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- Press release -

Child malnutrition: a hidden crisis which threatens the global economy.

Geneva - A new global survey shows that, following year of rocketing food prices, nearly half of surveyed families are forced to cut back on food and children do not have enough food to eat. Save the Children released the new report on 15th February 2012 through a series of launch events around the world. In Geneva, a global capital for nutrition policy, the occasion is marked by an event gathering senior figures, drawing attention to the need for committed action around the world.

The new report entitled "A life free from hunger: Tackling Child Malnutrition," highlights the difficulties families are facing in countries already struggling with high rates of malnutrition. The report also notes that rising food prices and malnutrition are putting future global progress on reducing child mortality at risk.

Even before recent spikes in food prices, many of the world's poorest children have already been surviving on sparse, low-cost diets dominated by basic staples such as white rice, maize or cassava, which have very low nutritional value¹.

The chief executive of Save the Children, Jasmine Whitbread, said: "Imagine you were a parent who couldn't give your children the kinds of food that will help him grow and thrive. In recent years, the world has made dramatic progress in reducing child deaths, down from 12 to 7.6 million², but this momentum will stall if we fail to tackle malnutrition".

Malnutrition is the underlying cause of one third of the 7.6 million child deaths each year before their fifth birthday. The challenge is clear: the world cannot achieve its Millennium Development Goals to reduce child mortality by two thirds by 2015, unless it addresses child malnutrition.

Meeting this challenge is doubly urgent because among children who survive, chronic malnutrition causes devastating and irreversible damage. Lack of nutritious food, coupled with infection and illness, means their bodies and brains don't develop properly. At least 170 million children are affected by stunting.

Save the Children warns that if no concerted action is taken, half a billion children will be physically and mentally stunted over the next 15 years, their lives blighted by malnutrition³.

Tackling malnutrition is not only a moral obligation, but good economics too. Left unchecked, malnutrition can result in a 2-3 % loss in national income. Conversely, proven low-cost nutritional interventions during childhood can increase individual adult earnings by 20%. Well-nourished children are less prone to disease and illness, thus lowering the cost of health care. And in an interconnected world economic progress in the poorest countries will benefit the whole global economy.

¹ Save the Children: 'Hungry for Change: An eight step costed plan of action to tackle global child hunger' (2009)

² UNICEF: 'Levels and Trends in Child Mortality: Estimates Developed by the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation' (2011)

³ Save the Children: 'A Life Free From Hunger: Tackling Child Malnutrition' (2012)

Dr. Carole Presern, Director of the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health notes that “the international community, through the Global Strategy for Women’s and Children’s health has demonstrated a commitment to improving nutrition of pregnant women and children with a view to reducing mortality and morbidity. It is important that this commitment materializes into action and that we see results quickly. We need a way to systematically measure what is happening and the Commission on Information and Accountability for Women’s and Children’s Health has given us a way forward.”

Save the Children is calling for national and international action by political leaders and the public to tackle the global malnutrition crisis head on by investing in solutions. The organisation recommends a package of basic measures that can reverse the trend of malnutrition and reduce vulnerability to volatile food prices.

- To make the crisis visible by setting global and national targets to reduce stunting in countries hardest hit.
- To increase funding for direct nutritional interventions, such as breastfeeding and a fortification diet, that could save millions of lives.
- To invest in effective social protection policies that reach vulnerable families and support small-scale farmers by ensuring that their agricultural policies aim to improve nutrition.
- To use the G8 and G20 meetings to galvanise political leadership on hunger and build a plan of concrete action to tackle malnutrition.

Jasmine Whitbread said: "Every hour of every day, 300 children die because of malnutrition, often simply because they don't have access to the basic, nutritious food that we take for granted in rich countries. By acting on hunger and malnutrition, world leaders have the chance to change this for millions of children across the world."

ENDS

Notes to editors:

Save the Children’s survey results showed that: in India, one of the world’s biggest boom economies and where half of all children are stunted, more than a quarter of parents surveyed said their children went without food sometimes or often; in Nigeria, nearly a third of parents had pulled their children out of school so they could work to help pay for food; in Bangladesh, 87% of those surveyed said the price of food had been their most pressing concern in 2010.

The survey was carried out by Globescan, international polling agency, in December 2011 and January 2012 in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Peru and Nigeria. These countries are the home of half of the world’s 170m million stunted children.

A randomly-selected sample of over 1000 adults over 18 years was interviewed in each country spanning both urban and rural areas. The data were weighted by income group and male and female. The results are nationally representative. In all but Bangladesh, the interviews were carried out face to face. In Bangladesh, where the penetration rate of mobile phone among adults is between 80 and 90%, the interviews were carried out through random direct dialling.

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