

The Importance of a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Food and Nutrition Security in Africa

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One of the targets of the first Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is to reduce the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by half between 1990 and 2015, with hunger measured as the proportion of the population who are undernourished and the prevalence of children under five who are underweight. Many countries remain far from reaching this target, and much of the progress made has been eroded by the recent global food price and economic crises. As we enter the final five years to trying to achieve the MDGs, we look upon one of the greatest challenges of our time with one billion people hungry, 129 million and 195 million children underweight and stunted respectively and more than 2 billion people deficient in micronutrients.

Of the 117 countries analyzed by UNICEF, 63 are on track to meet the MDG1 target based on the proportion of children underweight. Three years ago, only 46 were on track, which holds some promise of improvements for certain countries. Of the 20 countries classified as not making any progress at all towards the MDG1, most are in Africa.

Addressing food and nutrition insecurity are inextricably linked to wider progress towards other MDG targets. Durable gains will hinge on concurrent steps to reduce poverty, improve access to education, empower women and girls, and facilitate access to basic infrastructure including safe water and sanitation, energy, transport, and communication. Working on multiple fronts simultaneously has the potential to leverage synergies and catalyze gains that extend beyond those achieved through sector specific programs working in isolation. While multi-sectoral approaches may seem difficult and unwieldy, it is time for the global community to take on the challenge as we move forward towards 2015.

Recent calls for greater attention to hunger and under-nutrition highlight the importance of integrating technical interventions with broader approaches to address underlying causes of food insecurity – incorporating perspectives from agriculture, health water and sanitation, infrastructure, gender and education. Such an approach would inherently build on the knowledge and capacities of local communities to transform and improve the quality of diets for better child health and nutrition. Recent research has documented potential synergies between health and economic interventions, suggesting multi-sector approaches may generate a wider range of benefits than single sector approaches acting alone. Yet even while addressing broader determinants, a political priority is to address root causes of hunger and under-nutrition in an equitable manner.

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Evidence also suggests that increasing economic growth alone, while necessary and important, is unlikely to be sufficient to address hunger and under-nutrition. Food and nutrition security is complex, and requires efforts across a spectrum that includes enhancing food production while simultaneously increasing access and utilization with substantive political commitment to address the most vulnerable populations with an equitable, basic human rights lens approach.

Many governments under-invest in programs and efforts to reduce food insecurity, and fail to provide the minimal and essential domestic public goods and investments in agriculture and health needed for sustained growth. Countries must develop contextually **relevant priorities that integrate technical prevention and treatment-oriented interventions** with wider efforts to enhance agricultural productivity, food security and diet diversity. Within many countries, coverage gaps will remain among vulnerable groups, and securing safety nets through the use of food aid, conditional cash transfers or food-for-work programs will be inevitable. Poverty and hunger hotspots within countries should be a top priority, as should pregnant women, mothers and children under five years of age - with a special emphasis on under twos.

Emerging Lessons

Clear policy and visible leadership: Nutrition policies can either be embedded centrally within the Poverty Reduction Strategy Policies (PRSPs) or as stand-alone initiatives linked to the overall development vision for countries moving forward. There is plenty

of evidence to suggest in the absence of clear policy, rapid gains are much more limited.

Adequate financing: Many governments under-invest in programs and efforts to reduce hunger and under-nutrition, and fail to provide the minimal and essential domestic public goods and investments in agriculture and health needed for sustained growth. In countries that cannot afford to provide these goods, international development assistance and food aid will remain an indispensable temporary supplement. Many PRSPs do not currently contain hunger reduction strategies. Taking steps to redress gaps in budgetary allocations in line with locally relevant priority areas will be essential if gains in reducing hunger and under-nutrition are to be achieved (60).

Central coordination: Both nutrition and hunger fall within a broader mandate that necessarily includes agriculture, health, education, water and sanitation and other departments. This poses clear challenges to leadership and coordination. Too often, no single entity or team takes primary responsibility for working at the nexus of research, policy and program development. From a policy and budgeting perspective, it is difficult to commit staff and resources when a sector is divided among four departments. Given these realities, **one national plan, one budget, one framework and one reporting mechanism** should be in place for a harmonized, streamlined effort. Even in decentralized mechanisms, a chain of command must exist up to the national level where capacity, data and reform management should be centralized. International organizations should play an active role in supporting national governments through providing tools and technologies, capacity and resources to address hunger and under-nutrition in the context of a wider, locally owned development strategy.

Measuring progress: Accurate and timely hunger, vulnerability and nutrition information is the cornerstone of a broad-based hunger and nutrition strategy. It is imperative that partnerships be developed to support nationally-led monitoring systems to measure, provide feedback and appropriately hone and refine program activities. Building this capacity should be the central goal of both national government and donor-funded activities and should be done at the beginning of policy crafting and implementation. In high-risk countries, more frequent updates than 3 to 5 yearly nutrition surveys will be essential if reaching the 2015 targets is to be achieved. This is especially important in high-risk settings, among vulnerable groups, or to assess the effectiveness of programmatic innovations.

Nutrition and the wider MDG context: While nutrition specific interventions remain the backbone of an effective response to hunger, the case studies in this report repeatedly support the need for a comprehensive response to be firmly embedded within the wider MDGs agenda. Durable gains will hinge on concurrent steps to

reduce poverty, improve access to education, empower women and girls, and facilitate access to basic infrastructure including safe water and sanitation, energy, transport, and communication. Persistent high levels of under-nutrition in India, despite a strong economic engine, attest to the importance of applying this wider lens. Working on multiple fronts simultaneously has the potential to leverage synergies and catalyze gains that extend beyond those achieved through sector-specific programs working in isolation. While multi-sectoral approaches may seem difficult and unwieldy, it is time for the global community to take on the challenge as we move forward towards 2015.

The strongest lesson emerging from both community-based and national efforts is that making rapid gains in reducing hunger and under-nutrition is possible. Through energetic and engaged national leadership and with the support of robust international partnerships, rapid progress in reducing levels of hunger and under-nutrition by 50% by 2015 is attainable. Accelerating progress towards these targets is less about the development of innovations and new technologies and more about putting what is already known into practice. Success will hinge on linking clear policies with effective delivery systems for an evidence-based and contextually relevant package of interventions that can rapidly be taken to scale.

Many programs on the ground have found innovative ways to overcome historical barriers to implementation – from household-level delivery systems, to subsidies for small holder farmers, to linking efforts to reduce hunger with wider efforts to empower women or create work and business opportunities. Persistent hunger and under-nutrition remain an inexcusable unfinished agenda and successfully closing the few remaining gaps is a pre-condition for wider global progress towards achieving the MDGs.

Please find the Paper commissioned by the World Food Programme now available at full length at <http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?P=327>