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Government of Kenya, European Union and UNICEF launch multi-million Euro programme to help prevent child and maternal malnutrition at a National Nutrition Symposium

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The Government of Kenya, the Ministry of Health, the European Union (EU) and UNICEF will hold a National Nutrition Symposium at the Kenya School of Government in Nairobi on 18 February to launch a four-year Nutrition Resilience Programme, aimed at improving maternal and child nutrition.

“Malnutrition is a public health concern in Kenya; it has cost the lives of our children and undermined the healthy physical and cognitive development of thousands of others,” says the Minister of Health, the Honourable Mr. James W. Macharia. “Despite Kenya’s economic growth over the past 20 years, we have been unable to reduce our high rates of malnutrition. Recent official data estimates that 2.8 million or one third of Kenyan children under the age of 5 are stunted.”

Her Excellency, Mrs Margaret Kenyatta, the First Lady of the Republic of Kenya, will be the Guest of Honour at this one-day Symposium. Also in attendance will be members of the SUN Business Network, the Civil Society Alliance, the Donor Network, UN Network agencies and development partners supporting the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement in Kenya, including the EU delegation in Kenya, UNICEF, USAID, DFID, GIZ, WHO, WFP, FAO, UNFPA, UNAIDS and many members of civil society.

“This multi-sectoral programme marks a significant shift in Kenya’s approach to tackling malnutrition in the country,” says Her Excellency, Mrs Kenyatta. “The Government of Kenya welcomes the fact that our partners have made a commitment to work together to help build the resilience of Kenya’s most vulnerable communities.”

A focus of the programme is to reduce the impact of the recurrent food shortages and crises that have undermined the health and development of communities in Kenya's semi-arid and arid lands, using a multi-sectoral approach that focuses on prevention and treatment of malnutrition. The target population are women and children under the age of 5 in the nine counties of Kilifi, Kitui, Kwale, Mandera, Samburu, Tana River, Turkana, Wajir and West Pokot. The aim is for partners and civil society to work together to strengthen health systems in these areas and to empower communities to cope better with the impact of drought and other crises. This involves adopting healthier practices, such as hospital births, exclusive breastfeeding, diversified and age appropriate infant feeding practices and better hygiene.

“The EU is committed to this programme as development is one of our central goals,” says EU Chargé d’Affaires, Mrs. Marjaana Sall. “As well as having a detrimental impact on the economy, malnutrition hinders efforts to reduce poverty. In addition, recurrent and prolonged droughts have exposed Kenya’s arid and semi-arid counties to repeated food and nutrition crises. This programme will contribute to build resilience and prevent the economy against these types of shocks.”

UNICEF Acting Representative, Ms. Pirkko Heinonen highlights that, *“access to nutrition is a child’s right and it is a right that is in our power to meet.”* Ms. Heinonen continues, *“Malnutrition in children is particularly damaging since the effects are irreversible, resulting in permanent physical and cognitive impairment. This has an impact on the individual’s quality of life and productivity, as well as on the national economy.”*

If malnutrition is not addressed, the cost of malnutrition to Kenya’s economy over the next 20 years will be an estimated Ksh. 3.2 trillion (US\$35 billion) and 527,000 lives will be lost. To put it in perspective:

- 19,000 child lives will be lost every year due to being underweight;
- 10, 000 child lives will be lost every year due to being vitamin A deficient;
- 11,000 child lives will be lost every year due to inadequate child feeding practices.

That is why Kenya's partners have joined hands to ensure that child and maternal malnutrition in Kenya becomes a thing of the past.

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