

Event Report

“The right to nutrition: Key to children’s health and survival”

*convened under the auspices of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food,
Mr. Olivier De Schutter,
on the occasion of the 19th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva*

Many participants gathered at the Room XXIV at the United Nations in Geneva on 5th of March 2012 for the side-event about the right to nutrition initiated by Save the Children and World Vision international.

The side-event further explored how a human-rights approach can reinforce efforts to ensure access to adequate diets. The figures speak for themselves. Hunger and malnutrition contribute to one third of all deaths among children under the age of five. One in three children in the developing world suffer from chronic malnutrition, with malnourished girls later delivering low birth-weight babies, reinforcing a vicious intergenerational cycle of high maternal and child mortality.

The event was very well attended, with a variety of missions, NGOs and UN agencies present. The presence in the audience of high profile figures such as David Nabarro (Special Representative of the Secretary General for Nutrition and Food Security) and Francesco Branca (WHO Director, Nutrition for Health and Development) was indicative of the timeliness and profile of engagement on the issue of the right to nutrition. Contributions from the floor from these and other figures added to the excellent panel speakers.

The event allowed us to turn our energy towards how to use frameworks of accountability (both existing ones like human rights mechanisms, and new ones) to ensure delivery on promises for nutrition, child survival and health; emphasising the importance of a ‘human rights’ approach important for ensuring delivery to all. The importance of community involvement and participation was also discussed, so that communities are urged to participate in advocating to their own local governments.

The event was an opportunity to harness the human rights mechanisms in Geneva and the actors involved towards the realization of the right to nutrition. It was chaired by Michael French, Director of the Save the Children Geneva Office, and introduced by Jennifer Philpot-Nissen, World Vision.

There was excellent input from the following speakers:

Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, spoke about the scale and nature of the challenge of the right to nutrition. Child malnutrition is a problem that can be addressed. A human rights approach is important, and not a threat to practitioners but a positive help. Mr. de Schutter outlined the following 6 key features and advantages of this approach:

1. A human rights approach means that child malnutrition should be a commitment made at the highest political level and should result in a whole of government approach; not just with the involvement of the Ministry of Health, but other Ministries as well.
2. It helps ensure that the promises that are made can be kept - improving the accountability of Governments and monitoring the implementation of action plans that they adopt.
3. A human rights approach allows us to move from a supply-driven to a demand-driven approach and participatory processes.

4. A HR approach supports stronger linkages between direct interventions and long-term poverty reduction and development – including investment in supporting the local agrifood system and gender empowerment.
5. It allows us to move up on the chain of causes of malnutrition, to address structural aspects and develop sustainable strategies.
6. A HR approach encourages the international community to donate more to international assistance.

Dr Charles Dias, Indian Member of Parliament, Save the Children partner, addressed the particular challenge and statistics for India. He outlined several programmes at national political level that aim to address the issue of child malnutrition. He also expressed his personal commitment as a voice in the political system of India and in key forthcoming political processes.

Ben Phillips, Save the Children International, drew attention to the encouraging number of actors engaging on the issue. He also reiterated the crucial importance of local people and children in communities and keeping a focus on real children in all of our efforts. He presented nutrition as a right, as good economics, and as a problem we can solve. Now is a moment of opportunity for drawing increased attention and action towards child malnutrition, through forthcoming global moments such as the G8, G20.

Cyprian Ouma, World Vision Emergency Nutrition Technical Advisor East Africa told the story from East Africa; the critical nature of the problem; what it means for a child; field level means not only securing a 'right' but delivering on it, overcoming very practical challenges; getting structures right will help overcome the problem

The strong collaboration between World Vision and Save the Children for this event allowed us to build up real momentum on the issue. Both partners are following up the event with two statements in the 19th Session of the Human Rights Council on nutrition and child survival and health. The statement during the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, was presented the next day. In his reply, the SR mentioned the side-event on nutrition and also responded to the tension referred to by SC and WV between short-term strategies to address acute nutritional needs and ensuring long-term sustainability of the food system. Several meetings with missions were also convened, building upon the presence of the Indian Parliamentarian, Dr. Dias and Dr. Tandon from SC India. These meetings were focused around the upcoming UPR for India and ensuring advocacy on child and maternal health issues for this critical process. Dr. Dias and Dr. Tandon will use the UPR review as leverage in various national level political processes.

Interesting quotes:

“Malnutrition can result in the reduction of a country’s GDP by 3-6%. Reducing child malnutrition is the single most important investment for Governments – there is high return – higher earnings and increased life expectancy.” Olivier de Schutter, SR on the Right to Food

“We know that in 1990 nutrition relate goals were adopted at the World Summit for Children, in 1996 the Summit on Food made several references to nutrition, and in 2000 the MDGs made further commitments on nutrition. We have committed but we are failing.” Olivier de Schutter, SR on the Right to Food

“Progress has not been fast enough, but 2012 is a year of opportunity – we have more voices than ever before on what had been a hidden crisis on child malnutrition” – Ben Phillips, SCI

“We need to address the bottlenecks – the resources. We would need 10 times more people and 5 times more money – the human resources gap is key.” – Francesco Branca, WHO

