nutrition Sector Coordinator.

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