

## EVENT SUMMARY

### **Integrating Essential Nutrition Actions in Universal Health Coverage** Unofficial side event on the margins of the 78th UN General Assembly

#### **Background**

No country is immune to the burden of malnutrition. Despite continuous improvements in health outcomes and economic development, rates of malnutrition remain unacceptably high and progress towards reducing its burden is too slow.<sup>1</sup> Mainstreaming and scaling up nutrition services within health systems would save lives, reduce healthcare spending and accelerate progress towards the SDG agenda, especially SDG2 and SDG3. Essential nutrition actions are crucial at all levels of health service delivery. The World Health Organization's *Essential Nutrition Actions* publication provides a compilation of actions to address malnutrition in all its forms, in a concise and user-friendly format to help in decision-making processes for integration of nutrition interventions throughout the life course.<sup>2</sup> Many nutrition interventions are highly cost-effective to prevent disease and reduce mortality. While these interventions should be a core component of all comprehensive health systems, today they represent only a tiny portion of national health budgets. Research shows that nutrition is lagging far behind the coverage of traditional health services. The median number of trained nutrition professionals is just 2.3 per 100,000 people, and pre-service nutrition training in the curricula of health workers averages less than 20 hours. As a result, the health workforce is underequipped to deliver high-quality and effective nutrition care.

During the UN General Assembly's 78<sup>th</sup> session, a high-level meeting (HLM) on UHC was convened to accelerate progress towards the achievement of universal health coverage by 2030. In support of the HLM on UHC, the Scaling up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN-Nutrition Secretariat hosted a special side-event, co-sponsored by the Governments of Bangladesh, France and Japan. The event brought together experts and leaders to discuss the urgent need, and explore opportunities for integrating essential nutrition actions into UHC.

#### **Overview of the event**

The event brought together government representatives from Bangladesh, France, Ghana, Japan, Indonesia and the UK as well as nutrition leaders of Amref Health Africa, Helen Keller Intl, Nutrition International, the SUN Movement, UN-Nutrition and WHO. Each shared their experiences, successes, opportunities and challenges in the integration of essential nutrition actions into universal health coverage. Echoing through the event was the universal agreement that the Essential Nutrition Actions provide a focused guide on what health systems need to achieve the health and economic benefits of eliminating malnutrition in all its forms. This was coupled with the shared concerns that current progress on their implementation is too slow, with the resounding need to strengthen dedicated financial investment for nutrition, workforce capacity and political commitment to accelerate country-led implementation. Powerful advocacy tools, such as nutrition investment cases, youth advocates, community ownership and strong data, are emerging to realize this shared vision and must be utilized to progress the commitment to improved nutrition within the upcoming resolution on UHC.

#### **Session details**

- The event was opened by its Moderator, **Dr Francesco Branca**, Director of Food Safety and Nutrition at WHO, emphasizing the burden at hand and the need to systematically address malnutrition through our health systems. **Afshan Khan**, SUN Global Coordinator, then set the scene for the event, speaking of the existing burden and economic and social imperative to

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<sup>1</sup> The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023: <https://www.fao.org/publications/home/fao-flagship-publications/the-state-of-food-security-and-nutrition-in-the-world/en>

<sup>2</sup> Essential nutrition actions: mainstreaming nutrition through the life-course: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241515856>

invest in robust, inclusive and sustainable health and nutrition systems to work as a catalyst for human development and achievement of the SDGs. Emphasizing the comprehensiveness of the Essential Nutrition Actions provides us with clear action points for nutrition, investments and monitoring must then support the systematic implementation of these, and should be supported by the declaration resulting from the HLM UHC.

- As co-sponsors of the event, **Ambassador Akohori Takeshi** of Japan reminded of the importance of nutrition awarded during the G7 Hiroshima Summit, and the Tokyo Compact emerging from the 2021 Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit, featuring over 390 commitments and 27 billion USD pledged to nutrition, as well as 2.8 billion USD committed by the Government of Japan who are dedicated to achieving UHC and improving nutrition. **Christophe Guilhou**, Director of Sustainable Development, Ministry of Foreign Affairs shared France's commitment to nutrition, prioritizing focus on the first 1000 days of life, hosting the 2024–25 N4G Summit, as well as focused activities and investment on improving nutrition internationally through its foreign aid programme. He also indicated that there will be a Sustainable Development summit, with sports and nutrition as a core focus, prior to the 2024 Olympics. **Dr Md Anwar Hossain**, Senior Secretary, Health Services Division with the Bangladeshi Ministry of Health and Family Welfare also emphasized the need for multisectoral action to address the drivers of malnutrition, and their successes in implementing ENA's to achieve substantial reductions in the levels of malnutrition impacting women and children.
- **Stineke Oenema**, Executive Secretary of UN-Nutrition, then provided an overview of the newly released nutrition investment cases. Developed in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), WHO and the UN-Nutrition Secretariat, as convenor of the Nutrition working group of the UNATF, nutrition investment cases offer a powerful advocacy tool, allowing governments to assess the health and economic return on investment in the implementation/scaling up of 20 ENA's. The concept has been tested with a Zimbabwean case study, with hopes to broaden the ENA's included and for Member States to request case studies in support of the integration of ENAs into UHC.
- The panel discussion was then opened by **Ghana**, represented by Dr Baffour Awuah, Director Technical Coordination Directorate, who shared actions Ghana is taking to implement ENAs to improve early years nutrition, and tackle food systems drivers of malnutrition. He also shared the challenges they face in enforcing regulations, limited staff capacity and continually high rates of malnutrition. **Indonesia**, represented by Pak Amich Alhumami, the Deputy Minister for Human Development, Society and Cultural Affairs, also shared their progress in mobilizing resources for nutrition by strengthening primary health care, which is a priority within the National Development Plan. He also recognized responsibility of multiple government departments, supported by allocated budgeting at the national and provisional levels. From the **UK**, Chris Carter, Head of Human Development Department, shared the centrality of nutrition to the UK's work in global health. He urged other donor and partner countries to follow suit recognizing that while there is no single silver bullet solution, strengthening primary healthcare to ensure the provision of a package of costed, nutrition services is crucial to tackle malnutrition and reach the most vulnerable. He also shared an update on the Nutrition Match Fund, launched in 2021, which has now raised 12 million British pounds towards childhood wasting. In November, the UK will host a global food security and nutrition event to bring together global leaders and nutrition experts with the goal of galvanizing funding and increasing action on malnutrition. Dr Mandana Arabi, Vice President of **Nutrition International**, emphasized the importance of balancing preventative and curative services. He also underscored the importance of the nutrition community speaking with one voice and advocating for the multiple benefits of nutrition interventions over the course of time and the reinvestment of financial gains from fiscal policies into nutrition interventions and identifying specific country needs to foster investments. Rolf Klemm, Vice President of

Nutrition at **Helen Keller Intl**, also highlighted neglect on lifesaving nutrition interventions within healthcare systems, as reported in the [2021 Lancet series](#). He supported the need to bring clarity to nutrition for policymakers through a shared voice on the ENAs and shared the work of Helen Keller Intl in scaling up maternal child health ENA, with encouraging progress on coverage surveys to improve data and inspiring stories of Nepal's female community volunteers breaking records in the delivery of essential nutrition services. The question was then put to Desta Lakew, Global Partnership Lead for Africa of **Amref Health Africa**, can community demand generation accelerate implementation of the ENAs. Desta shared their work in empowering communities with knowledge on the importance of nutrition during the first 1000 days to drive forward action. This included training community health workers in the delivery of services and engaging governments to operationalize levers of change, as well as the essential role of data collection, utilizing mobile technology to create community-led accountability mechanisms to keep leaders accountable for their commitments.

- The **moderator** summarized the key messages of the panel, emphasizing the resounding focus on investment. This includes investment already there by countries and development partners and showing great impact, and the investment needed to scale up the country-led and prioritized ENAs which are science based and for quality services.
- **Pierre Cooke Jr.**, youth representative of the Healthy Caribbean Coalition and SUN Lead Group Member, then provided a call to action. Pierre called on leaders to engage with and mentor youth today to secure a future of moral, strategic, political and leadership, building on opportunities such as those awarded by the SUN Lead Group. Events such as this provide crucial information and awareness on nutrition that youth can feed into their work and their countries' leadership. Young people need to have a high-level voice at the key nutrition summits. The Caribbean is leading the way with training for youth advocates to speak to ministers of health, prime ministers and presidents, delivering calls to action to drive forward effective policies – including the establishment of school nutrition policies in Barbados. Youth must be part of the discussions that impact their lives and shape their future. They have the freedom to speak without restriction and powerful mechanisms for sharing information to inspire change. Following this session, Pierre planned to utilize the information shared to make the case for investing in nutrition within Barbados and the wider Caribbean region.

**Dr Li Ailan**, Assistant Director-General of Universal Health Coverage, Healthier Populations with WHO, then provided closing remarks, thanking everyone for their commitment to nutrition. He reflected on the persistent challenges faced in implementing ENA's, such as low numbers of and data on nutrition professionals, and low levels of investment in nutrition. Today's session shared many positive examples we can learn from, helping to accelerate progress. There is no UHC without good nutrition.