

Joint statement on the need for an indicator on childhood wasting in the Sustainable Development Goals

1. This September world leaders will adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a new set of targets agreed upon by UN member states that will build upon the ambition of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
2. The Rio+20 outcome document made clear that the SDGs would “focus on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development.”¹ No single effort is more central to attaining sustainable development than efforts to improve people’s nutrition status, especially of children.
3. Through the Open Working Group (OWG) proposal the SDGs build upon the ambition of the MDGs by including nutrition among the pivotal goals and targets of the SDGs. Target 2.2, includes wasting as follows: *“by 2030 end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving by 2025 the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, and older persons.”*
4. Considering that the SDG targets will frame the global development agenda and policies for the next 15 years, it is of the utmost importance that decision makers ensure this inspirational global agenda for sustainable development is complimented and monitored by statistically robust indicators.
5. The SDG process is an opportunity to learn from the MDGs, particularly in regards to indicators. The underweight indicator used in the MDGs has proved to be too blunt a tool for capturing the complexities and the multiple dimensions of undernutrition in under-fives. The expert consensus now is that wasting (measured by low weight for height and/or low mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC)) and stunting (low-height-for-age) are superior measures to underweight (low weight-for-age) as they are able to capture consequences for health and development affecting children under-five².
6. While the proposed indicators developed by the Bureau of the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC), in its technical report (19 March 2015), includes an indicator on stunting and overweight, it did not include one on childhood wasting, despite the fact that wasting is explicitly mentioned as a target. This unfortunate omission should be rectified immediately.
7. The human costs related to wasting are high both in terms of preventable mortality and morbidity. Wasting affects 52 million children at any given time, and severe wasting is

¹ <http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/814UNCSD%20REPORT%20final%20revs.pdf>

² R.E. Black et al, Maternal and child undernutrition and overweight in low-income and middle-income countries. Lancet series on maternal and child nutrition, June 2013.

responsible for 1 million child deaths a year – making it the deadliest form of undernutrition.³ Without quantification and monitoring, it is difficult to determine whether sufficient progress is being made. We must ensure that every child that is affected by this is counted in the SDGs framework.

8. It is critical that wasting in children under-five is included as an indicator to Target 2.2:
 - i. **Wasting is an explicit target of the SDGs.** In order to monitor progress towards achieving Target 2.2 it must be accompanied by an appropriate quantifiable wasting indicator. The technical monitoring framework should be aligned with what is politically agreed at target level by Member States.
 - ii. **A stunting indicator does not measure the prevalence of wasting.** Although both stunting and wasting share similar causes and can even co-exist in the same child, they manifest differently and as such the responses required sometimes differ. A wasting indicator must be used along with stunting since the absence of stunting alone does not necessarily mean the absence of malnutrition.
 - iii. **Wasting is already a universally agreed indicator.** In 2012, 194 Member States of the World Health Organization (WHO) agreed upon six targets to improve maternal, infant and child nutrition, which were endorsed by the 65th World Health Assembly (WHA). The selected indicators, including one on wasting, are smart, not only because they are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound, but because these represent markers to track the smartest investment to improve global welfare.
 - iv. **WHO and Rome-based UN agencies have called for wasting to be an indicator,** stating the prevalence of wasting is an indicator of acute malnutrition that “should be used along with the stunting indicator.”
 - v. **A wasting indicator is critical for accountability.** Not only will having reliable data on nutrition help to support informed decision-making, it will empower people with information to hold their governments to account on their progress towards the agreed target in the SDGs and relevant national strategies.
 - vi. **An indicator on wasting is vital to ensure the ‘no one is left behind’ principle is realised and made truly meaningful.** A child with wasting is one of the most emblematic signs of a world that is too often leaving the most vulnerable behind.
 - vii. **A wasting indicator is critical for identifying gaps in progress.** Not only would global progress be tracked, but given that rates of progress on meeting the wasting target may vary widely among countries and regions, a wasting indicator would identify countries that are falling behind and help guide timely and appropriate responses to scale up efforts to address this form of undernutrition.
 - viii. **Both wasting and stunting can be easily measured** when data on height, weight, age and MUAC are collected. They can also be disaggregated by population groups according to location (e.g. rural or urban), age and gender, thus helping to reflect inter-group inequality and institutionalised barriers.
 - ix. **The process of gathering data on wasting is already established.** Introducing an indicator on wasting would not add an additional burden in regards to establishing a new data

³ WHO/WFP/UN-SCN/UNICEF [Joint Statement on Community-based Management of Severe Acute Malnutrition](#); 2007.

collection process. The WHO is committed to supporting countries on this indicator, including in the SDGs framework.

- x. **An indicator on wasting meets all UN statistical criteria for indicator selection**, in relation to the relevance, methodological soundness, measurability and understandability of the indicators.⁴
9. The need for a manageable number of indicators overall should not mean a reduction in the quality of the indicator framework and jeopardise having the best indicators possible. Moreover, it could not be more important to track the number of vulnerable children most at risk of illness, starvation, and death, as a result of acute wasting: measuring wasting is a critical indicator.
10. As NGOs involved in nutrition around the world, we strongly call on Member States and the UN system to ensure the SDG indicator set includes wasting, reflecting its status within the target, so that the nutrition indicators are aligned with the target and all children suffering the most extreme form of malnutrition are counted.
11. We propose the inclusion of an indicator that measures the “prevalence of wasting (low-weight-for-height/ MUAC) in children under-five years of age.”

Signatories:



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⁴ UNSTATS, Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring From a Statistical Perspective, 2013
[http://unstats.un.org/unsd/broaderprogress/pdf/Lesson%20Learned%20from%20MDG%20Monitoring_2013-03-22%20\(IAEG\).pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/broaderprogress/pdf/Lesson%20Learned%20from%20MDG%20Monitoring_2013-03-22%20(IAEG).pdf)