Adolescents: Agents of change for a well-nourished world
An expert consultation on nutrition programming for the next generation
19-20 June 2018, Geneva, Switzerland

CONCEPT NOTE

Purpose of the consultation
The world has set ambitious goals for the future of its citizens, among them an end to poverty and hunger; good health and well-being, and the achievement of gender equality. One of the greatest challenges to realizing these goals is the problem of all forms of malnutrition, which threatens the health of adolescents, especially girls.

As young people on the brink of entering into active engagement in society, the workforce and family life, adolescents are experiencing multiple burdens of malnutrition, the increasing problem of overweight and obesity coexisting with continued high prevalence of underweight and micronutrient deficiencies. They consume less than adequate amounts of fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods and high levels of processed products full of sodium, sugar, and solid fat. Their food choices are constrained by poverty and lack of access to nutritious food, with implications for future life and health. The diets of the world’s 1.8 billion adolescents, shaped by social, economic and cultural forces, are putting this critical age group at risk now and throughout their lives.

Recent international meetings and technical discussions in Nepal¹, Canada², the United States³ and the UK⁴ have begun to chart the way forward on the problem of adolescent nutrition. This meeting will build upon the work of these previous events by looking in depth at how the nutrition community can learn from and work collaboratively with other sectors, and adolescents themselves.

As the world becomes more interconnected, the potential of adolescents to be agents of change and leaders of movements is growing exponentially, and they will share their views and insights during this consultation.

This event, organized by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition and the World Health Organization, will position action on adolescent nutrition as an opportunity to advance principles under the Sustainable Development Goals, to leverage the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025), the ICN2 Rome Declaration, and the Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health (2016-

¹ International Conference on Child Health and Development, Nepal, June 2017
² Global Adolescent Health Conference, Canada, May 2017
³ Stakeholders Consultation on Adolescent Girls’ Nutrition, USA, October 2017
⁴ Adolescent Interest Group Meeting, United Kingdom, December 2017
2030), and the priorities of the 2018 G7, namely advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment. The meeting will include technical and advocacy discussions which are required to advance action on adolescent nutrition.

The meeting will feature sessions on nutrition and behaviour during adolescence, intersectoral approaches to creating programs that work, innovative ways to engage adolescents, and how adolescent movements could promote good nutrition. Working groups will come up with potential programming solutions to “pitch” to adolescents and nutrition experts in a Shark Tank/Dragons Den format. The meeting will culminate with a session on next steps each organization can take to achieve progress.

Problem
Adolescents’ growing bodies need increased energy, protein, and micronutrients to develop properly, making them particularly vulnerable to deficiencies and placing them at higher risk for forms of undernutrition. Adolescents have the highest prevalence of anaemia of all age groups. In many parts of the world, they experience high rates of underweight or stunting because of poor childhood nutrition.

Undernutrition is a global threat to the health of adolescents and the next generation. Prevalence of moderate/severe thinness among adolescent girls across low- and middle-income countries is estimated at 7.6%. Iron deficiency anaemia is a leading cause of adolescent disability-adjusted life years (DALYS) lost by girls 10-19 years, and boys 10-14 years[2]. At the same time, adolescents face the increasing problem of overweight and obesity and increased risk of diet-related noncommunicable diseases. Trends show substantial increase in childhood overweight and obesity, affecting about one in three adolescents worldwide [3].

Six of the 11 top risk factors driving the global burden of disease are diet-related [4]. The diets of the nearly two billion adolescents in the world are putting this critical age-group at risk [3]. During a period of increased nutritional requirements, available data on adolescents’ diets are especially alarming. This is compounded in low-resource settings where food choices are constrained by high levels of poverty, leading to food insecurity, poor diet diversity, and lack of access to nutritious food. Adolescence is the key period for the adoption of diet-related behaviours, which affect present and future health during adulthood [5]. These behaviours are shaped by social, economic, and cultural forces, and are major determinants of ill health across the life course. In many contexts girls eat last and least.

Rationale
Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for everyone at all ages is the focus of 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SGD) #3. The United Nations Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescent's Health 2016-2030 envisions a world in which every woman, child and adolescent realizes their rights to physical and mental health and well-being, has social and economic opportunities, and can participate fully in shaping prosperous and sustainable societies. Building on this momentum, World Health Organization (WHO) and partners developed the Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!), which identifies optimal nutrition during adolescence as fundamental to achieving lifelong health and wellbeing.

The 2017 Milan Global Nutrition Summit, under the umbrella of the United Nations (UN) Decade of Action on Nutrition and Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), saw the launch of an Action Agenda to close the gap on women’s and girls’ nutrition, advocating for increased investment in adolescent nutrition, as it has a triple return: for adolescent health now, for adult health later, and for the health of future generations.
Other meetings have also explored action for adolescent nutrition.

- In May 2017, the Global Adolescent Health Conference, organized by the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children’s Health (CanWaCH) looked at solutions in adolescent health for the hardest to reach both in Canada and internationally, placing adolescents clearly at the centre of efforts to achieve the SDGs.
- A meeting hosted by Action Contre La Faim (ACF) in Nepal in June 2017 highlighted evidence on the importance of integration of interventions and the fact that multi-sectoral interventions in this area are effective and can be scaled up. A stakeholders’ consultation on adolescent girls’ nutrition in October 2017 in Washington DC defined key evidence and implementation gaps on diet and eating practices of adolescent girls in low and middle-income countries.
- An Adolescent Interest Group Meeting in the United Kingdom in December 2017 organized by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Save the Children, Emergency Nutrition Network and Irish Aid reviewed populations, interventions and outcomes of interventions.

These events have highlighted significant data gaps and raised questions surrounding the need to identify metrics that can assess improvements in nutritional status during adolescents. This includes a strong need to learn and be informed by other sectors and better understand how assessing adolescent girl empowerment can improve nutrition outcomes.

**Audience**
The consultation plans to bring together country stakeholders, experts and resource persons from development partners, international development agencies and private sector actors working on adolescent nutrition and adolescent issues.

**Outcomes**
The inherent interconnectedness of nutrition with other sectors provides opportunities and challenges. Effective strategies to improve adolescent nutritional status and diets at large scale will need to address the multiple and interacting factors starting with the biological, neural and hormonal characteristics of adolescence and extending to the socio-economic, gender, cultural and food environments in which young people live. At the same time, improving adolescent nutrition can accelerate progress toward improving school performance, economic development, maternal and child health, and other non-nutrition outcomes.

Through exposition of global evidence, dialogue with adolescents, and ideation of new approaches, this consultation aims to find new ways to improve adolescent nutrition, expanding current efforts and identifying concrete next steps. This gathering is not organized in isolation but will inform future planned meetings on this issue. Proceedings and conclusions of the consultation will be shared through a discussion paper, social media, and other communications channels.