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Improving nutrition in ACP countries – the role of agriculture

About 1 billion people – one-seventh of the world population – suffer from hunger. The situation is particularly serious in sub-Saharan Africa, where over a quarter of the population are undernourished. In addition, at least 2 billion people experience 'hidden hunger': their diets lack sufficient essential vitamins and minerals for a healthy and productive life. Another billion people are eating too much of the wrong types of food, resulting in overweight and obesity. Malnutrition is both a cause and consequence of poverty, and is linked to high levels of disease and death in many ACP countries.

At the Brussels Development Briefing on "Nutrition Security in ACP Countries"¹, held in June 2011, experts discussed measures needed to ensure that agriculture provides the quality and quantity of food required to sustain a healthy population.

Policymakers should encourage investment in activities that improve nutrition and reduce the health burden associated with poor diets. ACP governments should learn from the experience of countries such as Brazil, Rwanda and Malawi, which have successfully implemented programmes to reduce hunger and improve nutrition. The sectors responsible for agriculture, health and nutrition policies should cooperate more closely. Policymakers should encourage investment in research that provides a better understanding of the links between agricultural growth, nutrition and health.

FEEDING THE PLANET, UNFINISHED BUSINESS

In 1970, 24% of the world's population suffered from chronic hunger: they were not getting sufficient calories. This figure has now dropped to 13%. Nevertheless, approximately 925 million were still going hungry every day in 2010. Many more subsist on a starchy, carbohydrate diet which fails to provide them with all the nutrients they need.



A socio-health session in Rwanda in which women learn to monitor their children's nutrition

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POLICY POINTERS

➤ **Learn from the experiences of countries** which have successfully reduced malnutrition

➤ **Encourage greater collaboration** between the agriculture, health and nutrition sectors

➤ **Invest in measures** which improve the nutritional quality of food, including biofortification

➤ **Stimulate small-scale farm production** by introducing targeted measures, such as school feeding programmes, that increase the demand for local food



¹ Organised by CTA, the European Commission (DG DEVCO), the Secretariat of the ACP Group of States, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and Concord, the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development. Brussels, June 2011. <http://brusselsbriefings.net>



A health worker in Mali describes the elements of good child nutrition

“Traditionally, an invisible firewall has separated the agriculture, health and nutrition sectors.”

*Per Pinstrup-Andersen,
Cornell University, USA*

While hunger is a major problem in sub-Saharan Africa, the excess intake of calories seriously undermines health in the Caribbean and Pacific regions. Chronic non-communicable diseases, many related to poor nutrition, now account for 57% of deaths in the Caribbean. A similar story can be told for the Pacific region, where half of the adult population is overweight. Malnutrition, in its various guises, deprives people of strength and energy, reducing their ability to work effectively. It is thus a significant cause of poverty and acts as a brake on socio-economic development.

Agriculture has a key role to play in eradicating hunger and malnutrition. Most obviously, the world needs to produce increasing quantities of food to satisfy a population that is forecast to increase from 7 to 9 billion by 2050. However, food security is not just a question of making more calories available. It is also about producing food of a quality and nutritional value that provides a healthy diet, and ensuring that it is accessible and affordable to all. This will require significant changes in agricultural policies and practices.

POLICIES FOR A WELL-NOURISHED WORLD

Investing to improve nutrition

To keep pace with population growth, food production must rise by at least 70% by 2050.

For this to happen, governments and donors must increase investment in agricultural and rural development, promote sustainable intensification and provide greater support for small-scale farmers (See CTA Policy Brief No 1, “Moving from food crisis to food security in ACP countries”).

Producing food of high nutritional quality requires a range of interventions. Smallholder farmers should be encouraged to produce a diversity of grains, roots and tubers, vegetables and fruits, fish and livestock. In doing so, they can provide themselves, and supply local markets, with a diverse diet containing the minerals, vitamins, proteins and calories essential for a healthy life. Raising smallholder productivity is one of the measures being advocated by the Pan-African Nutrition Initiative and the Africa Regional Nutrition Strategy developed by the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Union. Effective implementation of these initiatives should improve the nutritional security of the most vulnerable populations in many African countries.

An important technological solution involves the breeding of micronutrient-rich staple food crops with high concentrations of important vitamins. Biofortification, as it is known, requires considerable upfront investment, but may prove more cost-effective than providing supplements to vulnerable groups. There have already been notable successes with the orange-fleshed sweet potato, rich in vitamin A, in Uganda and Mozambique.

Learning from experience

In Brazil, the Zero Hunger Campaign (*Fome Zero*) dramatically reduced child malnutrition. Between 2003 and 2008, the number of malnourished children under five years of age dropped from 12.5% to 4.8%. The programme's success was based on a strong political commitment; making the eradication of hunger a central element of national policy; targeting social protection for families via women; and stimulating small-scale farm

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Most political leaders do not recognise malnutrition when they see it."

Robert Mwadime, FANTA-2, Uganda

production to satisfy the extra demand for food, for example to supply the school meals programmes.

Strong political leadership has also been evident in countries such as Rwanda and Malawi, which have had considerable success in reducing hunger and improving nutrition. In Rwanda, for example, malnutrition rates declined from 24.5% to 15.8% between 2000 and 2005. The country is set to meet the Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty and hunger four years ahead of the target date of 2015.

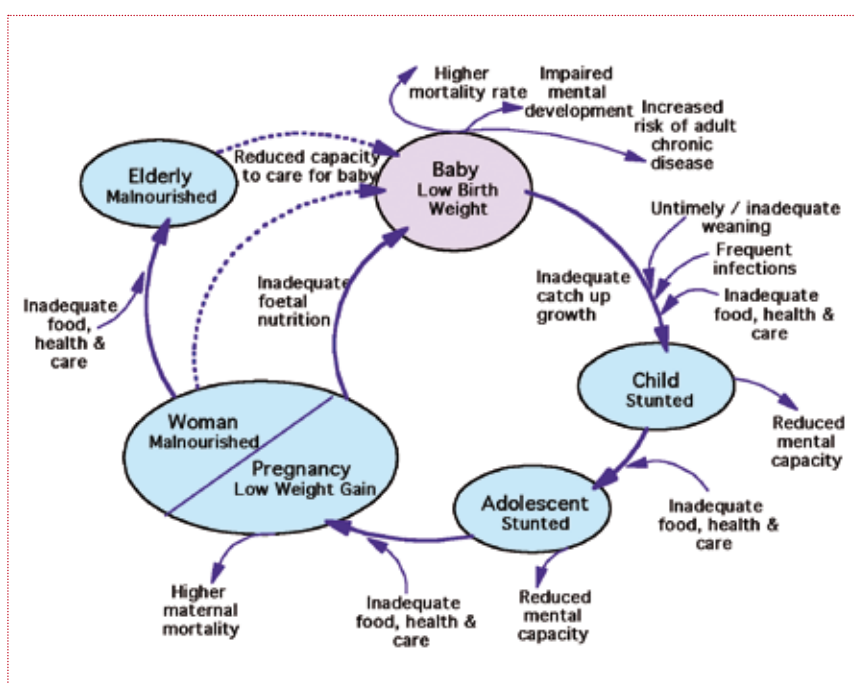
The Rwandan government adopted a multi-pronged approach to tackling malnutrition, involving many different sectors and a broad range of projects. These have helped to increase agricultural production, improve

soil fertility and reduce post-harvest losses. Specific interventions involved the distribution of dairy cows to poor and vulnerable households, a scheme enabling poor families to set up kitchen gardens, and the expansion of small-scale fish-farming.

Working in partnership

Traditionally, the agriculture, health and nutrition sectors have operated separately from one another, and continue to do so in most countries. Agricultural programmes have a much greater chance of achieving health and nutrition goals when the three sectors work closely together on their design, implementation and evaluation.

Professionals from the agriculture, nutrition and health sectors should also be encouraged to collaborate with civil society, farmers, consumer groups and the private sector to formulate policy and create greater awareness about measures to improve nutrition. African countries where malnutrition has been recognised as a development problem, rather than just a health problem – such as Malawi and Rwanda – have been among the first to adopt a multi-sectoral approach.



Nutrition throughout the life cycle

Source: UNSCN, *Ending Malnutrition by 2020*

Policymakers need to acknowledge the vital role played by women in both food production and family nutrition. Policies that provide women with greater control over land and financial assets, and better access to extension services and information, help to raise farm productivity and improve child health and the nutrition of the whole family.

Improving our knowledge

We still have much to learn about the way in which different agricultural systems affect nutrition and health, and consequently where to concentrate investment. What types of incentives are needed to ensure that increased farm incomes translate into better health? What type of agricultural growth leads to greater dietary diversity? The answers to these and many other questions will help to shape food and farming policy in the future. This

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Be bold – aim for full and lasting hunger eradication.”

*José Graziano da Silva,
FAO*

is why there needs to be greater investment in research and evaluation of the relationship between agriculture and nutrition.

Value chain approaches, which look at the links between food and nutrition from field to fork, can help policymakers design measures which increase the availability, affordability, safety and quality of nutritious food.

In many ACP countries, a lack of trained personnel and nutrition specialists, especially in rural areas, is hampering efforts to improve nutrition and dietary diversity. The goal of eradicating hunger and malnutrition will not be achieved without sufficient qualified personnel at every level.

POLICIES FOR PROGRESS

The policies outlined in this brief could lead to a significant reduction in malnutrition in ACP countries. Policies that focus on nutri-

tion, and encourage a multi-sectoral approach, could ensure that smallholder farmers increase their productivity and incomes and provide local communities with the produce required for a healthy diet. The experience in countries like Brazil and Rwanda provides policymakers with guidance on how malnutrition and poverty can be significantly reduced in a short period of time. Encouragingly, there is a high level of political commitment in ACP countries to introduce regional strategies that improve nutrition.

ACP countries should be encouraged to share information about measures which help to improve nutrition and reduce hunger. A strong political will, a determination to eradicate hunger and malnutrition, robust and sustained investments in nutrition, the recognition of the key role women play, flexibility in project design, strong partnerships between government and civil society, the ability to deliver: these are the essential elements of success. ■

Further reading

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