Global child and maternal nutrition— the SUN rises

In April, 2010, a policy brief—Scaling Up Nutrition: A Framework for Action—was released at the spring meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. It was a collective effort stimulated by the publication in January, 2008, of The Lancet’s Series on undernutrition. The Lancet Series encouraged an emphasis on the 1000 day window from the start of pregnancy to a child’s second birthday, with interventions that are both cost-effective and yield high returns for cognitive development, individual adult earnings, and economic growth. A second Series on nutrition, published in The Lancet, now explicitly shows that the solution to malnutrition relies on a collective effort in which all stakeholders—governments, academia, civil society, UN system organisations, foundations, development banks, and businesses—carry out specific roles in ensuring that interventions are delivered equitably and at scale.

The policy brief, which quickly became known as the SUN Framework, set the stage for the transformation that is now happening in global nutrition. It called for country-owned nutrition strategies and programmes; urgent scaling up of evidence-based and cost-effective interventions; integration of nutrition within national strategies for gender equality, agriculture, food security, social protection, education, water supply, sanitation, and health care; and a substantial increase in domestic support and external assistance for nutrition within the food security, social protection, and health sectors. The SUN Road Map, prepared later in 2010 and revised in 2012, set out ways for a wide range of groups to work together in sharpening, scaling up, and aligning their responses to people’s nutritional needs—and achieving results.

Alongside the 1000 days advocacy partnership, the SUN Movement was launched at the UN General Assembly in September, 2010. It takes forward the SUN Road Map by encouraging coherence and effectiveness among all groups working for better nutrition; it is not an initiative, project, or programme. By April, 2013, 35 countries had joined the SUN Movement with commitments that are in line with the SUN Framework and Road Map. These countries’ nutrition solutions show the commitments of political leaders, whole-of-society responses, careful tracking of progress, and the benefits of shared experience.

The second Lancet nutrition Series provides a range of valuable insights as the SUN Movement moves through 2013, a year dense with events that will move nutrition to the heart of the development agenda. It calls for a substantial increase of political commitment in responding to the complex causes of undernutrition. It recognises that the SUN Movement has the potential to harness such change and yield durable results.

The first paper of the Series leaves no doubt as to why nutrition is key for sustainable development and the wellbeing of entire populations. The second paper strengthens the arguments of the 2008 Lancet Series by bringing additional evidence to support the focus on ensuring that all women, girls, and young children are able to access specific interventions of good quality; they should be included in mainstream efforts for public health, family planning, and water and sanitation. The third paper sets the foundation for evidence-based research into achieving outcomes through nutrition-sensitive strategies in four key areas: agriculture and food, social security, early child development, and classroom education. It draws on the experience of countries that have made great progress when stressing that gender and social equality are the cornerstones of nutritional success. By focusing on the political context for effective action, the fourth paper recalls that the realisation of human rights, a commitment to equity, and gender
equality should be properly prioritised. It includes important proposals for ways in which business can best be engaged (and the challenges of doing so), and encourages increased involvement of civil society at all levels. It likewise underlines the need for governments to increase their own accountability for ensuring that people are able to achieve good nutrition and to ensure the existence of a fair and transparent framework for regulating any entity that might—even unwittingly—undermine nutritional justice.

At the May, 2012, World Health Assembly, government representatives agreed ambitious goals for reduction of all forms of malnutrition, including obesity. This Lancet Series points out that these goals can only be achieved through improved nutrition governance, more human resources, better demonstration of results, and increased investments from domestic and international sources. In the past 3 years the SUN Movement has provided a platform to enable leaders to pledge to intensify efforts for improved nutrition. 2013 provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to strengthen worldwide resolve for improved nutrition, through commitments being made in a series of international and regional events.

The publication of the second Lancet Series is timely and reinforces the urgency for transformation of political commitment into actions that lead to improvements in nutrition. The Series brings scientific rigour to the challenge of equitable delivery of effective services at scale—both now and in the years to come.

David Nabarro
SUN Movement Secretariat, Villa La Pelouse (2nd Floor), Palais Des Nations, 1201 Geneva, Switzerland
david.nabarro@undp.org
I declare that I have no conflicts of interest.