

Draft Statement v 4
Working Group on Nutrition in Emergencies

Use of the new WHO Child Growth Standards in emergency nutrition programmes - February 2007

- The release of the WHO Child Growth Standards in April 2006 represents a major achievement for nutritional science in that, for the first time, it allows child growth to be assessed relative to an international standard. The introduction of this new standard means that many agencies are interested in understanding its programmatic implications and in getting greater clarity on how to best apply the standards to their work.
- In the field of emergency nutrition, growth standards are used for multiple purposes, including understanding the nutritional situation through nutrition surveys, estimating potential numbers of beneficiaries, and in the individual treatment of malnutrition to calculate entry and exit criteria for feeding programmes.
- To date, analyses of data from nutrition surveys conducted in emergencies using the new growth standards vs. the NCHS growth reference suggest that the use of the new standards leads to markedly greater proportions of children under five years of age being categorized as severely wasted (based on WHZ <-3z scores). The two published papers comparing the WHO and NCHS charts show an increase in severe wasting of 1.5-2.5 (Figure 4 in de Onis et al, Public Health Nutrition 2006;9:942-7) and 0.5-2.7 % (Table 1 in Seal and Kerac, BMJ 2007; published 23 Feb) - findings that have programmatic and resource implications.
- The SCN Working Group on Nutrition in Emergencies feels that important questions need to be answered as a result of the use of the new WHO Child Growth Standards. Given the greater numbers of children under five years categorized as severely wasted and the uncertainty of what the traditional cutoffs tell us with WFH Z-scores, it is important and timely to study the functional significance of the weight-for-height indices and examine the choice of suitable Z-score cut-offs for therapeutic and supplementary feeding in terms of risk of mortality and other functional outcomes for children under 5 years of age.
- For estimating population means and prevalence data using weight-for-height, it is recommended that both WHO Child Growth Standards and the NCHS references be used for reporting purposes during the transition period.
- The SCN Nutrition in Emergencies Working Group will issue an update on the appropriate use of the WHO Child Growth Standards in emergency nutrition programmes at the next meeting of the SCN in 2008.