



Inter-Parliamentary Union

*For democracy. For everyone.*

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## CONCEPT NOTE

### Draft proposal for a regional parliamentary seminar on nutrition

#### OVERVIEW

##### **The prevalence of stunting and what it does to a child**

Over 180 million children under age five are not meeting their development potential owing to nutritional deficiencies that affect their learning outcomes and earning capacity as well as the economic prosperity of their communities and their nations. Poor nutrition and the stunting it causes, trap the child, the community and the nation in a cycle of poverty.

Stunting is the outcome of chronic deficiency in nutrition during the first 1,000 days of a child's life - from conception, through pregnancy, to the age of two. The damage it causes to a child's development is irreversible. A stunted five-year old is inches shorter than he or she could have been. Chronic malnutrition makes that child more vulnerable to disease. A stunted child is as much as five times more likely to die from diarrhoea than a non-stunted child. Most importantly, a stunted child will never reach his or her full cognitive capacity, never able to learn as much or earn as much throughout life.

##### **The economics of stunting**

The World Bank estimates that countries blighted by undernutrition lose at least two to three per cent of their gross domestic product, as well as billions of dollars in salaried employment and avoidable health care spending. The stunting rate across sub-Saharan Africa is a staggering 40 per cent.

Encouragingly, fighting malnutrition is one of the most cost-effective investments a country can make. The 2008 Copenhagen Consensus - reached by a group of leading scientists and economists, including several Nobel laureates - found, based on cost-benefit analysis, that combating undernutrition is the best development investment. They agreed that five of the top ten highest-return solutions to global challenges closely relate to combating undernutrition. The science is clear and the returns are high. Governments must invest now in programmes to prevent stunting or risk diminishing the impact of other investments in education, health and child protection.

The main objective of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is to improve the situation of the world's poor in a sustainable manner. Promoting effective nutrition policies is at the heart of the implementation of the MDGs, in particular goals number 1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger), 3 (promote gender equality and empowering women), 4 (reduce child mortality rates) and 5 (improve maternal health).

### **Situation of child nutrition in the SADC region**

The SADC region suffers many forms of malnutrition including stunting, wasting, underweight and overweight. According to the 2013 World Health organization report, stunting rates are close to or above 30% in ten of the fifteen countries of the region. Despite the existence of regional and national nutrition promotion mechanisms, further efforts are still needed to address this issue effectively.

### **Worldwide push to tackle child malnutrition: the critical role of parliaments**

Parliaments can make a critical contribution to those efforts. They have the power to enact laws and regulations, influence the shape of national development plans, determine national budget design and allocations, monitor and oversee the government (i.e. executive branch) implementation of commitments to children and hold it to account, and use their platform as community/opinion leaders to draw attention to key development challenges such as nutrition and educate constituents on healthy practices.

Concretely, this means that, to fight malnutrition, parliaments can pass legislation restricting the marketing of breastmilk substitutes or providing maternity protection, boost micronutrient programming; scale up programmes to promote, protect and support infant and young child feeding, or measure stunting and wasting rates against benchmarks.

### **Regional seminar to mobilize parliamentarians in support of nutrition**

In order to galvanize targeted national parliaments into taking action on nutrition issues and enhance their capacity to advance nutrition goals, the IPU and UNICEF propose to bring parliamentarians from the Southern African Development Community region, SADC, together with civil society players (that can furnish MPs with relevant data and work with them to foster greater accountability) with a view to raising their awareness of and educating them about the urgent need for action.

The aim of the seminar would be to enhance the understanding of parliamentarians and their staff on issues related to malnutrition, stunting, and the deleterious effects they can have on their countries, and to boost their capacity to support action on nutrition. The seminar will focus on the powers (law-making, budgeting, oversight, and representation) parliamentarians can deploy to help reduce malnutrition rates.

Parliamentarians in the region will hear and benefit from each other, additionally UNICEF and the IPU will also invite experts (for instance, from UNICEF, civil society, and other parliaments) to share perspectives and expertise on the role of parliamentarians in contributing to the reduction of malnutrition and stunting rates. Throughout the seminar, the emphasis will be on the strategies and tools parliamentarians can leverage to scale up and strengthen nutrition programmes and policies.

The proposed two day seminar would be co-hosted by the IPU, UNICEF and the Namibian Parliament. The IPU would invite parliaments from the SADC region to send delegations of parliamentarians to participate in the seminar. It is envisaged that approximately 15 national parliaments would participate.