

**African
Nutrition
Capacity
Development
Initiative**

OVERVIEW

Nutrition Is Important Today for Tomorrow: An Action Plan for Capacity Development in the Area of Food and Nutrition.

Most African governments have commitments to reach nutrition goals set at the **1990 World Summit for Children**, **1992 ICN, OAU Africa Strategy for Nutrition**, and **1996 World Food Summit**. But progress towards reaching the Year 2000 goal of reducing by half the 1990 levels of severe and moderate malnutrition among children less than 5 years of age remains a distant ideal in most countries in 2001. A general trend of steady deterioration or stagnation continues. Between 1980 and 1995, the number of stunted children in Sub-Saharan Africa increased by 62%, from 26.3 million to 42.6 million. Sadly, malnutrition contributes more to acquired immune deficiency than does the AIDS virus in sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, child mortality due to malnutrition is staggering.

Yet, intolerable death rates do not depict adequately the nature of the problems caused by malnutrition. Malnutrition saps people's energy, retards their children's physical growth and mental development, diminishes the benefits of schooling, and keeps nations trapped in survival activities that focus only on today, thus paradoxically forgoing tomorrow. Sustainable improvement in nutrition was the key to development in the so-called first world. It is no less important in Africa. The eradication of malnutrition is central to any development strategy for the continent. Investment in nutrition is an investment in human capital and, thus national development.

The deteriorating situation in Africa demands a redoubling of efforts. More of the same will not do and our leaders recognize the imperative to act. The Millennium African Renaissance Plan is an example of the required response. It is an integrated African led plan that depends on home grown ideas and local ownership for poverty reduction. It recognizes the critical roles played by education and health, i.e., it recognizes the importance of human capital formation as the engine that drives development.

Commitments of this type recognize that it is no longer defensible to conclude: "Nothing can be done." Solutions are at hand. Population well-being is at their core and well-being cannot be achieved in the absence of sound nutrition. Although gaps exist in understanding malnutrition fully and present researchers with exciting challenges, a lack of scientific knowledge is not a major constraint to progress. We know enough about malnutrition, the high costs of inaction, and the benefits of successful action to act.

Key to effective action is the capacity to solve problems. We propose a renewed commitment to capacity development in the area of food and nutrition for Africa. Core to our concept of **capacity development** is that it embraces the key role of nutrition in any development agenda and that it recognizes the need to enhance capacity at multiple levels simultaneously, i.e. the enhancement of, individual, organisational, and institutional capabilities to meet desired nutrition goals.

Action plans for the realization of this concept were outlined in a series of four workshops held over the last two years. Ten-year plans for capacity development were outlined in southern, eastern, and western and central Africa to begin the process of operationalizing the commitment that emerged from each of those regional discussions. Regional nutrition leaders devised these plans to help meet Africa's contemporary challenges, identify gaps and opportunities for leadership and chart a way forward.

The plans' principal aim is to secure inspired African leadership in nutrition that is sustainable and capable of meeting the continent's challenges, driving the nutrition agenda at national levels, and mobilizing inter- and intra- regional co-operation to achieve the eradication of malnutrition as a public health problem. Each recognizes ongoing efforts and strives to build on inclusive mechanisms that reach beyond nutritionists and unite multiple efforts for more effective action through common continental strategic and action oriented foci, thus helping to bind distinct efforts that Africa can use to pull itself forward. The plans outlined in this report address the development of learning co-operatives, mechanisms for effective intra- and inter- regional cooperation, and medium and advanced training needs. Among their priorities are:

- *Development of a focused advocacy strategy that is designed to convince national and regional policy and decision makers of nutrition's role in the development process and of the need for greater investment in capacity development to achieve nutrition goals.*
- *Training that focuses on client-focused techniques in policy and program development.*
- *Development of new and sustaining relevant existing short courses that meet immediate needs.*
- *More effective inter- and intra regional curricular development and harmonization of degree programmes.*
- *Stronger capacity for action-oriented research that is guided by the need to assure long-term institutionalized commitment, maintenance, sustainability and ownership by the beneficiaries who will drive the nutrition agenda.*
- *Improved leadership quality and services in nutrition.*
- *Strengthening networks between regional and national institutions for the exchange of experiences and "best practices".*

The challenges Africa faces in addressing the growing problem of malnutrition seems daunting in the wake of other competing priorities such as the AIDS pandemic. The nutrition community in Africa is ready to meet this challenge. However it needs the support of partners and strategic allies to uphold our efforts in capacity development for food and nutrition in Africa. It is heartening to know that there is growing support for this initiative. The recent Inter-country Workshop on the ICN Follow-up held in Harare for 26 countries in the English speaking sub-Saharan Africa, endorsed this initiative. We have made a good beginning. We appreciate UNU, IUNS World Bank FAO and WHO in facilitating the process so far.