

## Reflections on the UN Global Action Plan (GAP) on Child Wasting: How can the GAP on Child Wasting address gaps in continuity of care?

Advocacy Summary Brief. June 2020.

### Background

Globally, at least 47 million children under five are wasted, 14 million of them severely<sup>i</sup>. The more severe the wasting, the more life-threatening it becomes, especially if children are stunted, or born small. Children who suffer from wasting are at increased risk of mortality (as much as 11-12 times higher than their healthy counterparts) and wasting is estimated to be responsible for 12.6% of deaths among children under the age of five<sup>ii</sup> each year. Although wasting is a significant contributor to child mortality, wasting can be treated in community settings with a product known as ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF). This has enabled more children to be treated than ever before.

In 2019, an estimated 11 million children accessed treatment for wasting<sup>iii</sup> but this varies greatly by context. Addressing wasting at a global scale remains a huge challenge and coverage of treatment remains low. While coverage has increased<sup>iv</sup>, current global estimates indicate only around twenty three percent of severely wasted children in 2019 had access to treatment<sup>v</sup>.

In 2019, the 60th edition of ENN's established publication, *Field Exchange* (see box 1), documented programme experiences and research on continuity of care for the treatment of wasted children. Continuity of care (CoC) for treatment means supporting children towards recovery irrespective of the severity of their condition. Effective CoC for treatment requires aligned policies, guidance, financing, and programmes. The rich compilation of programme experiences and research in *Field Exchange 60* found poor CoC for children with wasting due to a variety of factors. Three priority areas for action were identified to help address these (outlined in the following section). Follow up actions included, in December 2019, a letter to the UN Secretary General

signed by 45 members of civil society calling for reform of the UN's approach to managing wasting.

The release of *Field Exchange 60* coincided with UN Agencies' global initiative to determine how they could provide a more unified response to care for wasted children. In March 2020, five UN agencies (UNICEF, WFP, WHO, UNHCR, FAO) published the *Global Action Plan (GAP) on Child Wasting: A Framework for Action* (see box 2). In May 2020, the Field Exchange Team reviewed the *Field Exchange 60* priority actions relative to the *GAP Framework*. This brief outlines our findings to help inform next steps in the development and finalisation of the GAP on Child Wasting.

### About Field Exchange

The Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN) is a UK based charity dedicated to improving knowledge, stimulating learning and building evidence on nutrition to improve policy and practice worldwide, especially in humanitarian contexts and fragile and conflict affected states. ENN produces a regular publication, *Field Exchange*, that documents programme experiences and research to support learning and programming on nutrition worldwide, especially where malnutrition is prevalent and in fragile and conflict affected states. It is a rich source of experiences and stories of innovation and challenges faced by frontline workers worldwide.  
<https://www.enonline.net/fex/60/en>

**Advocacy from different actors was critical to the development of the GAP Framework and progress seen to date. It remains essential to support the finalization, implementation & accountability on the GAP on Child Wasting.**

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## Global Action Plan (GAP) on Child Wasting

The *GAP on Child Wasting* is a statement of UN agencies' commitment to global action to accelerate progress in preventing and managing child wasting and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The *GAP on Child Wasting: A Framework for Action (March 2020)* aims to provide a common focus to guide individual and collective action to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on child wasting. In 2020-2021, UNICEF will lead the process for developing a multi-year, multi-country and multi-stakeholder *Roadmap for Action* to enable UN agencies to support countries to develop concrete commitments, targets and actions to reach the global SDG targets. The *GAP Framework* and *Roadmap* together will become the *GAP on Child Wasting*.

The *GAP on Child Wasting* has a life-cycle approach that focuses on mothers, infants and children. It includes both prevention and treatment of wasting. It identifies four critical outcomes: reduced incidence of low birth weight; improved child health; improved infant and young child feeding; improved treatment of children with wasting and identifies 43 essential actions to address these. The *GAP on Child Wasting* aims to increase coverage of wasting treatment by 50% by 2025. [www.childwasting.org/](http://www.childwasting.org/)

### Does the GAP Framework address the Field Exchange 60 priority actions?

#### FEX 60 Action 1:

*One UN agency should have authority, responsibility, and accountability for providing CoC for wasted children. All the UN agencies have roles to play to put this into practice. Inter-UN initiatives to address wasting should be subject to external multi-stakeholder and expert peer review.*

While *Field Exchange 60* identified some strong examples of UN agency collaboration, the way the UN divides responsibility for children on the wasting spectrum contributes to the lack of CoC for treatment. There is limited information sharing and referral mechanisms between services, different location of services, and different supply systems and products that must be navigated by governments and implementing agencies. A lack of alignment between agencies' data makes it impossible to know how many wasted children access a continuum of care.

#### The GAP Framework:

- Identifies UNICEF as the UN agency *responsible* for child wasting, but **no details are provided on what authority and accountability UNICEF has vis-à-vis the other four sister UN agencies.**
- Outlines broad agency roles that reflect how they will work *better* together but **not how they will work differently.**
- Commits to an **accountability mechanism** but does not provide details on the function, modality and scope.
- Implies that UNICEF is responsible for the care of medically complicated cases, **raising questions about the inpatient care that WHO currently oversees** in some settings.
- Notes the need for actions to strengthen national health information systems to monitor and report on wasting but **does not outline mechanisms to improve data sharing** across the UN agencies.
- Involved some regional workshops and rapid public **consultation**, but the process was **not transparent nor predictable.**

#### FEX 60 Action 2:

*A dedicated body of research on wasting should be established, allowing WHO to provide up-to-date guidance on treatment and care, and advice for governments and programmers. In the meantime, interim guidance is urgently needed.*

*Field Exchange 60* highlights areas of innovation and action that could help to address gaps in CoC for treatment. These include emerging research on simplified approaches to identify and treat children in the community and in health facilities. It notes, however, that moderately wasted children in particular are missing out on care due to lack of attention, a lack of global targets, a poor evidence base, and lack of guidance from WHO on how to treat them.

#### The GAP Framework:

- Clearly identifies **WHO as the lead agency to coordinate new evidence and develop guidance** on prevention and treatment of wasting (by end of 2021) and on the updating of national guidelines (by end of 2023). **It does not detail the exact scope of the guidelines nor the process for their development.**
- References a **WHO-led accelerated guidance process** that can respond to new evidence and country needs.
- States that that the **research agenda** will be further detailed in consultation with key stakeholders at global, regional, and country levels. **Specific, but limited, research questions** are included in the GAP but sources aren't specified.

## FEX 60 Action 3:

*An urgent review of the extent and nature of nutrition supply issues is needed.*

*Field Exchange 60* described problems with scaling up services for wasting treatment, health system capacity problems and difficult supply-chain challenges for ready-to-use food (RUF)<sup>vi</sup>.

### The GAP Framework:

- Notes that key nutrition products should be routinely available and managed as part of national health systems with **supply chain systems stream-lined** to deliver them. It does not give actions or guidance on how to streamline systems.
- Problems with the UN supply chain are not recognised and **it is unclear which agency is responsible for supplying key nutrition products and managing supply chains.**

### Continuing progress together

The *GAP Framework* has begun to address several of the critical gaps in CoC for treatment of wasted children identified by *Field Exchange 60*. Now, the development of the Roadmap provides an opportunity to elaborate details, provide clarity on delivery and determine the various roles and responsibilities of the UN to deliver on the GAP on Child Wasting.

### How can the advocacy community contribute to this effort?

The GAP on Child Wasting is an unprecedented, multi-agency action to prevent wasting and improve treatment. Advocacy is critical to help ensure areas for actions are prioritised and addressed in the Roadmap and to galvanise key stakeholders at international, regional and country levels to engage in and contribute to this effort. **Priority advocacy and action items include the need to:**

1. Establish an **independent accountability mechanism** for both UNICEF as lead agency and for the respective UN agencies in their operational/guidance development roles.
2. Clarify **UNICEF's authority as lead agency** and how this will be implemented.
3. Secure commitment to, and establish, which agency will lead on data continuity across services.
4. Provide a detailed plan with **timeline for WHO guidance development**, including interim guidance

and clarity on the development and delivery of a **coordinated research agenda.**

5. Clarify whether UNICEF is responsible for the **management of complicated wasting**, or if WHO still has a role to play in this.
6. Commit to a timely, independent **review of RUF supply chain management** performance across contexts.

### Additional considerations:

- The GAP Framework does not address what each UN agency should do differently – system reform may well be needed to more efficiently deliver CoC at scale. A review of current **UN mandates** may be needed to enable such reform. This would benefit from documentation of the current mandate development process across all five relevant UN agencies.
- The stated GAP Framework principle to promote **government leadership and ownership** is welcome. It will be critical to examine how wasting management is reflected in **national costed plans** and inform **financing arrangements**. The GAP Framework does not give any authority to government over UN ways of working and operations at country level.
- The GAP on Child Wasting does not address all forms of malnutrition which we increasingly understand are interrelated; a further **GAP on all forms of malnutrition** will likely be needed in the future.

Finally, a clearly outlined, **transparent process and timeline for the Roadmap development and finalisation of the GAP on Child Wasting** is essential to ensure timely and comprehensive contribution to, and buy-in from, a range of stakeholders, including government, civil society, funders, the private sector, and programmers.

<sup>i</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, World Health Organization, World Bank Group. (2020). Levels And Trends In Child Malnutrition: UNICEF / WHO / World Bank Group Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates. Key findings of the 2020 edition. <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/jme-2020-edition>

<sup>ii</sup> Black RE, Victora CG, Walker SP, et al. (2013). Maternal and child undernutrition and overweight in low-income and middle-income countries [published correction appears in *The Lancet*. 2013 Aug 3;382(9890):396]. *The Lancet*. 2013;382(9890):427-451. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(13)60937-X.

<sup>iii</sup> Estimate based on UNICEF reported admissions of children with severe wasting and other forms of acute malnutrition into therapeutic treatment in 2019 (4.9 million children) and WFP Annual performance report, 2019 (to be published).

<sup>iv</sup> UNICEF Nutridash data demonstrates a four-fold increase in the number of children treated between 2009 and 2017 (from 1.1 to 4.4 million treated annually). Available from <https://acutemalnutrition.org/>

<sup>v</sup> Coverage will vary considerably by country and region.

<sup>vi</sup> RUF is a broader category that includes RUTF in addition to other products used in the management of wasting.