

135 Improve young children's diets through a systematic analysis and a systems approach

The Solution: Countries need to design programmes to improve the diets of young children based on a systematic analysis of the determinants and drivers of young children's diets, to deliver an essential package of interventions through the food, health, and social protection systems. This solution aims to propose an effective approach to achieve that goal.

Source(s) of the Solution: Proposed by UNICEF (with the support of Micronutrient Forum and GIZ).

Problem addressed within food systems: The poor quality of young children's diets is a critical determinant of malnutrition in all its forms. Globally, barely one in four children is eating the nutritious and diverse diets required to grow, develop, and learn to their full potential. Yet, efforts to deliver interventions to improve young children's diets are scattered, siloed, and often not grounded in sound situation analyses. Interventions to improve young children's diets are primarily delivered through health systems. However, improving young children's diets requires leveraging the three key systems – food, health, and social protection – with the potential to address the barriers to the three main determinants of young children's diets: food, services, and practices.

While it is increasingly understood that food systems play a central role in providing nutritious, safe, affordable, and sustainable diets for young children, their role in improving young children's diets is often not assessed as part of country situation analysis. Moreover, the situation analysis often does not dig deeper to understand the drivers of poor diets among children. As a result, the actions that are implemented do not address the context-specific drivers of children's diets. In the case of food systems, the actions delivered are often not child-centred and, in most contexts, do not support food systems in guiding caregivers of young children towards healthy diets. An approach that is focused on evidence-based, context-specific interventions for young children delivered across the relevant systems – food, health, and social protection – in a coordinated manner is critical for accelerating progress on young children's diets at scale and with equity and ultimately ensuring children's right to good nutrition.

How this solution will address that problem: If a country undertakes a systematic analysis of barriers across all the three determinants of young children's diets (food, services, and practices) using the approach proposed, their priority actions to improve young children's diets will address the context-specific barriers to healthy diets. These priority actions will likely be required to be delivered through one or more systems (food, health, and social protection) with coordinated action by several actors. This, in turn, will lead to programming for young children that is child-centred and addresses the critical issues causing poor quality of children's diets. Delivery of evidence-based priority actions through the food system and its supportive systems—health and social protection—will also lead to improved coverage of essential interventions for improving young children's diets.

To facilitate the roll-out of this systematic and systems approach to improving young children's diets, UNICEF has developed an action framework specifically focused on the diets of young children, which is described in [this programming guidance](#). UNICEF is supporting governments and partners in applying this systematic analysis and systems approach to improve young children's diets across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Our vision is to implement it across all seven UNICEF regions to contribute to the SDGs by reducing all forms of childhood malnutrition.

Solution's alignment to the 'game changing and systemic solution' criteria: The application of this approach would facilitate a rapid shift from scattered, siloed, and stand-alone interventions for young children to an integrated child-centric systems approach grounded in context-specific analysis. This approach would serve as a tool to strengthen the capacity and accountability of food systems to

improve the quality of children's foods, food environments, and food practices. Guided by the Innocenti Framework on Food Systems for Children and Adolescents, this approach facilitates evidence-based actions by public and private stakeholders in the food system. The approach is actionable, and its application has the potential to accelerate results at scale and with equity.

Existing evidence: The systematic analysis and systems approach to improving children's diets have been adopted across Africa and Asia to refocus regional and country-level efforts to improve the quality of young children's diets. UNICEF regional offices - in close collaboration with the government and partners (UN Agencies, international and local NGOs, and academia) - have undertaken regional landscape analyses to understand the status and drivers of young children's diets. This systematic analysis has guided the prioritisation of regional and country-level actions to improve young children's diets through the food, health, and social protection systems. The uptake of this approach, its application, and its use across five regions and over 15 countries by government and partners to prioritise a systems approach to improving young children's diets show the potential of this game-changing solution.

Current/likely political support: This systematic analysis and systems approach to improving young children's diets has been adopted and endorsed by the Southern African Development Committee and their member states as well as by the national governments and regional partners in East Asia and Pacific, South Asia, and Western and Central Africa. With 2021 as 'The Nutrition for Growth Year of Action', the political support for improving early childhood nutrition through the food system is high. The FSS can support efforts to mobilise new policy and financial commitments, while positioning nutrition as an essential development priority.

Moreover, this solution is timely. With just one in four children eating a nutritious and diverse diet and lagging progress in improving the quality of young children's diets over the last decades across countries, regions, and globally, there is an urgent need to seize every opportunity to accelerate progress on young children's diet quality. Food systems have a key role to play in improving the diets of young children and the FSS provides a timely opportunity to leverage the discourse on food systems to advocate for systematic analysis and a systems approach for improving young children's diets. Further, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on maternal and child nutrition, and the global nutrition community needs to be able to come together to provide decisive, coordinated, and impactful responses to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the progress made to reach the SDGs.

Contexts where this is well/not well suited: This approach is suited for all contexts, as it allows for analysis and prioritising actions based on the country context.