Latin America and the Caribbean: How to Protect and Promote the Nutrition of Mothers and Children

Rapid Social Response (RSR) has supported the development of a toolkit that offers policymakers and program administrators in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) cost-effective tools that can protect children and their mothers from malnutrition.

Rationale

Since 2008, countries in LAC have grappled with the global financial crisis and food price volatility. Coupled with the region’s propensity for natural disasters, the crisis has had severe impact on the nutritional status of the population, especially poor mothers and children. The effects are particularly severe for children in the first 1000 days of life — the period encompassing pregnancy until the child reaches the age of two. Under-nutrition in this period of life lessens children’s chances of survival and may cause lifelong physical and cognitive damage.

An RSR-supported assessment revealed that most policies for crisis response and nutrition programs in the region tend to overlook the needs of mothers and young children. They are either poorly targeted or not prioritized, or the interventions used are not appropriate. This is evidenced by a sustained high prevalence of anemia and stunting in the poorest countries of the region, and in some middle-income countries with a high level of economic inequality.

Response

RSR has supported a toolkit that offers policymakers and practitioners in LAC a framework for decision-making on how to safeguard the nutritional status of mothers and children, especially in times of crisis.

The toolkit provides specific policy guidance on food security and promotion of healthy growth and motherhood, and suggests policy solutions to prevention and treatment of micronutrient deficiencies and infectious diseases. It also advises on cross-cutting issues such as targeting; multi-sectoral coordination, and monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendations include mainstreaming nutrition in development programs, and scaling up and intensify those programs in times of crisis. Program administrators are also encouraged to seek collaboration across sectors such as health, nutrition, agriculture, water and sanitation, and social protection.

The experiences in LAC were shared and the toolkit officially launched at a south-south learning event in Panama in December, 2012. High level representatives and policy practitioners gathered with experts from international organizations and NGOs.
Accomplishments to Date

- Completed an inventory of international recommendations and best practices
- Completed participatory assessments and inventory of the nutritional crises and emergency responses in 12 Latin American countries including Bolivia, Dominica, El Salvador, Grenada, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Colombia, Guatemala and Panama
- Summarized best practices in case-studies in collaboration with partners and developed country-specific recommendations
- Developed a web-based toolkit

This study allows the Red Cross to realize that the attention in the first 1,000 days is a weakness of the emergency response in the country.
— Ing. Mirna Zelaya, Executive Secretary, Red Cross El Salvador

Photo Credit: Marie Chantal Messier