

Media Update

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UNICEF

PRESS RELEASE

UNICEF: An additional 6.7 million children under 5 could suffer from wasting this year due to COVID-19

As part of its Reimagine campaign, UNICEF calls for accelerated action to prevent and treat malnutrition caused by pandemic as humanitarian community appeals for \$2.4 billion to improve maternal and child nutrition

NEW YORK/ISLAMABAD, 27 JULY 2020 – An additional 6.7 million children under the age of five could suffer from wasting – and therefore become dangerously undernourished – in 2020 as a result of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF warned today.

According to [an analysis published in *The Lancet*](#), 80 per cent of these children would be from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Over half would be from South Asia alone.

In Pakistan, burden of wasting (acute malnutrition) in children under five years remain very high, at 17.7% (GoP and UNICEF, 2018) above the internationally agreed-upon emergency threshold (15%). The annual burden of wasting is estimated at 5 million children.

“It’s been seven months since the first COVID-19 cases were reported and it is increasingly clear that the repercussions of the pandemic are causing more harm to children than the disease itself,” said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. “Household poverty and food insecurity rates have increased. Essential nutrition services and supply chains have been disrupted. Food prices have soared. As a result, the quality of children’s diets has gone down and malnutrition rates will go up.”

Wasting is a life-threatening form of malnutrition, which makes children too thin and weak, and puts them at greater risk of dying, poor growth, development and learning. According to [UNICEF](#), even before the COVID-19 pandemic,

47 million children were already wasted in 2019. Without urgent action, the global number of children suffering from wasting could reach almost 54 million over the course of the year. This would bring global wasting to levels not seen this millennium.

COVID-19 will also increase other forms of malnutrition in children and women, including stunting, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity as a result of poorer diets and the disruption of nutrition services.

Pakistan is already facing triple burden of malnutrition. It has the highest numbers of stunted children in the world after India and Nigeria. Approximately 12 million children are stunted (40.2%) countrywide. Infant and Young Child Feeding practices are suboptimal with only half of the children aged under 6 months are exclusively breastfed, and only less than one in 20 children (3.6%) receive complementary feeding. Beside high undernutrition rates, overweight (9.5%) is emerging as a serious health hazard among young children, increasing from 5% in 2011 to 9.5% in 2018. Also, micronutrient deficiencies are highly prevalent among children. More than half of Pakistani children (53.7%) are anemic.

UNICEF reports from the early months of the pandemic suggest a 30 per cent overall reduction in the coverage of essential – and often life-saving – nutrition services. Pakistan too faced some challenges in the continuation of nutrition service during early days of the COVID-19 outbreak. Partial lockdowns have led to the disruption of essential health and nutrition services.

Over 250 million children globally are missing the full benefits of vitamin A supplementation due to COVID-19. Pakistan also missed its first round of Vitamin A supplementation campaign in April 2020 due to COVID 19 outbreak leaving approximately 36 million children (6 months to 59 months) without vitamin A supplementation for first half of the year 2020.

Humanitarian agencies immediately need USD \$2.4 billion to protect maternal and child nutrition in the most vulnerable countries from now until the end of the year. The heads of the four United Nations agencies appeal to governments, the public, donors and the private sector to protect children's right to nutrition by:

- **Safeguarding access to nutritious, safe and affordable diets** as a cornerstone of the response to COVID-19 by protecting food producers, processors and retailers; discouraging trade bans; and designating food markets as essential services;

- **Investing decisively in support for maternal and child nutrition** by protecting breastfeeding, preventing the inappropriate marketing of infant formula, and securing children and women’s access to nutritious and diverse foods;
- **Re-activating and scaling up services for the early detection and treatment of child wasting** while expanding other life-protecting nutrition services;
- **Maintaining the provision of nutritious and safe school meals** by reaching vulnerable children through home delivery, take-home rations, cash or vouchers when schools are closed; and
- **Expanding social protection to safeguard access to nutritious diets** and essential services among the poorest and most affected households, including access to fortified foods.

UNICEF’s [Reimagine](#) campaign aims to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from becoming a lasting crisis for children, especially the most vulnerable children. Through the campaign, UNICEF is issuing an urgent appeal to parents, governments, the public, donors and the private sector to join UNICEF as we seek to respond, recover and reimagine a world currently besieged by the coronavirus:

- **Respond.** We must act now to stop the disease from spreading, help the sick, and protect first responders on the frontlines risking their own lives to save others.
- **Recover.** Even when the pandemic slows, each country will have to continue to work to mitigate the knock-on effects on children, and address the damage inflicted. Communities will also have to work together, and across borders to rebuild and prevent a return of the disease.
- **Reimagine.** If we have learned anything from COVID-19, it’s that our systems and policies must protect people, all the time, not just in the event of a crisis. As the world recovers from the pandemic, now is the time to lay the groundwork for building back better.

“We cannot allow children to be the overlooked victims of the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Fore. “We must simultaneously think both short and long term, so that we not only address the challenges posed by the pandemic and its

secondary impacts on children, but also chart a brighter future for children and young people.”

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About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world’s toughest places, to reach the world’s most disadvantaged children. Across 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone. For more information about UNICEF and its work for children, visit www.unicef.org. [For more information about COVID-19, visit www.unicef.org/coronavirus](http://www.unicef.org/coronavirus)

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