

# **RSOG – UNICEF Dialogue Forum**

## **Malaysia’s Double-Burden – Challenges and Ways Forward**

**When** : 25 May 2016  
**Where** : Razak School of Government  
**Speakers** : Christiane Rudert, Zalma Abd Razak, Dr. Elise Magnord and Professor Dr. Mohd IsmailNoor

### **About the Forum**

Following the release of the recent National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2015, Malaysia's health minister has given warning that the country is in the midst of an obesity epidemic. While similar to much of the developed world where obesity is on the rise, the rate of how the weight is being piled on is a cause for concern. New figures have shown that 30 percent of the population are overweight, and within a span of twenty years, obesity has significantly increased from 4.4 percent to 18 percent.

More alarmingly, according to the South East Asian Nutrition Survey 2013, one-in-five Malaysian children are now diagnosed as overweight or obese. This has serious implications for the future of the country, where they will likely grow to become obese adults who bear long-term health consequences. It is proposed that a multi- discipline approach is required to both examine the drivers and to develop policies and interventions which tackle this pressing health issue. Thus, in contributing to the discourse of the “double burden” challenge (i.e. malnutrition and obesity), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), in collaboration with the Razak School of Government (RSOG), hosted a Dialogue Forum entitled “Malaysia’s Double-Burden – Challenges and Ways Forward”. This forum discusses possible strategic areas of engagement between the Government of Malaysia and UNICEF to effectively address childhood obesity in Malaysia.

### **Summary**

In many Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries there is change in the face of malnutrition especially among young children. Many countries including Malaysia are now facing a double crisis, high levels of wasting whereby children are too thin for their height as well as a large and rapidly growing percentage of overweight children. This scenario is referred to as double burden. The double burden of malnutrition is characterised by the coexistence of undernutrition along with overweight and obesity, or diet-related non communicable diseases, within individuals, households and populations, and across the life course.

This double burden of malnutrition can exist at various levels from individual, household and population. According to Christiane Rudert, many ASEAN countries including Malaysia has seen impressive economic gains in the last decade which has lifted millions of children out of poverty. However there is a rise of conditions like obesity. The worrying aspect of this is that Malaysian children are now at risk of malnutrition from both ends of the spectrum.

One aspect to remember is that the relationship between undernutrition and overweight and obesity is more than a coexistence. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), reflected in the epidemiology and supported by evidence, undernutrition early in life – and even in utero – may predispose to overweight and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and heart disease later in life. Overweight mothers are also associated with an overweight and obese offspring. Rapid weight gain early in life may predispose to long-term weight excess. These are just some of the examples of biological mechanisms, which along with environmental and social influences, are increasingly understood as important drivers in the global burden of malnutrition across the life course.

Stunting, wasting and the correlation between the both is an issue in Malaysia despite significant economic gains. Some of the contributing factor to this can range from traditional diets that lack nutritious food, poor infant feeding practices, inadequate clean water and sanitation and many others. If children are stunted, this will impact their development in other areas including health and education.

A joint report released by UNICEF, WHO and ASEAN served as an eye opener to the facts about children's health and nutrition in Malaysia. This "double burden of malnutrition" is not only visible in Malaysia but also prevalent in neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand.

Christiane stated that the UNICEF's work in Thailand has been promising and they would like to emulate the work they are currently doing with Thailand, in Malaysia. Thailand has long been used as a successful nutrition programming example for the reduction of undernutrition in children during the 1990's. One of the reasons for the success of such programmes in Thailand has been due to the multi-sectoral agreement and collaboration which has led to a series of targeted nutrition programmes accompanied by economic growth and improvements in health, hygiene and sanitation access.

Zalma Abd Razak, outlined the various efforts taken by the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) on addressing this issue. According to Zalma, 47.2% of Malaysian adults are overweight. Some of the contributing facts can range from eating habits i.e. not eating sufficient vegetables and fruits to lifestyle and economic contributions. For example, some common myths like thinking the consumption of condensed milk fall under the daily intake. To address this particular issue, the Ministry of Health has a complimentary nutrition feeding programme in schools.

The ministry is also in dialogue with food industries and fast food industry to address better eating habits. MOH has set up the Global Nutrition Targets which aims at reducing the percentage of children who are stunted to 40%. Policies have been drawn up related to

school children which includes the ban on unhealthy foods and advertising of unhealthy foods within 50 metres around schools. Despite the efforts by the Ministry, she stressed that there is a lot more to be done and a more collaborative effort between all parties is required in overcoming this issue.

According to Dr. Elise Mognard understanding the behaviour and rationality behind peoples eating habits is crucial. She posed some important questions like why is it that the more they learn about food, the fatter they seem to be getting? There is a rupture between the eating behaviour and the rationality of a person. What are the values that Malaysians have that causes them to have the eating habits that they have right now? Why are Malaysian's making certain food choices instead of another? According to Mognard, Malaysians tend to eat in groups. 82.6% of Malaysians eat dinner with company, 75.7% eat lunch with company while 58.2% eat breakfast with company. Understanding the eating habits of a certain society is important when drawing up initiatives in overcoming the problems that come with this.

The UNICEF Malaysia country programme has outlined several initiatives as a way forward to overcome this problem. Firstly, a complete nutrition situation and landscape analysis has to be drawn out and recommendations and roadmap have to be developed. UNICEF will be able to provide technical assistance on effective strategies to reduce malnutrition among children under 5 years of age.

They will also be able to provide technical support to implementation of nutrition strategies to support prevention and control of double-burden of malnutrition and obesity among pre-school and school children. With the UNICEF programme, a thorough behaviour change communication plan will be developed to advocate for healthy eating practices.

### **Issues Raised**

- Double burden of malnutrition: Governments need to regulate the marketing of junk food and sugary drinks to children and restrict their availability in schools.
- Stunting and wasting: A more collaborative effort is required by various departments and ministries as it is a large problem that cannot be solved with the commitment of only some parties.
- Collaboration is also required between private sectors, NGO's and the government in addressing this issue. A good example is the UNICEF/EU partnership and report on nutrition in ASEAN that shows what can be achieved and learned through international partnerships.

## **About the Speaker**

- Christiane Rudert is the Regional Nutrition Adviser, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific.
- Puan Zalma Abd. Razak, is the Director of Nutrition Division, Ministry of Health, Malaysia.
- Professor Dr. Mohd Ismail Noor is President, Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity.

## **Contact**

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