



**Remarks by Ms. Pauline Tamesis
Resident Coordinator, United Nations in Cambodia**

On the occasion of the National Nutrition Day
7th November 2018

Your Excellency Deputy Prime Minister **Yim Chhay Ly**, Chairman of CARD,

Your Excellency **Mam Bun Heng**, Minister of MOH

Distinguished guests, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

I am privileged to be speaking on behalf of the United Nations, and I am truly honored to be here with you all today for Cambodia's 5th national Nutrition Day. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Yim Chhay Ly for focusing this year on a theme important to all UN agencies: "Good nutrition for children".

Children are the future of Cambodia, so investing in them is investing in the future development of the country. Good nutrition is the bedrock of child survival, health and development. Well-nourished children are better able to grow and learn, [better able] to participate in and contribute to their communities, and [better able] to be resilient in the face of disease, disasters, and other crises. Promoting exclusive breast feeding for the first six months of baby's life could be a practical first step. To illustrate, an exclusively breastfed child is 14 times less likely to die in the first six months of her/his life compared to a child who wasn't breastfed.

Countries in East Asia and the Pacific has seen great economic progress in recent decades. Despite this progress, however, nearly half of all deaths in children under 5 can still be attributed to undernutrition. According to a 2017 report, more than half of all stunted children, almost half of all overweight children, and more than two-thirds of all wasted children, live in this region.

Cambodia, just like its neighboring countries, has achieved commendable socio-economic progress over the last two decades. But despite this, undernutrition remains high, with nearly a third of children under five classified as stunted, and 10% of children classified as wasted in the last household survey (DHS). This means that approximately 600,000 children are stunted and 200,000 children are wasted. Our job is not yet done. We need to continue to invest in ending all forms of malnutrition by 2030.

In the past, children under 5 and mothers have historically been the primary focus of stakeholders working in nutrition [in Cambodia and around the world]. In recent years, however, we have seen that individuals face different and substantial nutritional vulnerabilities throughout the life-cycle. In order to break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition, we need to invest in good nutrition throughout childhood and adolescence. **This is because children continue to grow and develop until the age of 18. Good nutrition is an essential element to ensuring that they can reach their full potential.** This is a particularly important point to all the young people in the audience today. You need good nutrition to realize your full potential. In addition, the behaviours that you develop from when you were 6 years old, up to 18, such as dietary and wash and hygiene practices, strongly influence your future practices. So when you become parents you also invest in good nutrition and hygiene for your children.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen

Malnutrition costs low-income countries billions of dollars a year. In Cambodia, malnutrition can cost could up to 250 to 260 million USD per year. Unfortunately, people cannot tell when their children are becoming malnourished as it is cannot be detected with the naked eye.

A global nutrition report entitled “actions and accountability to advance nutrition and sustainable development” showed that specific actions to address undernutrition, when scaled up to 90% coverage, can generate a rate of return of 16USD for every one dollar invested.

Nutrition interventions alone will not solve the problem. In Cambodia, actions should address: one, people’s inability to obtain nutritious food. Two, tackle high rates of infectious

diseases. Three, improve hygiene and sanitation practices. And four, focus on the unsuitable feeding practices during the 1,000 day-window of a child's life. In some cases, actions should also improve people's knowledge and income. A study we conducted last year found that 1 in 5 households in Cambodia are not able to afford nutritious diets.

In order to tackle these issues, we all need to work together. We need more joint multi-sectoral interventions! The next National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition 2019-2023 will be a good opportunity to prioritize actions. In the first round of discussions with stakeholders at the sub-national level, we have identified priority areas for joint action. One, linking food security and nutrition to Social Protection for equity and access. Two, ensuring food safety by improving food system at the same time. Three, coordinating and implementing community-led nutrition programs at sub-national level. And four, doubling efforts to address the double burden of malnutrition.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen

There are many UN agencies invested and very active in the food security and nutrition sector. We are harnessing and coordinating our efforts to deliver as 'One UN' to better support the Royal Government and people of Cambodia. Over the years, the United Nations has recognized the critical role of nutrition as an enabling goal for other development goals (SDGs). The Cambodian government also emphasizes the importance of health and nutrition as a cornerstone for development, and a priority area for the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV. We, the UN, cooperate with the government in coordinating policy dialogue and strategic planning for food security and nutrition through CARD and in various technical working groups (TWGs).

Before closing, I would like to raise another important point, that is, the need to tackle new nutrition challenges in a context of migration and urban development. The children of Cambodia are now growing up in a more complex society where although undernutrition remains a major issue, overnutrition is on the rise.

I am very alarmed about the fact that two out of five adults in the Asia-Pacific region are either overweight or obese. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that roughly half of the world's share of adults with diabetes live in Asia. The cost of obesity in the Asia-

Pacific region is estimated to be roughly US\$166 billion annually. Among Southeast Asian countries, healthcare and productivity losses from obesity are highest in Indonesia (US\$2 to 4 billion), Malaysia (US\$1 to 2 billion), and Singapore (US\$400 million). These numbers show the magnitude of the problem if left unchecked. The rapidly changing food environment puts Cambodia at a high risk of following a pattern similar to others in the region. In particular, the rising consumption of snack foods, as found amongst young children, is of grave concern.

In Cambodia, for the first time in 2014, the prevalence of overweight women has surpassed the prevalence of underweight women. Developing countries are also spending an average of 2 to 7 percent of their health care budgets on direct costs for treatment of obesity and associated chronic diseases—and the obesity problem is rapidly worsening. These costs fall largely on governments. UN agencies are promoting healthy diet as part of prevention of overweight/obesity and diet related non-communicable diseases, especially in conjunction with street food safety.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen

To conclude, I wish to reiterate specific actions that the Royal Government of Cambodia can do right now. The Royal Government needs to launch campaigns to prevent the rising burden of obesity, whilst keeping efforts strong to tackle the pervasive issues of undernutrition. We from the United Nations are ready to support by collaborating with private business and government to monitor and re-enforce laws and sub-decrees related to food safety, including the marketing of baby formula products and the sub-decree on iodized salt; working with government, food producers and the food industry to facilitate the availability of affordable nutritious foods; supporting the provision of nutritious school meals and encouraging healthy school environments; promoting exclusive breast feeding for the first six months of baby's life; and facing the growing challenges of overweight and obesity.

Nutrition is one of the many challenges that a child with his/her mother are facing over the life-cycle. Ensuring that line ministries are working closely together on multiple fronts is essential to ensure that public funding is well spent. In one month, an important workshop will be hosted by CARD to further advance the ongoing national dialogue on good practices

for integrated WASH and nutrition programming, which builds on the existing Cambodian experience. I encourage all of you to participate and share your findings and perspectives for the future of Cambodia towards nutrition.

Thank you for your attention.