Working together to prevent childhood overweight and obesity

Throughout 2020, UNICEF and Novo Nordisk continued to work towards a future where healthy environments support children’s right to thrive.
UNICEF’s partnership with Novo Nordisk is critical to strengthening advocacy, capacity, and evidence for the prevention of childhood overweight across countries and regions.

Victor Aguayo
Global Chief of UNICEF Nutrition Programme
01 Context

Childhood obesity is a global issue with high rates in Latin America and the Caribbean

The prevalence of overweight, including obesity, among children and adolescents is increasing almost everywhere. Around 39 million under-fives around the world have overweight, about 5.7 per cent of children in this age group. The toll is even higher among older children aged 5 to 19 years, with estimates of more than 340 million being overweight, nearly 18 per cent worldwide. Once regarded as a condition of the urban rich, overweight including obesity now affects both urban and rural poor children and is increasing most rapidly in low-and-middle income countries (LMICs).

The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region faces some of the highest rates of childhood overweight in the world and is one of the regions where UNICEF and partners are working most actively on the prevention agenda. Compared to the world average of 5.6 per cent, 7.5 per cent of children under five in the region have overweight; this represents 4 million children of preschool age. The situation is worse among older children. Around 30 per cent of 5-19-year-olds living in the LAC region are now estimated to be affected by overweight and obesity, far higher than the world average of 18 per cent.

The effects on individuals and society

Children who have overweight are at a higher risk of developing serious health problems in childhood, including musculoskeletal and orthopaedic complications, as well as early onset of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes type 2. These childhood trends also fuel a rise in NCDs later in life, which are the leading cause of death worldwide. Child overweight can also contribute to emotional difficulties and can lead to stigmatization, poor socialization and reduced educational attainment. At the societal level, overweight and obesity result in major financial and social burdens for LMICs.

A large and authoritative body of evidence suggests that the increasing availability, affordability and promotion of foods high in fats, sugar and salt is the major driver of the rise of overweight over the past 30 – 40 years. Combined with rapid urbanisation, these transformations are changing the face of malnutrition globally. This points to the critical importance of creating healthy food environments for all children. When nutritious foods are affordable, convenient and desirable, children and families can make better food choices. At the same time, complementary actions via the health, social protection and education systems are needed.

While very few countries have successfully turned the tide on childhood overweight, promising strategies are emerging at national and city levels. The first step for many countries to replicate these successes is to address existing knowledge gaps and to support decision-makers to develop and implement a package of effective policies.

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Girl eating an ice cream. Credit: Bektur Zhanibekov, 2019

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Our shared value partnership

The common agenda
Helping to prevent childhood overweight and obesity requires global partnerships that drive impact at scale. Based on a belief that every child should have the chance to thrive and reach their full potential in a changing world, Novo Nordisk has taken a lead role in spear-heading this agenda with UNICEF. As the leading global advocate for children’s rights with a worldwide presence, convening power, and 75 years of experience working with governments, UNICEF helps to scale solutions to deliver sustainable impact for children. Novo Nordisk, as a leading global healthcare company, draws on its extensive networks and expertise in advancing global health advocacy on NCDs and with multi-stakeholder platforms, such as Cities Changing Diabetes (CCD).

Overview
On World Children’s Day (WCD) 2019, Novo Nordisk and UNICEF announced the start of an ambitious global shared value partnership to help prevent childhood overweight and obesity. Initially focused on reaching over 500,000 children in Mexico and Colombia, the partnership aims to build knowledge and awareness to support decision makers to act and invest in evidence-based, cost-effective prevention strategies. The knowledge and tools developed through the partnership will be accessible to UNICEF staff, government officials and partners in at least 20 countries, including 10 countries in Latin America. This partnership is supported by Novo Nordisk’s $6 million strategic funding to UNICEF and collaborative work that leverages both organizations networks and expertise.

The scope
The LAC region faces some of the highest rates of childhood overweight worldwide, therefore this global partnership will initially focus on the LAC region. The projects in Mexico and Colombia aim to develop and scale-up interventions and policies that work not just in LAC but globally.

The partnership is organised around three pillars, focusing on complementary approaches:

A key shared ambition is to help shift perceptions so that tackling childhood overweight and obesity is seen as a societal responsibility and not an individual one. This requires increased knowledge and broader recognition that the causes of childhood overweight are complex, with interconnected environmental influences. By coordinating convening networks and disseminating key information and advocacy, this partnership aims to drive forward systemic changes to build healthier environments and early prevention as a key action to address the rise in overweight and obesity.

1. Address gaps in knowledge and sharing best practice:
Enhance knowledge among decision-makers on successful policies to prevent childhood overweight and obesity in middle-income countries.

2. Supporting decision makers to act:
Build awareness of the impact of overweight and obesity on children and their rights and advocate for systemic changes to address this growing epidemic.

3. Tailored in-country support: Mexico & Colombia:
Programmatic work in Mexico and Colombia to develop and strengthen interventions and policies for overweight and obesity prevention and help scale up interventions that work.

The partnership is working towards the Global Goals:

Sustainable Development Goal 2
End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Sustainable Development Goal 3
Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Sustainable Development Goal 17
Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

In Mexico, the prevalence of obesity among 5-19-year olds is 37 per cent over double the world average of 18 per cent

In Colombia, the prevalence of obesity among 5-19-year olds is 24 per cent thus exceeding the global average
Our impact

Overall Programming Highlights: The graphic below shows the original outputs in each pillar and what have been some of the highlights and biggest achievements in 2020.

Our goal
To contribute to the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity by addressing obesogenic environments, improving diets and changing societal narratives and norms.

Our pillars
1. Address gaps in knowledge and sharing best practice
2. Supporting decisionmakers to act
3. Tailored in country support: Mexico & Colombia

Our achievements

Develop a virtual knowledge center to inform and influence research agendas, methods development, and overall global knowledge on childhood overweight and obesity prevention.
- Expert committee established.
- Online inventory of policies and programmes available for UNICEF’s staff in LAC countries.

Develop a global and regional obesity landscape analysis tool: global pilot including three country offices in LAC (Costa Rica, Peru and Argentina) to start in Q1 2021.
- Digital marketing studies: An innovative methodology was implemented and adapted to the country context in Mexico and Argentina. These studies are in their final stages.
- Food Retail Assessment toolkit has been drafted and piloted in four country offices (Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, Costa Rica).
- UNICEF roadmap for work on urban food and nutrition developed and disseminated.

Introducing the landscape analysis tool

UNICEF developed a landscape analysis tool to be used by country teams to identify priority gaps and to help UNICEF refocus its country programming around the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity.

The tool is now being piloted in four regions: LAC, East Asia Pacific, South Asia, and Eastern and Southern Africa. In the LAC region specifically, the tool has been introduced in Argentina, Peru, and Costa Rica and will be piloted in 2021.

What happened in year one?

Establishment of the UNICEF Expert Advisory Committee
UNICEF convened a leading group of experts to guide our work on childhood overweight and obesity. The group met for the first time in May 2020 and has provided consistent feedback on products from the partnership including the joint landscape analysis tool, the advocacy guidance note and the research-action agenda.

Development of a regional food retail assessment toolkit
After a successful systematic review and survey to evaluate retailers’ policies and practices in relation to food retail environments, the LAC Regional Office (LACRO) launched a toolkit to assess food retail spaces via pilots in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica and Ecuador in December 2020. Results will be available in 2021.

Online inventory of interventions and policy actions in the LAC region to tackle NCDs, including overweight and obesity prevention
The inventory with information on existing data and actions on overweight and obesity as well as NCDs is available for internal use at the regional level. Based on the available information, the knowledge-exchange platform on the prevention of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents will be developed during 2021.

Digital marketing studies in Mexico and Argentina
UNICEF initiated studies on the extent and nature of digital marketing of food and beverages aimed at children and adolescents in Mexico and Argentina. Final reports with results will be available in 2021, a crucial year during which the countries will have opportunities to advocate for policies that protect children from the harmful impact of food and beverage marketing.

Child Profiles Initiative
UNICEF has designed an innovative project to capture children’s lived experience of food environments using in-depth interviews with children and focus-group discussions. Researchers will collect important qualitative insights around factors influencing children’s diets to identify how policies and interventions could better meet their needs. Work has begun in the Philippines with a full write-up expected in 2021.

Pillar 1 Achievements:
Address gaps in knowledge and sharing best practice

Country-level advocacy and policy development work:
- Advocacy material on front of pack labelling (FOPL) available for LAC countries.
- Support for implementation of FOPL in Mexico.
- Mexico works on food-based dietary guidelines (FBGD) initiated with the Ministry of Health and National Institute of Public Health.
- Methods for engaging territorial prevention networks in Colombia have been developed.

Supporting parents and caregivers adopt improved behaviours regarding maternal, child and adolescent nutrition and feeding practices.
- Linked to this, over 10 million caregivers of young children, school age children and adolescents were reached with digital messages on healthy diets, physical activity and hygiene.

Improving national capacities to adequately present, diagnose and monitor all forms of malnutrition in children and adolescents.
- UNICEF’s efforts in advocating for improvement of breastfeeding practices contributed to the introduction of a key amendment to the General Health Law in November 2020.
- Advocating with the Ministry of Health and the Department of National Planning in Colombia to form a technical committee on overweight prevention.

Advocacy actions (dissuasion and events) to support policies, and regulations that are effective in preventing diet-related NCDs through government-led, comprehensive approaches.
- Joint WEF event.
- World Obesity Day blogs.
- WCD event with WHO.
- Planning for joint event in LAC (2021).

Development of a global and regional advocacy strategy and evidence for an investment case on childhood overweight prevention.
- Advocacy guidance note for regions and countries developed and circulated via UNICEF’s Working to Improve Nutrition at Scale (WINS) mailing list.

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**b Pillar 2 Achievements: Support decision-makers to act**

What happened in year one?

*Call for Action at Davos:* In a blog posted on the WEF website in English and Spanish, UNICEF’s Deputy Executive Director Charlotte Petri Gornitzka highlighted the challenge of childhood obesity and tackled head-on the misconception that this is an unstoppable trend. The blog highlighted examples of impactful policies that show great promise and profiled the joint event with Novo Nordisk (see section 5: Resources).

*World Obesity Day 2020 activation:* UNICEF published two articles on World Obesity Day, calling for action to lower the financial, social and physical barriers that prevent communities from eating well. One focused on the story of 10-year-old Ricky who lives in Mexico City and faces multiple barriers to eating healthily. The other used the context of South Africa to frame childhood obesity as a sustainable development issue, affecting some of our most vulnerable communities. UNICEF social media activation generated >2.8 million impressions and 73,325 engagements.

*Communications to support front of package food labels in Mexico:* UNICEF produced and disseminated videos, messages, infographics and other products to support the implementation of the new labelling system. Materials were developed with the participation of children, targeting both children and the general public. This campaign will continue in 2021 and will be enriched with a new focus on the marketing of food and beverages. UNICEF also developed a technical note in support of the new labelling in Mexico.

*World Children's Day 2020 UNICEF-WHO Webinar:* To mark WCD 2020, UNICEF and WHO co-hosted a webinar to highlight the continued relevance and importance of global efforts to prevent childhood overweight and obesity, with over 1,000 registered participants, including a special contribution by Pau Gasol, UNICEF Global Goodwill Ambassador for Zero Childhood Obesity.

*WCD 2020 Blog:* Victor Aguayo, Global Chief of UNICEF Nutrition Programme teamed up with Johanna Ralston (CEO of World Obesity Federation) to publish a blog, supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies. The blog called for action on childhood obesity amidst the COVID-19 crisis, including a renewed commitment to generate and share policy-relevant data and evidence, test innovative approaches and scale up the implementation of evidence-informed interventions across both countries and cities.

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**c Pillar 3 Achievements: Tailored in-country support: Mexico & Colombia**

What happened in year one?

*Supporting parents and caregivers adopt improved behaviours regarding maternal, child and adolescent nutrition and feeding practices.* UNICEF Mexico increased its communication on optimal nutrition practices through mobile phones, social networks, community radios and TV. An interactive guide was developed by UNICEF to support families in lockdown with activities that they can do with their children to keep themselves healthy and active during the pandemic. Over 10 million caregivers of young children, school age children and adolescents were reached with messages on healthy diets, physical activity and hygiene. Adaptations to reflect the COVID-19 context are being incorporated so the rollout can begin in 2021.

*Improving national capacities to adequately prevent, diagnose and monitor all forms of malnutrition in children and adolescents.* UNICEF’s efforts in advocating for improvement of breastfeeding practices also contributed to the introduction of a key amendment to the General Health Law in November 2020, requiring the promotion of breastfeeding in the first hour in all health facilities and banning the offer of infant formula unless medically necessary.

*Activating for a comprehensive transformation of obesogenic environments in Colombia and Mexico.* UNICEF Mexico in collaboration with partners from the academia, finalized two key studies related to marketing of unhealthy food and beverages directed to children in retail and in the internet. The results show that existing regulations are insufficient to protect children from high exposure to marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, which strongly influences their choices and is among the key determinants of high rates of childhood overweight and obesity in Mexico. The evidence raised is being used to advocate – together with children – to improve existing marketing regulations.

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*A Story from Mexico: unhealthy food environments*

The lack of access to fresh and healthy foods, the aggressive marketing of food products directed at children and high exposure to ultra-processed food at home, in schools and in markets, all contribute to an unhealthy environment that promotes obesity and affects millions of Mexican children.

Ricky is a 10-year-old boy living in Mexico City with his mother Alicia. They try to have a healthy breakfast, because they know that throughout the day, they will not have nutritious options available. Alicia, who works as a house maid, usually has a loaded workday with a three to four hours commute. “I don’t have much time to go to the market; I know it is good to eat fruits; I also know I should buy more vegetables, but I don’t have the time to buy nor prepare them at home.” Her choices then are fast and processed foods. For school, before the COVID-19 pandemic, Alicia gave Ricky some money for a snack. He usually buys tacos or popcorn and candy. He doesn’t buy anything to drink, and although there are water fountains in his school, he doesn’t like to drink water because “it doesn’t have any taste at all.” When Ricky goes to a nearby market with his mom or when they go for a walk, he likes to get candy, chips and ice cream as they are tasty and attractive. Alicia says that when he does eat fruit it’s only because she encouraged him to do so.

In 2020, Mexico adopted a new front-of-package labelling, which has been supported by several government institutions, academia, civil society and international organizations including UNICEF. Developed with the most up-to-date and compelling evidence, this type of labelling warns consumers of excess calories, sugar, sodium, saturated fats, and trans-fats, as well as caffeine and artificial sweeteners, so that children can avoid them. Additionally, it prohibits the use of popular characters and cartoons on products directed at children. Although efforts are still needed to regulate advertising and improve school food environments, with this measure Alicia and Ricky will have more information and options to make healthier choices.

(Names have been changed to respect the family’s privacy)
04 2020 Collaboration highlights

Despite COVID-19, the partnership has adapted and found new ways to convene stakeholders and drive action on childhood overweight and obesity. Several joint events and activities, some mentioned below, have taken place in 2020.

During the January 2020 World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, UNICEF and Novo Nordisk hosted a session on Tackling Childhood Overweight in a Changing World. The event provided a platform for leaders from multiple sectors to profile promising initiatives to prevent childhood overweight and obesity, giving a specific focus to the critical role of healthy food environments.

Globally, 1 in 3 kids under 5 is malnourished # 700 million children! This crisis demands for urgent actions across sectors and radical transformation to food systems. Thnx for great discussions during the side-event today @UNICEF @novonordisk @unicefchief @UKLarsJorgensen #WEF20

In March 2020 UNICEF Mexico raised awareness about childhood overweight and obesity at the Novo Nordisk Leadership Summit. During this event UNICEF Mexico was able to leverage Novo Nordisk’s strong country-level platforms and network and provided an opportunity to spotlight UNICEF’s work on the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity for the 700 participants.

Between August & October 2020 another country level initiative took place when UNICEF Colombia and Novo Nordisk hosted six training workshops with 99 journalists from six territories across the country, in an effort to positively reshape the national narrative around child overweight and obesity.

Due to COVID-19, the workshops were successfully transformed into virtual workshops led by UNICEF Colombia. 100 per cent of participating journalists reported the sessions to be highly relevant for their professional practice, underlining its success.

Another highlight of 2020 was the roadmap for action to support nutritious diets and healthy environments in cities developed by UNICEF. This was a first step in setting an agenda for healthy urban food environments for children with the ambition to run a pilot during the partnership. Novo Nordisk's Cities Changing Diabetes (CCD) team has engaged with UNICEF in several consultations to provide insight about CCD's knowledge, tools and approaches, and provide feedback on UNICEF's draft roadmap.

Through CCD, UNICEF and Novo Nordisk also joined forces with EAT to host a joint side-event on children eating well in cities during the EAT@Home virtual conference. The session on 3 December 2020 brought together select actors from the nutrition, health, environmental sustainability and urban development communities to kickstart collaboration and cross-learning on healthy food environments for children. The three host organisations committed to continue the collaboration to help drive this agenda in 2021.
There is no doubt that childhood overweight and obesity is a public health crisis that requires immediate attention. Childhood overweight and obesity is more than an individual choice, this is everybody’s business. Together with UNICEF, we hope to help millions of children lead healthy lives and at the same time ease the burden of obesity to society.

Lars Fruergaard Jørgensen,
CEO, Novo Nordisk A/S
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01 Context

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02 Our shared value partnership

10. ENSANUT 2018 (Mexico National Nutrition and Health Survey)
Working together to prevent childhood overweight and obesity

in support of

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