

Advocacy and Engaging Young people on the impact of COVID –19 on nutrition using online platforms in the Eastern and Southern Africa Region.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has burdened young people with multiple vulnerabilities. With school closures and restrictions on gatherings, many adolescents and other young people now face the risk of being left behind not only in learning outcomes but also on nutrition, health, and wellbeing at a critical stage of their development. Nationwide school closures have been reported in 17 out of the 21 countries¹ in the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa region (ESAR)². The cost of living is likely to increase for many households as children spend more time at home. Yet, earnings for parents are expected to decrease, resulting in some families struggling to meet their basic requirements such as food, electricity, water, and healthcare. Dietary quality and quantity are therefore expected to fall due to the loss of household income and disruptions in food systems, for example, disruption of trade and transport of foods from production to markets, and suspension of school feeding programmes³.

Efforts to assess and document the impact of COVID-19 on nutrition are ongoing. Regional inter-agency working groups in both Eastern and Southern Africa issued statements highlighting that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate existing food crises, driving populations into worse food and nutrition insecurity. To date, little has been documented on the impact of the pandemic on nutrition, especially on

¹ Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Comoros, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

² UNESCO. COVID-19 Impact on Education. Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by COVID-19. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

³ WHO. 01 June 2020. Maintaining essential health services: operational guidance for the COVID-19 context. Interim guidance

school-aged and adolescent children. Also, to assess the implications of the COVID-19 mitigating measures on nutrition and food security outcomes, few efforts have focused on providing school-aged children and adolescents the correct information they need to make the right decisions for their health and nutrition status during this pandemic.

Within the context of the COVID-19, there is a need for nutrition services to adapt to prevent increases in morbidity and mortality associated with malnutrition. The adaptation includes the dissemination of correct information and the capacity development of youth advocates on nutrition in the context of COVID-19.

To this end, UNICEF ESAR Office (ESARO) Communication for Development (C4D) and Nutrition sections, in collaboration with the World Organization of the Scouts movement⁴, engaged 450 adolescents and young people from the ESAR and around the world during a special Online Global Scouts Jamboree held 3-5 April 2020. The Jamboree is an international scouting activity held annually, and Scouts around the world discuss and learn from each other as they come up with solutions to challenges affecting young people.

The online Global Scouts Jamboree empowered young people nutrition with awareness and knowledge on the potential impacts of COVID-19 on Nutrition, why engage young people on nutrition matters, tips on healthy eating while preventing the spread of COVID-19, and actions to embark as youth-advocates. Below is a discussion of the three main topics covered:

I. Potential impacts of COVID-19 on nutrition

While there are no known direct impacts of COVID-19 on nutrition, there are several potential secondary impacts associated with the pandemic.

- 1. Insufficient access to food:** The mitigation measures of COVID-19, such as lockdowns and other containment measures put in place by governments to flatten the curve of COVID-19 infections, are increasing poverty food insecurity and risk increases in malnutrition. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity in the East Africa region was already alarmingly high, with over 33 million⁵ food-insecure people, while a record 45 million⁶ people were food insecure across the SADC countries. Given the additional economic shock resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, the magnitude and severity of food insecurity and undernutrition could increase significantly. A group of concern is those working in the informal sector, which includes large numbers of young people.
- 2. Disruption of essential health services for young people:** With health facilities focusing more on the management of COVID-19 patients, and the resultant stigma, the pandemic is disrupting young people's access to sexual and reproductive health services, which may increase their risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

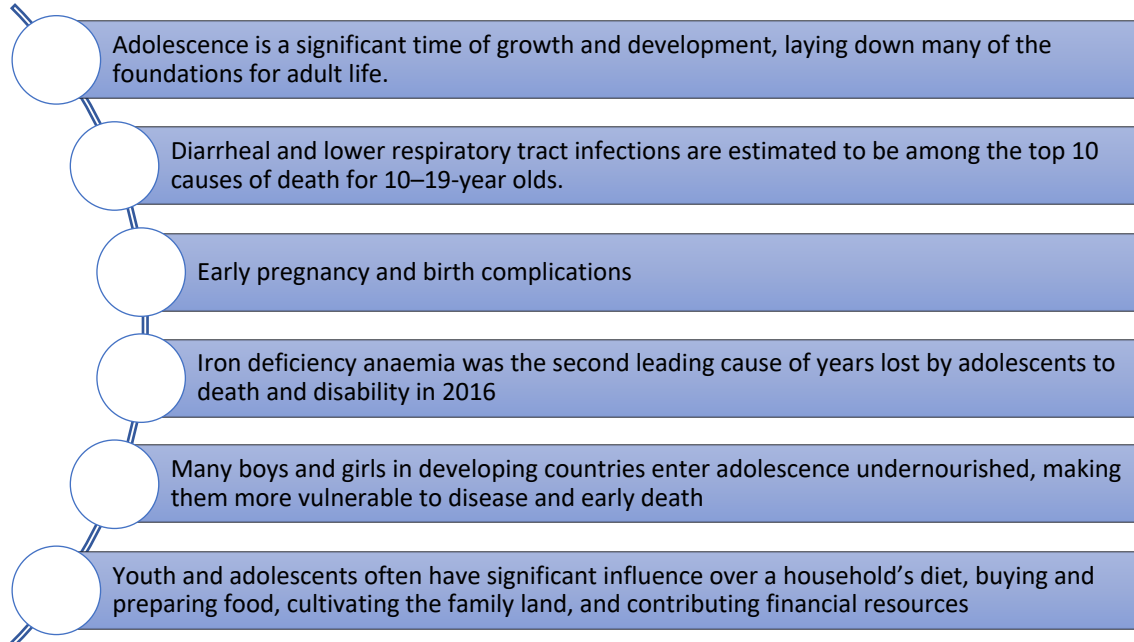
⁴ The Scouts Movement, founded in 1907, is one of the largest youth organizations worldwide with a mission to contribute to the development of young people in achieving their full physical, intellectual, social and spiritual potential as individuals, as responsible citizens and active members of their local, national and international communities⁴. In 2020, the Scouts Movement Africa support office and UNICEF ESARO forged a partnership focusing on adolescent engagement for both humanitarian and development regional priorities

⁵ Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG). COVID-19 Food Security and Nutrition Alert. 30 March 2020

⁶ Food and Nutrition Security working Group (FNSWG). Southern Africa: COVID-19 Alert. April 2020

- 3. Inadequate care practices:** The increased risk of obesity in young people is also present in specific populations who are more likely to consume high-fat high sugar convenience foods and reduce their exercise.

II. The evidence: Why engage young people on nutrition matters



III. Young people as advocates for nutrition

The online Global Scouts jamboree empowered adolescents and young people to become advocates for nutrition to:

1. Support the dissemination and promotion of key messages on infant and young child feeding, healthy eating/exercise, management of wasting, and management of donations.
2. Advocate for programmes and services to protect, promote, and support optimal breastfeeding and age-appropriate and safe complementary foods and feeding practices.
3. Encourage mothers with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and isolated at home to continue recommended feeding practices with necessary hygiene precautions during feeding.
4. Promote the delivery of preventive services to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on young children's diets and wellbeing with strong linkages to early detection and treatment of child wasting.
5. Promote full adherence to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly (WHA) resolutions (including WHA 69.9 and the associated World Health Organization Guidance on ending the inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children) in all contexts in line with the recommendations of Infant Feeding in Emergencies Operational Guidance.
6. Denounce donations of breastmilk substitutes, marketing, and promotion of unhealthy foods that are high in saturated fats, sugar, or salt.

"When you wake up in the morning, you think about food. Before you go to bed, you think about food. Food is core to us, but the food choices you make when young has an impact on your health

during adulthood. Let's advocate for eating the right foods and staying healthy," said Marjorie Volege, UNICEF ESARO Nutrition Specialist, in her closing remarks during the Online Jamboree.

The engagement around the above topics generated questions, queries, and feedback. The table below shows some of the issues raised and the responses.

Table 1: Issues and responses arising for Online Jamboree discussion (Adolescent Nutrition session)

Issue	Response
How can young people stay fit if they are unable to exercise due to a lack of physical space?	It is possible to work out from home, making use of your body weight. Squats, skipping, push-ups, yoga, and other stretching activities are some of the basic exercises one can do when physical space is a barrier. Indoor games, for example, reading and spelling games, are also good for maintaining good mental health
Is there any guide or eBook from UNICEF that provides more education on nutrition?	Young people are encouraged to participate and actively engage with the U-Report. The U-Report is a real-time mobile messaging platform designed to give young people a chance to voice their opinions on issues that they care about. In collaboration with youth organizations, U-report provides a platform for strengthening communication and dialogue with communities around core development issues.
How can young people distinguish nutritious from non-nutritious food?	Nutritious food must be in its original state. Whole-grain foods, fresh fruits, and vegetables are always healthy because they still have their full nutrient content. Avoid over-processed foods because key micronutrients would have been removed. Also, take the time to read the food labels where the ingredients used are specified.
In the absence of water, how should fruits and vegetables be washed?	The recommendation is to wash fruits and vegetables using running water. Even fruits that can be peeled off like bananas and oranges would still need to be washed because their surfaces may be contaminated. If water is scarce, prioritize the washing of fruits and vegetables, and then use them for something else, e.g., watering plants.
Is fasting recommended as a measure to save food? Is there a recommended diet during quarantine?	Intermittent fasting could have potential benefits to the health of the body. However, adolescence is a period of rapid growth, and the body needs all the nutrients in the right quantities. There is no recommended diet during the quarantine period. All that is required is to consume a variety of nutritious foods in the right amounts.
If a mother tests positive for COVID-19, how is self-isolation done without depriving the baby of its mother	Emphasize the promotion of good hygiene practices. If the baby is less than six months old, then the mother should continue breastfeeding. The transmission of the COVID-19 virus through breastmilk and breastfeeding has not been detected. While breastfeeding, a mother should still implement appropriate hygiene measures, including wearing a medical mask if available, to reduce the possibility of droplets with COVID-19 being spread to her infant. When the mother has been isolated, breastmilk can be expressed while observing proper hygiene practices.

Further to the Global Online Jamboree, UNICEF ESARO has been supporting all the 21 Country Offices in nutrition-focused COVID-19 risk communication and community engagement interventions. One of the mechanisms is through a regional partnership between UNICEF ESARO and the Scouts Africa Bureau – which has a presence in all the 21 countries except Somalia. One of the collaboration areas is the

mobilization of adolescents and youths for U Report⁷ – a UNICEF-supported real-time mobile engagement platform for youths, currently active in 10 ESAR countries: Eswatini, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Burundi, Botswana. Below is an example from Zimbabwe:

U-report COVID-19 intervention of Adolescent Nutrition in Zimbabwe

UNICEF Zimbabwe conducted U-report⁸ poll to assess nutrition knowledge about COVID-19 among adolescents and young people, understand any changes within households that may impact nutrition outcomes, and identify gaps and inform adolescent and youth engagement efforts. Among young people who participated in the polls, 69 percent reported being struggling to cope or stressed. Most common changes made by households are only buying food items the household cannot do without cutting down the number of meals and reducing portion size. Only 44 percent of young people polled met the weekly recommended physical activity. These findings informed the development of radio episodes targeted at young people, which covered, clearing out myths about COVID-19, promoting healthy eating and lifestyle under lockdown, how highly processed foods can affect health and nutrition.

In conclusion, adolescents and young people are a critical constituent in COVID-19 response, including around the impact on nutrition. Appropriate online platforms like the Online Scouts Jamboree and U-Report presents some of the empowering channels to facilitate youth engagement and advocacy to enable meaningful involvement of youths in response. UNICEF ESARO's experience with these platforms show that young people are affected in several ways due to the pandemic, they are yearning for more information and knowledge around nutrition in the context of COVID-19 and are ready to enhance the role of advocates in their communities. Decision-makers in nutrition-COVID-19 response should foster an enabling environment to reap from the involvement of youths and adolescents.

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Disclaimer:

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the United Nations Children's Fund.

⁷ <https://ureport.in/>

⁸ U-Report is a messaging tool that empowers young people around the world to engage with and speak out on issues that matter to them