**Why millions of infants and young children in East Africa are vulnerable to malnutrition and its lifelong consequences**

By Joseph Kyanjo, 17th August 2025.

The first 1,000 days of life are a critical window for child growth, brain development, and future health. Nutrition during this period not only determines survival but also lays the foundation for learning and future productivity. Poor diets in infancy are strongly linked to stunting, micronutrient deficiencies, and illness. To address this, WHO and UNICEF emphasize the importance of complementary feeding, the process of introducing foods and beverages alongside continued breastfeeding from six months onward. A central indicator is the Minimum Dietary Diversity (MDD), which requires children 6–23 months to consume at least five of eight defined food groups in a day for healthy growth and development.

Yet, the latest data from East Africa highlight a worrying picture. Even in Kenya, the best-performing country, only 37 percent of children aged 6–23 months achieve minimum dietary diversity. At the other end of the spectrum, the Democratic Republic of Congo records just 17 percent. This means that most children in the region are not receiving the diversity of foods essential for their growth and development, leaving millions vulnerable to malnutrition and its lifelong consequences.