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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 Jonan Tusingwire

According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2022 and the Kabarole Nutrition Action Plan, the dietary situation in the district remains a serious public health challenge, especially among children under five years and mothers.

Reports show that Kabarole district, part of the wider Toro subregion, continues to record high levels of child malnutrition; 40.6% of children under five are stunted, meaning they are too short for their age, due to chronic malnutrition far above the national average of 29%.

Between 2.4% and 3.4% of children are wasted, indicating acute malnutrition, 10.3% of babies are born with low birth weight (below 2.5kg), often linked to poor maternal nutrition.

About 45% of children under five are anaemic, while 29.4% of women of reproductive age also suffer from the condition.

HOW KABAROLE COMMUNITIES ARE EMBRACING NUTRITION CHANGE

PHOTOS BY JONAN TUSINGWIRE



Members of the Kamutebe Tweekambe Group in their demonstration garden. The group, which started in Kyakaguju village in 2020, is actively improving nutrition through savings, livestock, and farming



Male role model: Twesigomwe

nightshade (*eswiga*), which some men previously rejected.

CASCADE PROJECT AIDING NUTRITION
The community efforts are being strengthened by the Catalysing Strengthened Policy Action for Healthy Diets and Resilience (CASCADE) project.

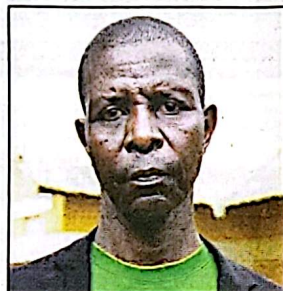
The euro 10m project funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs aims to improve food security and reduce malnutrition among at least one million women and children in Uganda.

In the Toro subregion, CASCADE is implemented in Kabarole, Kyenjojo, Kamwenge and Kyegegwa districts.

Daisy Immaculate, the project manager, says the Initiative focuses on strengthening nutrition policy implementation, supporting agricultural innovation and empowering women economically to make healthy food decisions.

LEADERS BACK GROWING AWARENESS
Harriet Nyakake, the deputy prime minister of the Toro Kingdom, says the project has exposed the severity of malnutrition.

"We thought we had enough food. CASCADE opened our eyes," she said.



Model father: Rwakahangi

DOUBLE BURDEN OF MALNUTRITION

In 2020, Kabarole developed a Nutrition Action Plan running up to 2025. The plan shows that stunting reduced from 45.6% in 2011 to 40.6% in 2016. However, the district now faces a double burden of malnutrition (indicated by stunting, wasting and anaemia) and over-nutrition.

In response, community initiatives are playing a growing role in tackling malnutrition at the grassroots level.

In Hakibale sub-county, the Kamutebe Tweekambe Group is actively improving nutrition through savings, livestock and farming. Started in Kyakaguju village in 2020, the group has 25 members — 20 women and five men — who save sh10,000 every week.

"We started saving together and used the money to buy goats. Some of these goats produce milk, and we give this milk to our children to improve their nutritional needs," Emily Atwine,

FOOD SECURITY PARADOX

Ironically, despite the high malnutrition levels, the Toro subregion is considered relatively food secure. The 2024 census by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics indicates that about 67% of households are food secure, placing the area second nationally, after Ankole.

Brian Kilembo, chairperson of the Kabarole district nutrition committee, says the problem is not food scarcity but poor nutrition practices.

He highlights key drivers of malnutrition as poor feeding practices, low dietary diversity, sale of most household food produce, limited nutrition knowledge, as well as poor sanitation and hygiene.

Ronald Mutegeki, the Toro kingdom deputy minister of information, echoes this concern. "People do not know when to eat what. We have households that eat one type of meal from Monday to Monday, which is bad," he said.

Mutegeki urged stakeholders to strengthen community-level sensitisation on proper nutrition.

the group's chairperson, said.

"The group also runs demonstration gardens where members learn improved farming practices for vegetables and other foods.

SHAPING GENDER NORMS, NUTRITION

The group introduced role model men to promote shared responsibilities in homes and improve nutrition outcomes.

These men encourage others to support their wives in household chores and nutrition planning. Alex Twesigomwe, a 39-year-old role model and father of four, says attitudes are changing.

"We make decisions with our wives

and we have encouraged men to take good care of their wives during pregnancy," he said.

William Rwakahangi, a 50-year-old father of six, added that cultural barriers are being dismantled.

"We have helped men get rid of cultural norms like men cannot fetch water," he said, adding that this has reduced domestic violence and improved harmony in homes.

The initiative has equally improved acceptance of indigenous vegetables, such as African



Kamutebe Group chairperson Emily Atwine