Although in recent years there has been a dramatic decrease in child mortality in low-income countries, many surviving children continue to have poor psychosocial and cognitive development. There are extremely limited data on the size of the problem, but it is likely that millions of young children are failing to reach their potential in development. They subsequently are unable to benefit fully from schooling and to become productive citizens. This failure has implications both for the individuals and for national development.

A workshop held in 1991 in Jamaica [1] concluded that there was substantial evidence that poor health and nutrition detrimentally affected children’s development. However, good health and nutrition alone were insufficient to promote optimal child development, and quality of the psychosocial environment was also important. It was the need to look at the children’s development in a holistic way and take an integrated approach to child services that stimulated the subcommittee on Nutrition and Mental Health of the Institute of Child Health, London University, and UNICEF, New York to plan another workshop. The aim of the event was to sensitize senior managers and policy makers to the need for development of programmes that integrated child development, health, and nutrition activities.

The resulting workshop was held at Wye College, Kent, in the United Kingdom, on April 4–8, 1998, and was attended by researchers active in the field of nutrition and child development, UNICEF programme officers from regional and country offices, and representatives from other international agencies and non-governmental organizations. The papers in this issue were presented at the workshop. These papers review the nature of child development and factors that affect it, including health, nutrition, and the environment. The problems in measuring child development and identifying at-risk children are discussed. Case studies of integrated programmes and studies from developing countries are also included. Finally, the economic implications of such programmes are considered.

Following the Wye meeting, a small group of researchers met at UNICEF’s request in New York and wrote a short summary of the scientific evidence on the nature and determinants of child development and their implications for interventions. This summary can be found in this issue after this introductory statement.

It is hoped that this issue will contribute to further work on designing and implementing integrated programmes for the promotion of child development in developing countries.

Several people contributed to the planning of the meetings, including David Alnwick, Roger Shrimpton, Ludmila Lhotska, and Marjorie Newman-Williams from UNICEF, and Andrew Tomkins from the Centre for International Child Health, University College, London. Ernesto Pollitt from the University of California, Davis, was particularly helpful in planning the scientific programme. The meeting was funded by UNICEF with a contribution from the International Union of Nutritional Sciences.

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Editor

Reference