

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE 9<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF THE COMCEC POVERTY ALLEVIATION WORKING GROUP**

The Poverty Alleviation Working Group (PAWG) held its 9<sup>th</sup> Meeting on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017 in Ankara with the theme of “*Malnutrition in the OIC Member Countries: A Trap for Poverty*”. During the Meeting, the participants discussed some crucial policy issues about reducing malnutrition in the OIC Member Countries. The policy advices presented below have been identified in light of the main findings of the research report prepared specifically for the Meeting and the responses of the Member Countries to the policy questions which were sent by the COMCEC Coordination Office in advance of the Meeting.

### ***Policy Advice 1: 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%.

### ***Policy Advice 2: 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.

***Policy Advice 3: 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 hand-washing with soap after toilet use).

***Policy Advice 4: 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.

**Instruments to Realize the Policy Advices:**

**COMCEC Poverty Alleviation Working Group:** In its subsequent meetings, the Working Group may elaborate on the above-mentioned policy areas in a more detailed manner.

**COMCEC Project Funding:** Under the COMCEC Project Funding, the COMCEC Coordination Office issues calls for project proposals each year. With the COMCEC Project Funding, the member countries participating in the Working Groups can submit multilateral cooperation projects to be financed through grants by the COMCEC Coordination Office. For realizing above-mentioned policy recommendations, the member countries can utilize the COMCEC Project Funding facility. These projects may include organization of seminars, training programs, study visits, exchange of experts, workshops and preparation of analytical studies, needs assessments and training materials/documents, etc.