

COMMUNITY-CENTERED FOOD-BASED STRATEGIES FOR ALLEVIATING AND PREVENTING MALNUTRITION

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Summary

Around 800 million people in developing countries – almost one fifth of their population - do not have enough food to meet their basic daily needs for nutritional well-being. More than two billion people subsist on diets that lack the essential nutrients required for normal growth and development and for preventing premature death and disabilities. The failure to alleviate poverty is the main reason why undernutrition persists in many developing countries, often compounded by drought and war. This paper describes the current food and nutrition situation and the projections over the next thirty years and argues that since agriculture is the major source of food, income and

livelihood for many of the poor, this sector offers the greatest potential for achieving sustained improvements in the nutritional status of the rural poor. However, lasting improvements in nutritional well-being can only be achieved by concerted improvements in a broad range of agricultural, health, social, educational, cultural and economic conditions. The choice of policies and actions depend on the nature of the countrys food security problem, the characteristics of the food-insecure population, and the resources and institutional capabilities available.

The paper explains why community-centered food-based strategies are considered the best bet for improving nutrition and describes how such strategies can be adopted. The empowerment of the community through a process of social mobilization and the identification of volunteers to translate the nutrition improvement strategies into concrete actions at the level of the individual, household and community are dealt with. A key feature of the strategy is that primarily the community, in collaboration with national and local institutions, decides upon the type of intervention and its design and management. Practical ways are proposed by which the nutritional impact of food and agriculture-based strategies can be further improved to reach the goal of the World Food Summit to reduce the number of the undernourished by half by the year 2015.

1. Introduction

Human society can be justly proud of its record of scientific and technological achievement over the last fifty years. Unparalleled opportunities for development have been released and for many people real benefits in the standard of living are being enjoyed today which would have been inconceivable less than a generation ago. The mapping of the human genome at the beginning of the third millennium may herald even brighter prospects for the quality of life in the West, but it comes far too late for many of the current populations in countries where hunger, poverty, war and HIV/AIDS have reversed the gains made since the 1970s.

The food and agricultural sector has also benefited from innovations and technological breakthroughs over this period that led to the Green Revolution and other achievements and considerable progress continues to be made. At the global level and for all regions other than sub-Saharan Africa, this resulted in agricultural production over the last thirty years keeping pace with and even outstripping population growth. The worldwide average per capita dietary energy supply is now 17 percent higher than what they were 30 years ago. The majority of countries participated in this progress and as a result nutrition levels improved. However, impressive as this progress has been, the great strides made over the last three decades to improve food availability and nutrition by-passed a large number of countries and population groups. Hunger and undernutrition consequently persist in many countries, and have significantly increased among certain population groups, especially in those countries that continue to have low per capita food supplies. Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and Latin America today have more undernourished people than they did 20 to 30 years ago.

FAO estimates that around 800 million people in developing countries - about 18 percent of their total population – are undernourished. More than two billion people subsist on diets that lack the essential vitamins and minerals required for normal growth

and development and for the prevention of premature death and disabilities such as blindness and mental retardation. At the same time, hundreds of millions suffer from diseases caused or exacerbated by excessive or unbalanced dietary intakes or by the consumption of unsafe food and water. With the growth in population, the situation will likely worsen unless very determined and well-targeted actions for improving nutrition are taken. But, specifically, what kind of activities are needed to alleviate and prevent malnutrition, and by what processes and mechanisms will they be undertaken and by whom?

As recognized by various international initiatives (*FAO/WHO International Conference on Nutrition (ICN), World Bank End Hunger Conference, Population Conference, IFPRI's 2020 vision, the Children's Summit, UNCED, the World Food Summit (WFS) and the World Food Summit – five years later*), the pre-eminent development objective of the new millennium is to overcome hunger and malnutrition. Malnutrition is a multi-sectoral problem requiring an inter-disciplinary effort if sustainable improvements in nutrition are to be achieved. However, given the high level of dependency of many of the world's poor and nutritionally vulnerable to the fruits of the earth, the primary importance of the food and agriculture sector in alleviating and preventing malnutrition is clear. In meeting this objective continued focus needs to be given to increasing the production and consumption of food and ensuring that the poor have adequate access to adequate quantities of safe, good quality food for a nutritionally adequate diet. This includes not only energy, protein and fats, but also micronutrients - the vitamins and minerals and other trace elements so necessary for normal growth and development. Activities also include promoting appropriate diets and healthy lifestyles, preventing and managing infectious diseases, combating HIV/AIDS and providing a healthy and caring environment.

1.1. What is FAO and what it does?

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations which has as its mandate the raising of levels of nutrition and standards of living, improving the efficiency of the production and distribution of food and agricultural products and ensuring humanity's freedom from hunger. The Organization is the lead UN agency for agriculture and rural development and since its founding in October 1945, has worked to alleviate poverty and hunger by promoting agricultural development and improving nutrition and food security. The Organization offers direct development assistance, provides policy and planning advice to governments, collects, analyses and disseminates information and acts as an international forum for debate on food, nutrition and agriculture issues.

FAO's role in alleviating and preventing malnutrition is guided by the commitments set forth by the International Conference on Nutrition (1992), and the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action, which were adopted at the World Food Summit in 1996. FAO continues to promote food security and nutritional well-being by working in areas in which it has a comparative advantage - particularly by supporting the agricultural sector, including forestry and fisheries in the production, processing and marketing of agricultural products, by promoting household food security and community development, ensuring the quality and safety of food supplies, combating micronutrient deficiencies through support to sustainable food-based approaches and promoting food fortification programmes where there is a strong cash

economy and an effective food marketing system, promoting nutrition education coupled with other efforts to improve nutrition such as school and community gardens, and assessing and monitoring food and nutrition situations.

1.2. The International Conference on Nutrition (ICN)

Possible actions to eradicate hunger and malnutrition were discussed by the Ministers of Agriculture and Health of the 159 participating countries at the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) that met in Rome in December 1992. A World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition was unanimously adopted and all countries pledged to prepare national plans of action and policies for improving nutrition. Activities, ranging from community involvement in specific localized interventions to policy work by which a more positive environment for fulfilling nutritional objectives can be created, were considered under the following nine themes:

- incorporating nutrition objectives, considerations and components into development policies and programmes;
- improving household food security;
- protecting consumers through improved food quality and safety;
- preventing and managing infectious diseases;
- promoting breast-feeding;
- caring for the socio-economically deprived and nutritionally vulnerable;
- preventing and controlling specific micronutrient deficiencies;
- promoting appropriate diets and healthy lifestyles;
- assessing, analyzing and monitoring nutrition situations

1.3. World Food Summit (WFS)

The World Food Summit held in Rome, 13-17 November 1996 gathered Heads of State and Governments from close to 200 countries to renew their commitment to the eradication of hunger and malnutrition. At this Summit, the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action to Achieve Universal Food Security was unanimously adopted. One goal of the WFS is to reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by at least half by the year 2015 and the objectives and strategy of the ICN for improving nutrition and food security were endorsed. World leaders recommitted themselves to achieving these goals at the World Food Summit – five years later. The success of the Summits will be measured ultimately by the degree to which the absolute numbers of hungry around the world decline in the coming years. In pursuit of this goal, FAO is building on existing activities at country and community level with a focus on providing individuals with adequate quantities of food in terms of energy and variety that is able to meet their nutrient requirements.

1.4. Community-centered Food-Based Approach

FAO is developing a comprehensive participatory community-centered food-based approach (CCFB) for alleviating and preventing malnutrition, raising nutritional levels and overcoming nutritional deficiencies. This approach recognizes the essential role of food for good nutrition and the importance of the food and agricultural sector for supporting rural livelihoods. The strategy adopted by this approach for effecting

improvements in nutrition is through community-based empowerment and involvement. It is crucial that people from the communities where the programmes are to be implemented are mobilized and fully involved in the identification, planning and implementation process. Community volunteers can serve as vital links between the implementing organization, the village council and the people themselves. Such an approach requires wide inter-sectoral involvement in the design, implementation, management, and monitoring and evaluation of flexible programmes to increase peoples self-reliant production and consumption of foods, especially those rich in micronutrients, as well as their absorption and utilization in the body. Sustainable improvements brought about by such food-based strategies will contribute to nutritional well-being and in the long run, will provide overall economic benefits at both local and national levels.

The community-centered food-based approach for improving nutrition empowers communities to effectively demand services and productive resources and at the same time to support local initiatives for implementing food and nutrition programmes. This involves increasing the participation of communities in the design, implementation and monitoring of development programmes and interventions including those for increasing the production and consumption of under-utilized traditional food crops, the promotion of simple techniques in food preservation and storage, and enhancing small-scale agricultural industry and marketing with an aim to improve nutrition.

This paper sets out the case for implementing community-centered food-based nutrition programmes as the way forward for achieving rapid improvements in nutrition. Beginning with definitions of nutrition, household food security, and poverty, Section 2 describes the nature and extent of food and nutrition problems at global, regional and country levels. As evident from the data presented here, the linkages between agriculture development, food production and nutritional status are neither straightforward, consistent, nor always evident, with the effects of agriculture (productivity, sustainability) and food (availability, access, quality) on nutrition being mediated through a number of factors. The role of agriculture for alleviating and preventing malnutrition is discussed in Section 3 and the practical means by which the nutritional impact of food and agriculture-based strategies can be improved is given in Section 4. The adoption of a community-centered food-based strategy for improving nutrition is proposed in Section 5 with conclusions in Section 6.

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Biographical Sketch

Brian Thompson is Senior Nutrition Officer of the Household Food Security and Community Nutrition Group in the Nutrition Programmes Service, Food and Nutrition Division of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Mr. Thompson holds a degree from London University in Human Physiology, and a Masters in Human Nutrition from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He has over twenty years experience in rural development activities in developing countries, during which time he has worked with ICRC, WFP, UNICEF and FAO as well as with major international NGOs. He first worked in Nepal where he conducted a nutrition survey in the Middle Hills as a basis for incorporating nutrition objectives into a large scale integrated rural development programme in cooperation with bilaterals, government and NGOs. Subsequently, he worked in Thailand as Border Nutrition Coordinator assisting the international operation to provide assistance to the Khmer refugees along the Thai-Kampuchean border. Working first with the ICRC and then with WFP and UNICEF, his responsibilities included the clinical management of the severely malnourished, the organization and management of food distribution programmes, nutrition training and education and the provision of broad relief and rehabilitation activities. His work continued in the region where he consulted for NGOs and UN agencies

on a range of subjects including the micro level linkages between nutrition and forestry and the macro level linkages between nutrition and economic development. After two years in Afghanistan during the mid 1980s, he left to join FAO Headquarters in Rome in the Planning, Assessment and Evaluation Service. With FAO, he has worked with nutritionists, senior planners and junior Ministers in Asia and Africa to put nutrition improvement higher on the development agenda. He continues to assist countries in implementing government commitments made at the International Nutrition Conference and the World Food Summit and has published a number of papers on the subject. He is currently developing FAOs household food security and community nutrition programmes emphasizing the positive experiences of community-based nutrition programmes for reducing malnutrition in both regular and emergency situations.

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