

Health Policy Dialogue

27TH FEBRUARY 2018

Our Nutrition Crisis: Considering Local Alternatives



Curbing malnutrition doesn't need much funding. All we need is education and demonstration farms in communities.



The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) identifies malnutrition as the underlying cause of morbidity and mortality in more than 50 per cent of children under-5 years of age in Nigeria. Malnutrition, the lack of proper nutrition or not getting enough nutrients, results in stunting, underweight and wasting, or a combination of all three.

The task of reducing prevalence rates was what the Nigeria Health Watch policy dialogue on nutrition, '**Our Nutrition Crisis: Considering Local Alternatives**' on Tuesday, February 27, 2018, set out to achieve. Delegates made up of policy makers, organisations working in the nutrition space and stakeholders with a broad interest in nutrition put forward *agwa*, *eforiro*, *acha*, *ikire*, *yalo*, *anyara*, *bitter leaf*, *millet*...as highly nutritious local Nigerian foods that can help tackle malnutrition.

The aim of the policy dialogue was to discuss preventative and restorative solutions to malnutrition and highlight funding priorities. New models and other high impact interventions, with a focus on local alternatives for preventing the onset of malnutrition, looking at targeted interventions to address malnutrition were also key outcomes sought.

The backdrop for this dialogue on nutrition was the 2017 Nigeria Health Watch #FeedNaijaPikin campaign which highlighted the issue of malnutrition among under-fives in Nigeria. The findings were enough motivation to continue important conversations, even after the initial project came to an end.

Dr. Ngozi Azodoh, Head, Health Nutrition Emergency Response, Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja, set the tone of the conversation: "We need to identify our local foods that can serve as alternatives and glamourise them. We need to look at the things that cause malnutrition region by region and address them using the local things that exist within the region." She stressed the need to be

practical - providing food demonstrations to mothers and caregivers, showing them how to use food items like groundnuts, millet and soya beans to prepare nutritious meals.

Pro-Health International's Dr. Samson Egbunu who worked with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) noted that, IDPs often sell off all their produce, including nutritious food to pay for medical needs. But he was quick to proffer a solution: "For us to achieve some level of sustainability, we should empower these people to actually produce the food we want them to eat and better their nutrition status."

Also on the solutions lane was Rev. Matthew Fanto, Center Manager, Peace Building and Trauma Healing Center, Little Ray Field, Jos, Plateau State. "Curbing malnutrition doesn't need much funding. All we need is education and demonstration farms in communities," he started off. Rev. Fanto was emphatic that poverty, ignorance and lack of education were underlying currents in the malnutrition crisis. "Every Nigerian should engage in backyard farming. It does not require large space," he stressed.

Beatrice Eluaka of the Civil Society Scaling-Up Nutrition in Nigeria (CS-SUNN) took her cue from Rev Father Fanto. "Nutrition education is very important. We just have to combine nutrition education with all efforts in food production," she reiterated.

If more undercurrents were needed for the malnutrition crisis, women's education/empowerment, access to quality reproductive healthcare services, food security, agriculture, access to clean water and sanitation, all showed their ugly heads.

It was clear to all delegates that malnutrition needs to be tackled with different, quality, diverse and affordable interventions. Key interventions that deal with root causes of malnutrition which often required looking into children's home environment and the general family circumstances are required to prevent

relapse for treated severe acute malnutrition (SAM) cases.

A key highlight of the Dialogue was the concern for sustainability of health programmes targeting malnutrition amidst the growing and continuous agitations for reduced development aid and for national governments to use public spending on the local populations. In this light, the charge was for local communities to be empowered to produce the foods they needed to sustain themselves. This was good music to Ayodele Fella of Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). “We need to think of local solutions to address our nutrition problems in Nigeria - local problems, local solutions.” Her passionate plea was for government to support local businesses by creating enabling environments for participation in the nutrition sector.

The key issue of nutrition information education and advocacy was recurrent among delegates. Adia Oro-Ghene (Catholic Relief Services), Faheed Zeeshan (Action Against Hunger) and Aisha Sani (nutrition advocate) were all resounding voices on nutrition education and access to nutrition advice to enable dietary diversification and enable better access to actual healthier food items.

Along these lines, there is a need to guide how the issue of malnutrition is framed in the mind of the average Nigerian. Advocacy about malnutrition needs to be stepped up. The mass media, as a key partner, was urged to keep the nutrition issue in the front burner for Nigerians in the midst of many other competing concerns.

In the very words of UNICEF's Faraja Chiwile, 'every child has the right to have access to nutritious food,' but solving (mal)nutrition according to Dr Francis Aminu, is 'a movement that goes beyond mere talk and advocacy.' Consequently, do we have to wait till children get malnourished to play our own part? Not at all.

Key Themes

1 Sustainable Models

EMPOWER COMMUNITIES

Local communities should produce the foods they need to sustain themselves. Sustainability mechanisms for local communities to have better access to more nutritious foods need to be put in place

RE-ASSESSMENT NUTRITION INTERVENTIONS

Interventions need to also tackle the root cause of malnutrition. There is a need to look into the lifecycle of malnutrition from onset to treatment and what happens thereafter. Streamlined with a special pointed focus on women of child bearing age.

ACCESS TO NUTRITION ADVICE

This would enable dietary diversification and enable better access to the actual healthier food items. Nutrition focal officers in primary healthcare facilities are key as this improves access for local communities to nutrition advice.

SUPPORT FOR NUTRITION PROGRAMMES

Identify local nutrition foods. Then, small community nutrition projects and programmes should be supported either with grants or without grants.

SCALE-UP COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Seek opportunities where community projects can be scaled up, looking for ways to put in place community support groups and also looking at agricultural diversification.

“For us to achieve some level of sustainability, we should empower these people to actually produce the food we want them to eat and better their nutrition status.”

- Dr. Samson Egbunu, Pro-Health International

2 Advocacy and education

BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE COMMUNICATIONS

Framing the issue of nutrition in the minds of average Nigerians should be an obligation. Communications about malnutrition needs to be stepped up.

ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA

The media has to keep the issue front of mind for Nigerians. Against the backdrop of several other issues that compete for their attention, this should take on a 'campaign-until-something-changes' approach.

NUTRITION EDUCATION

This should identify changes and detect possible signs and also provide information on the different parts of nutrition. Men should be enlightened on nutrition and corresponding health matters. Nutrition education targeting traditional and community rulers should be combined with efforts on food production.

“Let's have traditional rulers and community members get educated on nutrition because these community people lookup to them within the communities.”

- Aisha Sani, nutrition advocate

For the Record

3 Government Support

ADDRESS MALNUTRITION

Government must continue to be held to account to fully address the malnutrition issue, especially to provide the requisite finance to support interventions. Government should not be dependent on development partners to provide funding for nutrition programmes.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The National Policy on Food and Nutrition in Nigeria needs to be implemented. More government leadership is required on the issue of malnutrition. Nutritional interventions need to be multi-sectoral.

ENGAGE PRIVATE SECTOR

The private sector should be better engaged by both government and community organisations. More public-private partnerships (PPP) should be explored.

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Government needs to provide a common ground for businesses and support them to participate in the food and nutrition sector.

"Businesses have to be given the support they need. That's where the government comes in to provide the enabling environment for them to participate in nutrition."

- Ayodele Fella, GAIN

'Every Nigerian should engage in backyard farming'

REV. MATTHEW FANTO,

Centre Manager at the Peace Building and Trauma Healing Centre, making a call for demonstration farms to curb malnutrition in communities



**Just a few of the
highly nutritious local
Nigerian foods
highlighted at the
Dialogue that can help
tackle malnutrition**

agwa

Beans and corn porridge (adalu) is also known as 'ewa ati agbado' (Yoruba) and 'agwa na oka' (Igbo)

eforiro

rich vegetable soup that is native to the Yorubas

acha

carbohydrate-rich cereal of northern Nigeria (especially Benue and Plateau States) with huge amount of Vitamin B and minerals

ikire

traditional delicacy from Ikire, Osun State, originally made from over-ripe plantains, pepper, oil and salt

yalo

Kanuri and Hausa name for the richly abundant garden egg that provides a good source of dietary fibre and antioxidants



anyara

garden egg leaves used by the Igbos to prepare a nutritious soup (ofe akwukwo anyara) with many health benefits

millet

a North Eastern Nigeria nutritious and versatile grain that can be served as a cereal, as a pilaf or in any dish that uses rice

'LOCAL PROBLEMS. LOCAL SOLUTIONS.'

AYODELE FELLA,

Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)'s delegate adding her voice to the call for local communities to be empowered to produce the foods they needed to sustain themselves



'Solving malnutrition in Nigeria is a movement'

DR FRANCIS AMINU,

Dangote Foundation's Director of Health & Nutrition in his rallying call to Nigerians to play their role and move beyond rhetoric

'Every child has the right to have access to nutritious food'

FARAJA CHIWILE,

UNICEF's delegate at the Dialogue laying down the marker for the need to step up action towards reducing malnutrition prevalence levels





Mr Faheed Zeeshan, Deputy Country Director, Action Against Hunger makes a case for easy access to nutrition through linkage from health facility to the community at the Policy Dialogue



A cross section of delegates at the Health Policy Dialogue

Aloud

"We must prioritise maternal, new-born and infant nutrition in Nigeria"

- **DR. NGOZI AZODOH**

Head, Health Nutrition Emergency Response, Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja

"Everything communities need to combat the onset of malnutrition, can be found within their communities"

REV. MATTHEW FANTO,

Centre Manager, Peace Building and Trauma Healing Center, Little Ray Field, Jos, Plateau State

"In trying to distort what is available in the community, we have to use what is available in the community to work for what we want"

- **DR. GERTRUDE ODEZUGO**
USAID

"I think there is need for us to really enlighten the men on nutrition"

- **ADIA ORO-OGHENE**
Catholic Relief Services

"We need to have some linkage from the health facility to the community so people have easy access. They can identify danger signs, what the problems are but they can also be educated on different parts of nutrition."

- **FAHEED ZEESHAN,**
Action Against Hunger

At the local level we can have social innovative disruptors who can come together to make applications that would put local nutritious food and snacks makers on an e-commerce platform- for

mutual benefits

- **EMMANUEL BENYEGOR**
Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)

"If a man needs to access healthcare services, he will sell whatever he needs to, including nutritious food, to pay for his medical needs."

- **DR. SAMSON EGBUNU**
Pro-Health International

"We need to provide food demonstrations to mothers and caregivers, showing them how to use food items like groundnuts, millet & soya beans to prepare nutritious meals."

- **DR. NGOZI AZODOH**
Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja

Call to Action

Look into the lifecycle of malnutrition from onset to treatment and what happens thereafter.

Hold governments to account to fully address the malnutrition issue and provide the requisite finance to support interventions.

Men should be enlightened on nutrition and corresponding health matters.

Undertake combined nutrition education targeting traditional and community rulers with efforts on food production.

Co-opt health workers in the efforts to curb malnutrition.

Need to better promote fortified foods and adoption of business principles to promote these foods.

Explore ways to engage the private sector through public-private partnerships (PPPs).

'Eat what you grow, grow what you eat.'

Need to better co-opt religious and traditional leaders in the nutrition crusade.

Media should spread information about the state of malnutrition in Nigeria - tell stories of how people are expected to care and also fully engage with the issue.