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HUNGRY FOR CHANGE: WHY UGANDA MUST INVEST MORE IN NUTRITION

What children eat in their earliest years shapes survival, learning and future productivity. Yet for many families, nutrition is constrained by habits, misinformation and limited choices. As Uganda confronts persistent malnutrition, there is growing recognition that change requires informed communities and stronger policies. Through a month-long campaign from April to May, *New Vision*, in partnership with UNICEF and the Ministry of Health, is spotlighting the challenges and solutions shaping children's diets and their chances of a healthy start.

By Jacky Achan

In response to persistently high levels of undernutrition, Uganda rolled out the Uganda Nutrition Action Plan (UNAP) in 2011, as a national effort to address widespread food and nutrition challenges affecting children and women.

The initiative emerged from troubling statistics which showed 29% of children under five were stunted, 53% were anaemic and only 14% met the minimum acceptable diet guidelines, while one-third of women of reproductive age were also anaemic.

Undernutrition, which refers to a condition where the body lacks sufficient nutrients for proper growth and development, has been strongly associated with poor cognitive development, weakened immunity and increased maternal mortality, particularly among children and pregnant women. To date, the problem persists.



Children playing together. Nutrition experts say the foundation of good nutrition begins with maternal and infant care, but should largely point to adolescents who are the mothers and fathers of tomorrow

A CONTINUING CRISIS

According to health experts, two million Ugandan children remain chronically undernourished, with nearly 26% of children under five being stunted, meaning they are too short for their age, and about 4% under five years being wasted, meaning they are too thin for their height.

Dr Samalie Namukose, the assistant commissioner for nutrition at the Ministry of Health, says these conditions have long-term effects on both the child and society.

"A stunted child may face challenges in school in form of poor grade performance, and later in life struggle socially and economically, hindering their potential to contribute to the country's development," she explains.

UNICEF Uganda nutrition manager, Zakaria Fusheni, stressed the importance of diverse, nutritious diets for children to combat malnutrition and foster their growth and cognitive development.

"Close to 90% of children are affected by what we refer to as childhood poverty," he says. "Many children do not receive the right kind of food, which hampers their potential."

EARLY INTERVENTION

Uganda's nutrition efforts date back to 1993, when universal salt iodisation was introduced, a programme that has achieved significant success, with about 98% of households now consuming adequately iodised salt.

Later in 2002, the Government introduced voluntary food fortification targeting staples such as flour and oils. These interventions were aimed at addressing micronutrient deficiencies, which remain a major

WHAT NEEDS TO BE INVESTED IN

Addressing malnutrition in Uganda requires more than just awareness, it needs systemic investment in the food sector, says Dr Peter Milton Rukundo, the dean of the School of Vocational Studies at Kyambogo University and senior lecturer in nutrition.

He emphasises that the country must not only focus on growing enough food, but also on ensuring that food is nutritious and safe.

One of the challenges, he explains, is that food quality is often not tested before it reaches the market. For example, maize grown on farms is not always checked for dangerous levels of aflatoxin, a mold that can contaminate crops and cause serious health issues.

"There are no laboratories in most districts to check food safety," Rukundo says. "Without proper food inspection, people are more likely to get infections, which can lead to malnutrition, especially in children."

Investing in nutrition is not just about growing food, it's about growing the right food in a safe and sustainable way. By addressing these gaps, Uganda can take the first steps towards ensuring a healthier future for its children and a stronger, more resilient society.

public health challenge. But today, about half of children under five are anaemic, while 38% are vitamin A deficient, despite ongoing fortification efforts.

Food fortification in Uganda requires manufacturers to add essential micronutrients such as vitamin A, iron, zinc, and folic acid to staple foods including wheat flour, maize flour, edible oils, and salt.

Alongside industrial fortification, Uganda is also promoting bio-fortification, where crops such as vitamin A-rich sweet potatoes and iron-rich beans are developed through agricultural research led by the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries.

IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT

Nutrition specialist Jackie Kirabo says insufficient government funding significantly weakens both prevention

and early intervention systems, which are essential for sustaining gains in nutrition outcomes.

Experts warn that declining investment risks reversing the Government's efforts and triggering a resurgence of child undernutrition with long-term health, cognitive and economic consequences.

Kirabo explains that reduced funding for nutrition programmes makes families more vulnerable by limiting access to essential food assistance.

Faced with increased financial pressure, households spend more on healthcare and less on nutritious food, while some are forced into harmful coping mechanisms such as early marriage and child labour.

PREVENTION VERSUS TREATMENT

Kirabo explains that child stunting reflects chronic undernutrition during

the critical first 1,000 days of life, a period when poor nutrition leads to irreversible consequences on both physical and cognitive development.

Evidence from the Cost of Hunger in Africa Study conducted in Uganda in 2013 estimated that the country loses about sh1.86 trillion annually, equivalent to 5.6% of GDP, due to the long-term impact of stunting.

Kirabo adds that treating severe acute malnutrition is significantly more expensive than preventing it, as it requires hospital care and specialised therapeutic feeding.

Preventive interventions, on the other hand, can cost as little as \$52 per child per year while averting thousands of deaths and disabilities.

WHAT IS REALLY NEEDED

Nutrition experts say addressing malnutrition requires strengthening what are known as enabling determinants of nutrition, like the broader political, financial, social, cultural and environmental conditions that shape nutrition outcomes.

According to a 2020 conceptual framework, good governance is central to this, involving strong political commitment, effective policies, institutional coordination and accountability systems that ensure nutrition rights are upheld across sectors.

Kirabo explains that even small, low-cost interventions like improving exclusive breastfeeding rates and micronutrient supplementation can have significant effects when applied during critical stages of life, particularly the first 1,000 days.

WHERE IT STARTS

Dr Peter Milton Rukundo, the dean of the School of Vocational Studies at Kyambogo University and senior lecturer in nutrition, says the foundation of good nutrition begins with maternal and infant care, but it also extends to adolescents who are the mothers and fathers of tomorrow.

"We need to focus on the nutrition of mothers, infants, young children, and adolescents to break the cycle of malnutrition."

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

"For every \$1 invested in nutrition, you get \$16 in return," Dr Rukundo says, highlighting the substantial economic benefits of investing in nutrition.

"Uganda's economy loses about sh2 trillion each year due to malnutrition, which is costing us 5-6% of our GDP annually."

He says investing in nutrition is an effective way to ensure long-term national prosperity. By ensuring access to safe, nutritious food for all, Uganda can unlock its full potential and improve the lives of its people.