Minimum Dietary Diversity: A New UN Indicator to Track Progress Towards Ending Malnutrition

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Minimum Dietary Diversity (MDD) has been added to the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators.[1] In March 2025, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) announced:[1]

- MDD was adopted as a UN SDG indicator by the UN Statistical Commission; and
- The FAO and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) are the custodian agencies for MDD.

This is the culmination of a long process led by a coalition of countries and international organizations, spearheaded by the FAO and UNICEF, with support from the World Health Organization (WHO).[1,2]

Tracking of this simple validated measure of diet quality in young children and women of reproductive age is seen as key to ending malnutrition around the world. While the FAO, UNICEF, and WHO have long led efforts to track progress towards food security and nutrition targets, this represents the first time a measure of diet quality will be added to other critical indicators being tracked, such as child stunting, wasting, anemia, and overweight.[1]

MDD will be measured and tracked in 2 population groups at high risk of malnutrition:

- Young children (6-23 months) – MDD-C
- Women of reproductive age (15-49 years) – MDD-W

MDD-C and MDD-W have been shown to be a rough proxy for diet quality and nutrient adequacy.[3,4] They estimate the percent of the population who consumed foods from at least 5 defined food groups during the previous day. Recent research suggests MDD-W can be extended to children and teens 4-15 years.[5]

MDD indicators are an important addition to the UN Sustainable Development Goals:

The FAO notes MDD captures a crucial aspect of diet quality previously lacking in tracking progress toward ending malnutrition to achieve the UN SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and the broader 2030 Agenda:[1]

- "Dietary diversity - or the variety of foods we consume - is one of the pillars of a healthy diet."
- "The quality of a diet is essential to prevent all forms of malnutrition and support health, growth, development, and well-being."

MDD will be reported under UN SDG 2.2: "By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, women of reproductive age and older persons".

MDD recognizes diet quality impacts health outcomes:

The FAO's Chief Statistician and Director of the Statistics Division, José Rosero Moncayo is quoted as saying: "The absence of an SDG indicator on healthy diets neglected the pivotal role that diets play in achieving the 2030 Agenda, even though unhealthy dietary patterns are known to be the primary driver of poor health outcomes and non-communicable diseases globally."[1]

MDD-C (developed by UNICEF and the WHO) is defined as the percentage of children 6-23 months who consumed at least 5 of the 8 following defined food groups during the previous 24 hours:[4,6]

- breast milk
- grains, roots, tubers and plantains
- pulses (beans, peas, lentils), nuts and seeds
- dairy products (milk, infant formula, yogurt, cheese)
- flesh foods (meat, fish, poultry, organ meats)
- eggs
- vitamin-A rich fruits and vegetables
- other fruits and vegetables

MDD-C measures dietary quality and the adoption of complementary feeding practices in infants and young children 6-24 months.[4]

MDD-W (developed by FAO and partners) is a simple yes/no indicator of whether women 15-49 years have consumed at least 5 of the 10 following defined food groups in the previous 24 hours:[1]

- grains, white roots and tubers, and plantains
- pulses (beans, peas and lentils)
- nuts and seeds
- milk and milk products
- meat, poultry and fish
- eggs
- dark green leafy vegetables
- other vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables
- other vegetables
- other fruits

The FAO notes: "The higher the proportion of women in the sample who reach this threshold, the higher the chance that women in the population consume diets that have sufficient vitamins and minerals."[1]

MDD-C and MDD-W data will be collected and reported as part of the UN SDG framework:

The MDD indicators are part of a new statistical domain on food security and nutrition statistics created by the UN Statistical Commission in 2024. Global and regional MDD trends are/will be reported in the:[1]

- UN The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025. (See the graph on page 11 showing the percentage of women 15-49 years and children 6-23 months that achieved MDD).
- FAO assessment Tracking Progress on food and agriculture-related SDG indicators 2025.
- FAO MDD-W data in the SDG Indicators Data Portal.
- Global Diet Quality Project MDD-W country data presented in an interactive map.

Moving forward the new MDD indicators can be used to assess dietary diversity at the population level, inform policies, set targets, and evaluate the impact of programs.[1] Country-level estimates are expected to be released in the second half of 2025.

REFERENCES

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