

WHY UGANDA'S CHILDREN ARE **STILL** MALNOURISHED



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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 Jacky Achan

In many homes across Uganda, mealtime follows a familiar pattern — adults pile five pieces of meat on their plates, while children are given just two. On the surface, this seems harmless, even normal. But Dr Peter Milton Rukundo, the dean of the School of Vocational Studies at Kyambogo University and a senior lecturer of nutrition, warns that this long-standing habit is quietly fuelling child malnutrition and undermining child growth. "Children between one-and-a-half, and five years old should be eating smaller meals every two to three hours, amounting to six or more meals a day," Rukundo explains. Ideally they should be given the two pieces of meat per meal so that they should have a larger portion than



A health worker conducting a malnutrition screening for an infant in Moroto district. Dietitians say children should be eating smaller meals every two to three hours for proper growth



From left: Dr Samalie Namukose, the assistant commissioner nutrition; Zakaria Fushelini, the nutrition manager at UNICEF Uganda; Dr Charles Olaro, the director general of health services at the Ministry of Health and Dr George Upenytho, the public health nutritionist at the health ministry during the launch of the Nutrition Advocacy Campaign at the Ministry of Health in Kampala on April 14

adults. "Instead, they are given only two or three meals, the same schedule as adults, which is completely wrong."

The root cause of this problem, he says, lies deep in culture and tradition. Many adults grew up malnourished, so they assume that children eating less is normal.

"It is inborn in our systems. Because we suffered as children, we tend to think that's just the way it is," Rukundo says. "But it is not the way it should be. That's why progress in ending malnutrition has been slow."

Even in well-to-do households where food is available, children often go hungry. While adults may enjoy multiple meals at work or several cups of tea during the day, children at home are limited to what is served at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"You find a child after eating breakfast, waiting hours for lunch, then waiting for supper. Children cannot wait that long; their stomachs

are smaller and cannot store enough to sustain them until the next adult-sized meal."

The consequences are stark. They include gradual nutrient deficiencies, slowed weight gain and stunted growth. "Children who do not receive meals every two to three hours fall behind physically and cognitively, even when food is technically available," Rukundo explains.

A HIDDEN CRISIS

Health experts say two million Ugandan children remain chronically undernourished, with nearly 26% of children under five years old 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

to increase awareness about the importance of nutrition, with a focus on ensuring every child receives a diverse and nutritious diet.

THE COST OF POOR NUTRITION

The impact of poor nutrition goes far beyond health problems. Gaston Ampe Tumuhimbise, a food and nutrition scientist, points out that children who are stunted may struggle with their education, leading to higher dropout rates.

"In primary school, for example, you might start with two million children, but by the time they reach Primary Seven, you may only have 600,000 or 800,000 left. High dropout rates are a direct consequence of poor nutrition."

Furthermore, overnutrition also comes with high costs. Individuals who suffer from obesity or diet-related diseases like high blood pressure or diabetes often need medical care, which places a strain on the health system and reduces productivity.

"When people are sick, they can't work," Tumuhimbise, who is also a senior lecturer at Makerere University's School of Food Technology, Nutrition, and Bio-engineering, explains. "They spend time in hospitals, which affects their ability to contribute to the economy."

According to some studies, malnutrition costs Uganda as much as sh1.8 trillion, about 6% of the country's GDP. This figure includes healthcare costs, lost productivity and the educational costs associated with children repeating grades due to poor health.

ENDING CHILD MALNUTRITION

Addressing the problem requires awareness and care, says Rukundo. He emphasises the importance of what he calls MyCAN: maternal, infant, young child and adolescent nutrition.

"The foundation starts with maternal nutrition, continues with good infant and young child feeding practices and extends to adolescents who are the mothers of tomorrow," he says. "Creating awareness is critical, so parents and caregivers understand that care demands time, attention and adequate resources."

Rukundo says practical steps are also required. Children need breakfast, a mid-morning snack, lunch, an afternoon meal and dinner. "Providing meals every two to three hours ensures that a child's small stomach can get enough nutrition to grow," Rukundo explains.

"Adults have reached their maximum growth, but children are still growing, they need more frequent, smaller meals." Without such interventions, he warns, the cycle of malnutrition will persist, even in households that appear to have enough food.

"It is not just about food availability," he says. "It is about care, awareness and providing children with the right nutrition at the right intervals. Until we address that, progress will remain slow," he says.

GETTING A BALANCED DIET

Gaston Ampe Tumuhimbise, a food and nutrition scientist, says a balanced diet is one that provides all the essential nutrients for optimal bodily function. It includes a variety of food from different groups: carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals. "Carbohydrates come from foods like rice, millet and sorghum. Proteins come from eggs, fish and meat, while fats come from both animal and plant sources. It's essential to eat from all the food groups to meet nutritional needs."

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 Fushelini 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."

In response to the growing crisis, Uganda's Ministry of Health, in collaboration with UNICEF, launched the "Good Nutrition for All" campaign in April 2026. The campaign aims