ADVOCACY FOR INCREASED NUTRITION PROGRAMMING
Good Practices, Lessons Learned and Key Messages

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1. Introduction

In the quest to enhance pro-poor policy development and outcomes, the Southern Africa Trust with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation partnered with Uganda Civil Society coordinated by the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF) to undertake an initiative to create linkages between research, advocacy and media.

This initiative is part of a six country project in Africa including South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi to create opportunities and platforms that build innovative scaled up more coherent and value adding working relationships between different types of critical and non-state actors. This includes researchers, civil society, advocacy groups, and platforms of affected people, the media and policy makers.

In Uganda, through a highly participatory and consultative process consensus was made among key stakeholders to focus on the advocating for the passing of the food and nutrition bill that would contribute to scaling up of nutrition programming. The area of focus was informed by the recognition that the scale of implementation and budget allocated to nutrition is still inadequate for sustainably impacting national nutritional indicators.

Despite Uganda’s progress in reducing poverty over the years, malnutrition still ravages the country and affects millions of Ugandans in various ways, but it is particularly devastating to women, babies, and children. Malnutrition also impairs educational achievements and economic productivity, costing the government and families enormous amounts of money to treat related illnesses. The impact of malnutrition is further illustrated in figure 1 below.

The latest Uganda Demographic Health Survey 2011 indicates an improvement in some nutrition indicators, notwithstanding this development, there urgent need to reduce the numbers of stunted and wasted children. Statistics show that among children under 5 years of age 33 percent are too short for their age (stunted), 14 percent are too thin (wasted) whereas 5 percent are acutely thin. In addition, micro nutrient deficiency remains a big challenge among children and their mothers, 49 percent of children are anemic as well as 23 percent of the mothers of reproductive age and 4 out of 10 children less than 5 years are vitamin A deficient.

“The Cost of Hunger in Africa”, a study that was conducted by the Ugandan government with the support of the African Union Commission, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development, the UN Economic Commission for Africa and the UN World Food Programme (WFP), revealed not only shocking figures but deeply alarming annual costs associated with child under nutrition estimated at 1.8 trillion UGX, which is equivalent to 5.6% of GDP. In addition, forty seven percent of all child deaths and almost a quarter of all maternal deaths in Uganda are associated with malnutrition. The PROFILES 2010 report also states that such losses contribute to lost economic productivity leading to a reduction in GDP by 4 % (approximately 310 million USD) annually.

It is this state of affairs that inspired Ugandan Civil Society Organizations to design an intervention to champion increased investment for nutrition-sensitive interventions in Uganda. We set out to document good practices on nutrition interventions at national, district and community level to inform a CSO advocacy plan on nutrition. The mapping also documented stories of change of the different nutrition interventions and developed key messages to inform policy change. We also hoped that through this initiative we would build momentum for the passing of the Food and Nutrition Bill that has been shelved since 2009.

This policy brief therefore profiles different nutrition interventions models that are currently been employed by different actors at national, community and family level. The challenges, lessons learnt and the key advocacy messages to expedite the passing of the food and nutrition bill.
2. A Review of the Legal and Policy Environment

The foremost instrument on the Nutrition landscape is the Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy 2003 that seeks to promote the nutritional status of the people of Uganda through multi-sectoral and coordinated interventions that focus on food security, improved nutrition and increased incomes. It provides that food and nutrition issues should be incorporated in the national, district, sub-county and sectoral development plans; aims to create an effective mechanism for multi-sectoral co-ordination and advocacy for food and nutrition; and aims to promote the formulation and/or review of appropriate policies, laws and standards for food security and nutrition.

It is on the foundation of the food and nutrition policy that the Uganda Nutrition Action Plan (2011-2016) was developed and launched by H.E. the President in November 2011. It set a target to reduce stunting in children under five years to 27%, to reduce underweight in children under five years to less than 10% and to increase exclusive breast feeding in children up to six months of age to 75% by 2016. It also pledges that Uganda would ensure a functional multi-sectoral coordination mechanism to promote nutrition right from the central to local government level and will also put in place an integrated nutrition surveillance system that takes stock of nutrition status at community, district and national level.

There is also a draft Uganda Food and Nutrition Bill (2009) that seeks to recognize, promote, protect and fulfill the right to food as a fundamental human right, to provide a legal basis for implementing the Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy; to plan, budget and implement the Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy using a rights-based approach and to ensure the participation of rights holders and the accountability of duty bearers; and to promote the policies on food and nutrition as part and parcel of the overall national development policy.

However, the implementation of these strategic documents to promote food security and nutrition remains weak. There are several reasons for this both general and nutrition specific.

1. Government has never directly committed funds for the implementation of the UNAP. So far, most of the activities are being implemented through initiative supported by various development partners and international agencies such as UNICEF, USAID, WHO, WFP etc. This does not demonstrate real commitment from government to tackle the nutrition problem.

2. In Uganda there is no formal mechanism to coordinate nutrition activities among the various public and private entities that should be involved.

3. There is low awareness among relevant stakeholders of the roles and responsibilities they should take in implementing nutrition policies. This has therefore led to poor prioritization of nutrition issues.

4. The lack of a law to back up the policy on food and nutrition policy has also further constrained the process. The draft food and nutrition bill has been shelved since 2009.
3. Selected Nutrition Interventions

In spite of the limited funding by the government towards nutrition programmes, different actors have pioneered activities to address this situation. The UNNGOF Mapping earlier mentioned collated the different nutrition interventions models that are currently being employed by different actors at national, community and family level.

The mapping focused on initiatives promoting food-based nutrition interventions specifically efforts to increase and improve food production and availability, bio-fortification and commercialization. To complement the food-based nutrition interventions, other strategies used include; nutrition education and training for nutrition professionals, promoters and health workers with the objective of contributing to up to date information and promotion of healthy habits and attitudes.

3.1 Promotion of food security and livelihoods

A number of organizations are implementing activities to boost agricultural productivity in order to increase farm productivity which reduces food deficient, increases food surplus and raise incomes. For example, Hunger Fighters-Uganda engages in the fight against hunger by incorporating activities increasing food diversification and production and research as well as engaging in humanitarian assistance to the refugees, the disaster affected and the displaced persons. Our findings revealed that households provided with gardening and health education consumed more vegetables and ate a more nutritious diet.

3.2 Addressing micronutrient deficiencies

Micronutrients are the mineral and vitamin components of a healthy diet, required in small quantities, but essential for good health. Since the early 1990s, micronutrient deficiencies (MNDs) also known as “hidden hunger” was put high up on the international public health agenda. Micronutrients are the mineral and vitamin components of a healthy diet, required in small quantities, but essential for good health.

In Uganda several organizations such as Harvest Plus have taken substantial interest, in combating hidden hunger through research and investment. For example Harvest Plus leads the national efforts to make familiar staple foods that people eat every day more nutritious and available to those suffering from hidden hunger. Harvest Plus uses a process called bio-fortification to breed higher amounts of vitamins and minerals directly into staple foods. These include bean, cassava, orange sweet potato, rice, maize, pearl millet, and wheat. This is combined with consumer education to explain the importance and value of vitamin A intake. Complementarily other private sector organizations are championing processing of foods that have been fortified with the right nutrients.

Using Orange Fleshed Sweet Potato varieties to combat Vitamin A deficiencies

Orange-fleshed sweet potato varieties are rich in pro-vitamin A and can contribute significantly to vitamin A nutrition in humans. Vitamin A deficiency is common many places in sub-Saharan Africa where sweet potato is grown. However, most sweet potato varieties currently grown are either white or yellow flesh and are low in pro-vitamin A.

Recent experiences in Uganda have indicated that there is good potential for widespread consumer acceptance of orange-fleshed sweet potato varieties, for fresh consumption and marketing, and for incorporation into snack products such as mandazis and chapatis. Varieties for fresh consumption and marketing would preferably have the high dry matter content and dry texture upon cooking preferred by adult consumers. However, moist-textured, orange fleshed varieties also find ready acceptance as boiled and mashed components in mandazi and chapati recipes, and as food for small children.

3.3 Nutrition Education and Training

Preventative and educational programs seem to be the leading campaigns for addressing the nutrition problems in Uganda and many of these programs have seen measurable success. Of the programs that were reviewed, education is always at the forefront of the battle against malnutrition, stunting and deficiencies. Teaching about food and providing lessons on basic health and diet knowledge was found to be essential. The overall sentiment within rural communities is that the majority of village people do not lack food but they require the knowledge to identify and recognize nutrient rich foods.

For instance, Hunger Fighters utilizes tools like food preparation demonstrations and group education sessions that have led to a significant change in mentality and attitude towards nutrition. Similarly, Health Child Uganda Project provides health education for rural communities by training Village Health Volunteers on a variety of topics including sanitation, hygiene, malnutrition, prevention of disease. Action against Hunger undertakes trainings of health workers and Village Health Teams to ensure their capacity in malnutrition diagnosis and treatment.

STORY OF CHANGE 1:
EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN CAN SHRINK MALNUTRITION: A case study of Kissito Healthcare International

Uganda loses at least Shs 1.8 trillion annually to the effects of malnutrition as indicated in The Cost of Hunger by the World Food Programme. Kissito Healthcare International, a US Christian civil society organisation, embarked on equipping mothers to malnourished children with intervention measures on how to fight malnutrition amongst children in Mbale and Manafwa Districts. Kissito started the nutrition programme in Wanale Sub-County in May 2012 to curtail malnutrition in the area and as a result dedicated every Thursday as a nutrition day for mothers with malnourished children.
3.4 Nutrition Advocacy

Civil society organizations have been influential in nutrition advocacy in Uganda gaining momentum with the establishment of the Uganda Civil Society Coalition on Scaling up Nutrition (UCCO-SUN) whose efforts are geared towards strengthening partnerships to advocate for increased policy development and resource allocation for improved nutrition outcomes.

At community and grass root level, the advocacy methods varied ranging from open theaters, electronic and print media and use of Information Education Communication (IEC) materials among others. However it was noted that the advocacy and outreach remains low due a number of challenges. These include limited funding for media activities, high costs of IEC materials and low literacy levels in the communities. Furthermore, Nutrition issues are largely not a priority for media houses, lack of harmonized nutrition messages, there is still low uptake of nutrition information by communities coupled with negative community perceptions and beliefs.

Selected opportunities for nutrition advocacy at national level include; The August 2009, workshop supported by Uganda Academy of Sciences that agreed on the need for increased investment in nutrition, sustainable implementation of community-based nutrition initiatives and harmonized coordination of nutrition activities particularly involving the agricultural sector; the July 2010 African Union Summit in Kampala where presentations were made on the importance of nutrition for socioeconomic development in Uganda and official declarations were obtained to expedite the passing of the food and nutrition bill. In September 2010, the Global Scaling-Up Nutrition Initiative provided an opportunity for multi-sectoral interagency collaboration to design a Uganda National Nutrition Plan focusing on young children and mothers.

STORY OF CHANGE 2: Nutrition is not about how much money you have, but how much Knowledge you possess: A case study of Mama Tendo Foundation

A mother would probably have stopped breastfeeding her first child at three months had she not have learnt the importance of breast milk in a child’s growth. She learnt this from a nutrition workshop organized by Mama Tendo Foundation-an independent organization runs a nutrition program that teaches people, both children and adults about nutrition especially importance of proper feeding.

The mother continues to testify that her child now of two years is healthy and happy and that her immunity has now improved because she has learnt how to mix silver fish in her baby’s food. There are many more testimonies from mothers that they have sent their house helps to the nutrition programs and thus their knowledge has been evident in the change of diet and nutrition at homes thus boosting health living.

According to surveys done by Cost of Hunger in Uganda, Uganda bureau of Statistics one out of every three children in the country is stunted and 2.3 million children under five years are stunted and 360 children in the same age bracket die daily from nutrition-related causes and as such, Nutrition interventions could save at least 120 children’s lives every day.

It is also noted by the same surveys that 13 mothers in Uganda die daily due to pregnancy related causes and half of these are related to nutrition and in partnership with Ministry of Health, Mama Tendo Foundation has helped over 500 children, together with their parents, improve nutrition and fight malnutrition.

One of the big challenges is limited knowledge on nutrition as many people do not know that good nutrition does not require expensive foods, but ample knowledge on what to eat, when to eat it and how to prepare it and that once this challenge is addressed, malnutrition will be a myth.

All in all, various actors are implementing nutrition interventions albeit the coordination, investment and political will remain low. The level of investment to address the situation is clearly a drop in the ocean compared to the gravity of the problem of malnutrition of Uganda. There are still very few organizations that implement food based strategies in selected parts of the country and where they exist sustainability still an issue.
4. Challenges and Lessons Learnt

1. Effectiveness of capacity building, awareness creation and sensitization

A key drawback of capacity building, awareness creation and sensitization interventions is that monitoring its effectiveness is very difficult given the time needed to change attitudes, cultural and religious perceptions. In some instances mechanisms to enhance community involvement have not been well established. Hence the need for consistent and coherent messaging to address the knowledge gaps.

2. Coordination and implementation of nutrition interventions

The Multi-sectoral approach is considered strong in delivering optimal outcomes from the interventions however; the sector is still plagued by incoherent implementations in some instances as well as low coordination. This lack of motivation for inter-sectoral coordination has led to fragmentation in many areas of nutrition interventions.

3. Funding and sustainability

So far funding has remained a major challenge for nutrition actors incapacitating organizations ability to scale up their interventions in Uganda. It is therefore important to ensure systematized inclusion of and resource allocation for Food and Nutrition Security priorities as part of the government’s decentralized planning process.

4. Framing nutrition as part of the national development agenda

Poor recognition by policy makers of malnutrition as major obstacle to economic and social development is a crucial barrier to making it a top priority on the development policy agenda. This is exacerbated by inadequate mainstreaming of nutrition into existing sectoral programmes. Giving nutrition a high national profile can generate greater public awareness and concern around critical nutrition issues. This is most effective when nutrition is framed as part of a broader development agenda. It is therefore important that government expedites the implementation of the Uganda Nutrition Action Plan.

4.1 Key messages to advocate for the passing of the Uganda food and nutrition bill

From the study key messages to use in the advocating for the passing of the food and nutrition bill were identified. The messages have thematic connotations, with many of them reflecting on the relevance of passing the food and nutrition bill.

a) Galvanizing Leadership and Translating Commitments into Action

Political will and commitment is key to deliver a transformational effect on maternal and child under nutrition by making nutrition a national priority reflected in government policy and budgets, donor support, businesses, scientific research and civil society action. Whilst the government has demonstrated a certain degree of political commitment for improved nutrition wellbeing, it has however not translated into formidable nutrition actions. Political commitment will be demonstrated by how much resources are allocated for nutrition – sensitive interventions.

b) Review and Expedite the passing of the Food and Nutrition Bill

There are current changes in the nutrition landscape that were not reflected in the previous draft especially the multi-sectoral approach of addressing food and nutrition. The review of the food and nutrition policy should be a stepping stone towards revising the draft food and nutrition bill and thereafter pass the bill. Failure to have this bill passed has legally constrained the operationalization of the Uganda Food and Nutrition Council. Consequently, there is no legal basis for the council to undertake its pre-supposed functions.

c) Undertake sustained nutrition advocacy initiatives

Advocacy initiatives based on proven nutrition research and involving the media and communities need to be undertaken to raise political commitment and hence action for increased investment in nutrition programming. CSOs need to empower communities to demand access and utilize nutrition and health information. The food and nutrition bill recognizes the need for mobilizing and sensitizing communities to promote public awareness on food and nutrition security, food diversity and healthy eating habits. This is intended to be done through comprehensive nationwide education and information campaigns conducted in collaboration with relevant public authorities.

d) Strengthen the multi-sectoral approach as outlined in the UNAP 2011-2016:

The UNAP focuses on scaling up multi-sectoral efforts to establish a strong nutrition foundation for Uganda’s development. Passing of the food and nutrition bill would go a long way in contributing to achievement of the UNAP objectives.

e) Build sustainable, market-based partnerships for delivering nutritious foods to the bottom of the pyramid through shared investments and shared risk.

Finding long-term, flexible funding for cross-sector nutrition partnerships is difficult. Bi-lateral donors are less prepared than the private sector to take on financial risk, but they may be able to alleviate
some of the short term pressure through providing funding for research and development and supporting partnerships in the process of gaining technical certification internationally.

Working with venture philanthropists, banks and foundations or novel forms of financing, such as social or impact investment, may be further options to bolster the financial sustainability of a partnership since many such investors aim for social outcomes over financial returns.

f) Strengthen the platforms for sharing field and partnership experiences, from ideas to building new partnerships.

Platforms are important for creating an enabling environment to access the appropriate technical assistance, understand local and global regulations and how they may impact the work of partnerships, and improve communications between stakeholders. Some important platforms already exist in Uganda such the Uganda Coalition for Scaling up Nutrition in Uganda and global ones such as the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) Business Alliance and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Taskforce E.

Such platforms could be reviewed and enhanced to allow potential public and private sector partners to meet to discuss opportunities and challenges of new initiatives. Such a space could also become an archive of nutrition research, partnership best practices and case studies and thereby be both a knowledge facility and a networking base to facilitate partnerships.

g) Support development of local companies delivering nutritious foods through technical capacity strengthening.

Involving national and local government stakeholders in nutrition partnerships from their inception may increase trust and lead to a more enabling environment for nutrition projects and markets. It may be helpful to incorporate the local partners and their existing products or distribution processes to ensure that local demand and needs are being met without duplicating existing actions and networks.

5. Conclusion and Way Forward

Nutrition is central to Uganda’s larger development agenda and a prerequisite for further progress on the hunger and health Millinium Development Goals. However this area has remained largely neglected for a long time and it’s exacerbated by the delay in the passing of the food and nutrition bill. The limited funding to the sector is still inadequate to impact the national nutrition indicators.

The Civil Society Mapping of Nutrition interventions has provided key stakeholders with the evidence of what works and what can be scaled up in order to bring down the high rates of malnutrition in Uganda. The mapping has also highlighted the key challenges and lessons learnt that can guide different actors in the design and implementation of interventions.

Government efforts to address this dire situation requires demonstrable political commitment at all levels. At the launch of the cost of hunger report the Prime Minister announced that Uganda had set the target of reducing stunting in under-5 children to 27 per cent from 33 per cent and reducing underweight to 10 per cent. He argued that the targets can be achieved and even surpassed. He rightly indicated that the challenge is largely limited financial investment in nutrition and food security. It is therefore imperative that the government urgently passes the Food and Nutrition Bill to guide developments in this sector. Further it is important that the government sets up mechanisms that promote the nutritional status of all people of Uganda through multi-sectoral, participatory and co-coordinated interventions that focus on food security, improved nutrition an income levels.

There are things that have been working and things we know can work. It may once have seemed like a hopeless story, but we’re changing it to a hopeful one.

--- Bill Ayres ---

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A school feeding programme can address malnutrition among children in Uganda.