

Policy Recommendations Adopted by 33rd Session of the COMCEC

- **Developing and implementing nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions, especially towards women of reproductive age from vulnerable groups**

Rationale: Nutritional status of women at the time of conception and during pregnancy is of particular importance both for the health of the mother and for ensuring healthy fetal growth and development. Neonates with fetal growth restriction are also at substantially increased risk of being stunted at 24 months and of development of some types of non-communicable diseases in adulthood. Furthermore, good nutrition early in life is essential for children to attain their developmental potential. Yet, 27% of all births in low and middle income countries are of low weight. Individual counselling and group-wise education for mothers have been demonstrated to have positive impacts on improving nutritional status of women at the time of conception and during pregnancy. Moreover, providing maternity conveniences at the workplace for pregnant women is an important nutrition-sensitive intervention that help improve the future prospects of the baby.

Proven nutrition-specific interventions aimed at improving mothers' nutrition status include iron and folic acid supplementation, calcium supplementation, and iodine supplementation and fortification (iodised salt). Multiple micronutrient deficiencies often exist in low and middle income countries and need to be addressed through multiple micronutrient supplementations. Furthermore, maternal wasting and food insecurity need to be addressed through balanced energy and protein supplementation. Such nutrition specific interventions would reduce malnutrition up to 15%.

- **Improving infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices**

Rationale: Poor IYCF practices, including inadequate breastfeeding contribute to the high levels of malnutrition. WHO guidelines state that children should be breastfed within 1 hour of birth and exclusively breastfed for 6 months. Mother milk shall be provided up to 2 years in conjunction with complementary feeding. Labor laws shall be implemented in such a way that encourages these requirements.

Beyond this period, complimentary foods should be introduced in line with the guidelines on minimum acceptable diet, which accounts for both meal frequency and dietary diversity. Preventive zinc supplementation, vitamin A supplementation and iron supplementation for infants and young children should also be encouraged. On the other hand, regulation of mother-milk substitutes effectively and preventing false-marketing of unhealthy food are also important implementation issues.

Interventions to increase knowledge of and positive attitudes towards recommended feeding practices and dispelling harmful beliefs are needed to ensure optimum nutrition of infants and young children. In this respect, behavioral change communication – in the form of individual counselling for primary caregivers/mothers – can have a considerable positive effect on nutrition, if properly implemented. Moreover, developing IYCF integrated curriculum for health provider education programmes and establishing IYCF counselling and other support services in primary

health care facilities can enable the poor segments of the societies to reach necessary knowledge on appropriate feeding practices.

Malnutrition in the form of child obesity could be a problem as much as undernutrition. These together forms the double burden of malnutrition. It is crucial to put in place an action plan to fight the scourge of childhood obesity that affects several Islamic countries.

- **Ensuring universal access to healthcare, safe water and sanitation, and launching educational campaigns on infectious diseases to eliminate all forms of undernutrition**

Rationale: Infections lead to loss of appetite and reduced food intake, as well as a malabsorption of nutrients and metabolic losses, and are a direct cause of malnutrition. Moreover, there is a clear link between a range of micronutrient deficiencies and risks of infection: vitamin A deficiency, for instance, increases risks of severe diarrhea, malaria and measles severity and child mortality. Hence these two mutual effects form a vicious cycle. This calls for wide micronutrient supplementation of children as well as widespread fortification of staple food (such as wheat flour) with iron, zinc, vitamin and water-soluble vitamins.

Poor access to safe sanitation, drinking water and healthcare are also significantly associated with heightened vulnerability to infectious and water-borne diseases, eventually leading to acute and chronic malnutrition. For instance, 90% of all deaths from diarrhea are attributable to lack of access to safe drinking, water and sanitation, and poor hygiene practices. Protecting children from infectious diseases requires increasing access to safe drinking water, sanitation and health through investment in infrastructures and planning (thereby eradicate open defecation), effective and wide-spread vaccination programs and behavioral interventions aimed at improving hygiene practices (such as systematic handwashing with soap after toilet use).

- **Providing access to safe and nutritious food for all with community-based initiatives and by forming resilient capacities for food-security**

Rationale: Consistent access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food is a fundamental human right, and is necessary to eradicate malnutrition. In situations of acute or chronic food insecurity, scaling up the coverage of food aid interventions to reach the poor – especially in remote, rural areas - is crucial to avoid under-nutrition, hunger, and starvation. Community-based programs that leverage local food production (for example by expanding house-gardening practices) and expand the capacities of local food storage facilities are important for increasing access to food and reducing food prices.

Due to natural and man-made disasters, some countries need emergency relief on a wide scale to prevent millions of children suffering from acute malnutrition. Despite actions taken by the international community, the level of emergency assistance that reach vulnerable countries often fall short of the requirements. It is also more cost-effective to support resilience and early responses to crises than to rely on emergency interventions once large-scale crises have unfolded. All the stakeholders including governments, international organizations and other donors should take steps for funding and allocating resources.

It is also important to ensure availability and access to safe and nutritious food outside of emergency contexts. Cash transfer programs can have the potential to improve food security for poor households, whereas raising awareness of what nutritious foods are, and ensuring affordability of these foods are critical to avoid both under- and over-nutrition.

- **Improving access of poor and disadvantaged children to education through eliminating/reducing school fees and by developing conditional cash transfer and school feeding programmes**

Rationale: Children living in poorer households are more likely to be out of school compared to children living in richer households. Lack of proper education is strongly associated with a higher likelihood of remaining poor in the later periods of life. Making education more affordable thus is an ample opportunity to save these children out of this vicious cycle. As a good example, school fee abolition has been adopted in a number of countries in recent decades and this has led to increases in enrolment rates.

Conditional cash transfer programmes also prove to be an effective policy tool to increase enrolment rates. They provide financial support directly to households, mothers or children in order to achieve this certain goal. In cases where families do not have the necessary financial means and motivation, providing a financial transfer on condition that the children keep going to school creates a strong incentive for school attendance.

School feeding programmes on the other hand fulfil two important purposes. First, they encourage families to send their children to school. Even the parents might not put a great emphasis on education per se and hence are not well-motivated to send their children to school, they would care for their nourishment. Second, better nourishment leads to better concentration of students in classes, which improves the educational achievement.

Therefore, making schools free, providing conditional cash transfers and school feeding programs for disadvantaged children can enhance school enrolment and continuity of education.

- **Enabling access of children in rural and remote areas by establishing new schools or providing free transportation for the children living in these regions**

Rationale: Rural areas and urban slums have a greater likelihood to lack sufficient number of schools. Moreover, the dispersed locations of schools in rural areas necessitate much greater amount of travel. Schools in rural areas or disadvantaged regions also lack necessary number of trained teachers and sufficient amounts of education materials.

Hence, building new schools or modifying existing buildings as schools as well as providing free transportation and pocket money to children to allow them to reach the schools that are closest and to motivate their parents to send them to school are important. Also making rural and remote areas attractive for teachers by incentives stands as another policy option. Moreover, improving the quality of education by recruiting sufficient number of well-trained and motivated teachers, and upgrading the school resources are necessary.

- **Increasing access to inclusive education for children including those having disabilities by formulation of necessary political and legal framework as well as by providing them better assistance in the school environment**

Rationale: Children with disabilities are more likely to be marginalized and discriminated in almost every aspect of life, specifically in education and employment. The likelihood of a disabled child being out-of-school is substantial.

For this reason, inclusive education with clear steps to be followed should be promoted in national plans and legislation. Afterwards, it should be ensured that these goals work in practice by means of infrastructure development to accommodate disabled children. Teachers also need to be trained to increase awareness surrounding disabilities. Innovative policies previously employed in some OIC countries such as sending teachers to disabled students or initiating vocational programs suited for students with disabilities shall be increased.

- **Prioritizing gender equality and equity in access to education**

Rationale: While gender disparities in educational attendance have narrowed globally, girls are still more likely to be out of school. Around the world 8.1 percent of boys are out of school as opposed to 9.7 percent of girls at the primary school age.

Improving women's education has positive impact on economic growth and employment outcomes, as well as incurring positive effects for the society in general. Female education contributes to a better home environment for child development. More educated women tend to follow a better diet which also ensures children are well-nourished. Children of better educated mothers are also more likely to attain higher levels of education. Therefore, gender equality in education should be given place as a priority in national strategies and plans, and girls should be targeted specifically in the education programmes.

- **Mobilizing and optimizing more financial resources and human capital towards improving the quality of education**

Rationale: Receiving a good quality education is important in achieving later life outcomes and reaching one's full potential. Spending on education is positively correlated with learning outcomes. An adequate financing of the education system is important for providing children with necessary learning environment and materials. Inability of schools to provide a good environment for children could also affect household demand negatively.

Education is not a priority in the budgets of many member countries. Teacher shortages, teachers' levels of education and their absence from the classrooms are some of the challenges observed in the OIC particularly in rural and remote areas. More than half of the OIC countries spend less than 15 percent of their budget on education. On the other hand, allocating more financial resource solely does not guarantee rapid development in quality, which requires serious investments in human capital through specific programs. Therefore, the share of education spending in GDP can be increased gradually to the extent possible to address the challenges in terms of both education quality and physical conditions especially in rural and remote areas. Resources of the IDB can be utilized by the member countries in this regard.

Provision of life-skills training as well as technical and vocational education is also important for students with disadvantages since these students are generally more inclined to pursue vocational education and training instead of a purely academic path. Therefore, more financial resources for the programs in skills training and vocational education can be allocated by the member countries.