

# FIRST 1000 DAYS

THE CRITICAL WINDOW TO ENSURE THAT CHILDREN SURVIVE AND THRIVE

MAY 2017



for every child

SOUTH AFRICA



## WHY?

The first 1000 days of life - between a woman's pregnancy and her child's second birthday - is a unique period of opportunity when the foundations for optimum health and development across the lifespan are established. The right nutrition and care during the 1000 day window influences not only whether the child will survive, but also his or her ability to grow, learn and rise out of poverty. As such, it contributes to society's long-term health, stability and prosperity.

Children in South Africa continue to die from preventable causes of death including pneumonia, HIV, TB and diarrhoea - all of which are influenced by poor health seeking behaviour, health care, infectious diseases, nutrition and hygiene of the pregnant mother and child during the first 1000 days. About half of all children dying in South Africa are HIV positive, 34 per cent have severe malnutrition, and 30 per cent are underweight. Neonatal deaths account for nearly 40 per cent of overall deaths of children under the age of 5. While access to prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) services is nearly universal, retention in care, poor infant feeding practices, as well as challenges with immunization coverage continue to jeopardize the health and development of babies and young children.

Approximately one third of children under the age of 3 are stunted, a reflection of chronic malnutrition. The effects of stunting last a lifetime, leading to impaired brain development, lower IQ, weakened immune systems and greater risk of diseases later in life. Children who were stunted frequently have lower productivity, and earn up to 20 per cent lower than average wages as adults. Stunting can reduce a country's GDP by as much as three per cent. Rising childhood obesity in South Africa is another reflection of poor nutrition and poor infant feeding practices that also leads to disease and ill health later in life.

## WHAT? PROMOTING GOOD NUTRITION, HEALTH AND SANITATION DURING THE FIRST 1000 DAYS OF LIFE

Evidence demonstrates that it is far more effective to support brain development in the first place by preventing nutritional deficits, than to depend on replacement therapy once a deficit has occurred. This requires improved nutrition for adolescent girls and young women before, during and after pregnancy; timely uptake of PMTCT services by HIV positive pregnant women and their babies; screening for TB and retention in care; exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of the infant's life; provision of nutritious, safe and appropriate food to complement breastmilk as the baby grows; availability of safe water; improved hygiene and sanitation practices; and regular monitoring to track growth and development.

Breastfeeding, in particular, is of critical importance. As a baby's first vaccine, it is the first and best protection they have against illness, disease and death. Promotion, support and protection of exclusive breastfeeding until six months - including for HIV positive mothers who are on treatment and virally suppressed - are high impact public health interventions



South Africa's under-five mortality rate has dropped by 50% since 2002, yet still stands at 42 per 1000 live births



Diarrhoea is one of the five leading causes of death of young children



Children who are exclusively breastfed are 14 times more likely to survive the first six months of life than non-breastfed children



Nearly 40% of children do not receive all basic vaccinations



Handwashing with soap alone prevents up to 50 per cent of childhood diarrhoea



33 per cent of children aged 1-3 years are stunted (low height for age)



20 per cent of stunting begins in the womb



Approximately 13 per cent of children under 5 years are overweight



Approximately 30 per cent of children from birth to age 4 lived in households that ran out of money to buy food

that are well known to optimise child survival, and must be supported by regular growth monitoring, complete immunizations and adequate complementary feeding. Preventing diarrhoeal and respiratory illnesses through handwashing with soap, and ensuring mental stimulation through play and affection are also fundamental for optimal child development up to age 2 and beyond.

### HOW? A COMPREHENSIVE PACKAGE OF SERVICES FOR MOTHERS, BABIES, FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS

By adopting a comprehensive and multisectoral approach, UNICEF helps Government and partners to address all the aspects that hinder mothers and babies from receiving adequate care and nutrition during the critical 1000 day period. This includes:

- o Educating families and providing support to mothers for exclusive breastfeeding
- o Scaling up infant and young child feeding programmes
- o Raising awareness on the importance of growth monitoring
- o Expanding immunization coverage and uptake
- o Training communities on the importance of handwashing with soap to prevent illness
- o Ensuring eligible households receive their child support grants and have sufficient money to buy food
- o Novel use of mobile health technology (such as *Mom Connect*) to deliver direct communication to parents and caregivers on their mobile phones, which educates them on the needs of their babies, and supports them to get the health care they need

### PROMISING PRACTICES TO IMPROVE RESULTS ALONG THE FIRST 1000 DAYS:

**Strengthening health systems** by identifying bottlenecks, prioritizing actions and building capacities at primary care and community levels - the *3 Feet Approach* in select districts has shown dramatic reductions in under-five child deaths and improvements in coverage and access to care.

**Improving linkages with Early Childhood Development centres** in communities with primary care clinics - including building capacities of ECD practitioners for growth monitoring, improved hygiene practices, early identification of problems in children and referrals to care.

**Building capacities of front line community health workers** to support mothers and families for exclusive breastfeeding, improved hygiene practices, early stimulation and completing immunizations.

**Improving knowledge and demand for services** with mHealth innovations like the *Digital Road to Health Booklet*, that provides tailored information to the mother/caregiver on all aspects of child health and development.

### WHO? GOVERNMENT, DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

UNICEF works closely with the Departments of Health, Social Development and Basic Education to ensure a comprehensive focus on the first 1000 days for mothers and their children. Development partners, private sector, academia, civil society, and the media are also engaged to support the scale up of programmes; raise awareness among families, clinics and schools; and strengthen the linkages within communities.

### WHAT NEXT? ADDRESSING GAPS AND ENSURING NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND

South Africa has made great progress towards ensuring better health and survival of mothers and babies across the country. However, due to geographic disparities, inequities and inefficiencies in the functioning of the health system, certain localities and communities remain disadvantaged or underserved. Through research and use of latest monitoring technologies, UNICEF is supporting Government to identify where and why there are gaps in knowledge, demand, access and service delivery. This information is being used to target action and ensure the right interventions reach the right people, thus making best use of available resources. By building knowledge and capacity among all stakeholders and promoting quality service delivery for those who are most in need, UNICEF is helping Government to ensure no mothers and children are left behind.





## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

To ensure all children are afforded the best start in life requires action to strengthen the health system; improve coverage and quality of services; and increase community-level awareness and demand for care. By supporting comprehensive programmes that focus on the first 1000 days of life, companies have the opportunity to demonstrate private sector leadership and make a concrete investment that will change the development outcomes for millions of children. In doing so, you directly support the objectives of the National Development Plan as well as the Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa.

## A COMPELLING INVESTMENT:

**Children who get the right nutrition during the first 1000 days:**

- Are 10 times more likely to overcome the most life threatening child diseases
- Complete 4.6 more grades at school
- Go on to earn 21% more in wages as adults
- Are more likely as adults to have healthier families

## CONTACT US

To explore concrete and tailored partnership opportunities, please contact:

**Sandra Bisin**  
Chief, Communications and  
Partnerships  
Email: [sbin@unicef.org](mailto:sbin@unicef.org)

**Carine Munting**  
Partnerships Manager  
Email: [cmunting@unicef.org](mailto:cmunting@unicef.org)

**unicef**   
for every child