USAID stops nutrition funding in 21 districts

BY JULIET KASIRYE AND CAROL KASUJJA

The lives of over 124,543 people hang in the balance, following a decision by the US Agency for International Development to end a programme helping malnourished patients, especially children living with HIV/AIDS.

Under the programme dubbed Production for Improved Nutrition (PIN), USAID has been providing ready to-use therapeutic foods (dietary supplements) to moderate and severe acute malnourished pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and people living with HIV/AIDS in 21 districts for the last five years.

The affected districts include Bugiri, Bukedea, Bushenyi, Hoima, Ibanda, Iganga, Kamwenge, Kasese, Kibale, Kiryandongo, Mbale, Moyo, Masindi, Nebbi, Pallisa, Sheema, Sironko, Tororo and Yumbe.

Dr Hanifa Bachou, the project manager, said: "It is too soon for us to say we are closing down, yet the number of malnourished patients is still alarming."

According to Bachou, without therapeutic foods in the health facilities, there will be an increase in deaths because of food insecurity in Uganda.

Speaking during the closure of the project at Sheraton Kampala Hotel recently, Brian Rwabogo, the PIN programme director, said the number of malnourished patients is still high.

"Without the funding, malnourished patients have to depend on backyard gardens and other partner-driven nutrition initiatives in order to deal with malnutrition," Rwabogo said.

Toko Mansur, a nutritionist at Jinja Hospital, said solving acute malnutrition will remain a challenge since the supply of free foods to health facilities is not possible.

He requested USAID to continue providing therapeutic foods because the shortage in health facilities will affect many households.

"I am worried of a likely increase in deaths of malnourished patients which might arise due to absence of therapeutic foods in health facilities," Ruth Lubega, a nurse at St Francis Hospital Rehabilitation Centre in Buikwe district, said.

Jacent Assimwe, a principal nutritionist in the Ministry of Health, assured health workers that the ministry is in the process of procuring therapeutic foods which will be supplied in health facilities in order to help malnourished patients. Margaret Sancho, the USAID health and HIV/AIDS office director, said the US government recognised the importance of nutrition in improving Uganda's health and advancing development and she promised to continue supporting nutrition programmes in Uganda.

According to the demographic survey of 2016, 29% of Ugandan children under the age of five are stunted, 52% are anaemic and 4% are severely malnourished and wasted.

Malnutrition contributes up to 60% of child deaths and micro nutrient deficiencies have devastating effects on child development.

Rwabogo said because so many people will be affected by the closure, PIN has worked with health workers to enable health facilities asses and treat nutrition problems with locally manufactured lifesaving balanced foods which can boost their immunity.

"The project has trained over 36,000 farmers in improved agronomic skills to produce quality crop such as beans, groundnuts, soybeans and maize which Reco- industries uses to produce therapeutic and supplementary food which is supplied to 113 health facilities throughout Uganda," Rwabogo stated.

RUTAFA, which means 'celebrating life', is the RECO therapeutic food brand made from locally sourced ingredients including peanuts, sugar, soy oil, palm oil and milk to produce high energy supplemental foods rich in nutrients, including essential minerals and vitamins.



Sancho (left) interacts with Rwabogo (right) as the programme management specialist, Alfred Boyo looks on during the closure of the project recently. Photo by Juliet Kasirye

BENEFICIARIES SPEAK OUT

Robina Namuyiga, from Luwero: Because of poverty, our children will take long to heal once we fail to get ready-to-use therapeutic foods on time. My son had lost weight and his CD count had reduced to 240. I am affected because I cannot afford to provide a balanced meal to my children.

Prisca Basaliza from Nakasongola: I do not know any other place where I can get therapeutic foods. My seven months baby had improved but I am worried because I do not know what will happen if he becomes malnourished again.

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