Improving Nutrition as a Development Priority
Addressing Undernutrition within National Policy Processes in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Undernutrition remains one of Sub-Saharan Africa’s fundamental challenges for improved human welfare and economic growth, and a strong case can be made that governments should make substantial investments in efforts to reduce undernutrition among their citizens. Yet in most nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, a high prevalence of undernutrition in the population is not seen as anomalous and indicative of the government’s inability to fulfill its duties to its citizens. There is no drama associated with undernutrition; no concern that the issue is critical to the future of the country, to the continued political success of government, or to the well-being of its citizens. In consequence, there is low political demand for action against undernutrition, and most governments in Sub-Saharan Africa do little to ensure that nutrition-related goods and services are provided to their citizens. This is the problem at the center of this study.

Drawing upon the findings of a qualitative institutional study in Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda, the report examines what factors make it difficult for undernutrition to be targeted as a national development priority. With between one-quarter and one-third of all children stunted in their physical growth and cognitive development, the absolute human costs of undernutrition in these countries are immense. To assess the opportunities for and constraints in prioritizing nutrition-related actions in the public sector, the report examines four interrelated elements of the policy processes in each country: (1) policymaking structures, including both formal institutions and less formal political interests; (2) political actors who engage strategically with particular policy processes; (3) the narrative or persuasive understanding of undernutrition that drives policy choices in this area; and (4) the timing of policy initiatives.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Although small positive steps can be identified in all four countries, none of the four governments has effectively prioritized undernutrition in its development objectives or resource allocations. The following points summarize several of the most important country-level findings of the study.

- Undernutrition is seen across all the study countries as part of the context within which government works as best it can. High levels of undernutrition do not threaten the legitimacy of these countries’ governments or invoke a sense of crisis. In consequence, all of the countries consistently underinvest in efforts to reduce undernutrition.
- In all four countries, political leaders and policymakers have only limited understanding of the determinants of nutritional status and the costs of aggregate undernutrition for national development.
- The governments of Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda have developed formal food security and nutrition policies and established food security and nutrition coordination bodies. These policies and agencies have had little success, however, in shifting government resource allocations toward addressing undernutrition, perhaps largely because nutrition does not fit within a single sector. Certainly these three countries are no more successful in addressing undernutrition than Ghana, which does not have such a formal institutional framework to address food security and nutrition issues. In all the study countries, sectoral ministries within government tend to view themselves as being in competition with each other for resources. As such, cross-sectoral policies and coordinating agencies do not fit this sectoral pattern of resource allocation and tend to be neglected.
- In the implementation of programs to address undernutrition, existing sectoral mandates are used to assign responsibility to the sectors for such action. Yet, in all the study countries and for all sectors concerned (whether health, education, agriculture, water and sanitation, or others), nutrition activities tend to be viewed as secondary sectoral priorities. Other sectoral mandates receive more attention and resources.
- The actors from outside central government agencies that are involved in advocating for and coordinating nutrition activities present some common patterns across the countries. International partners tend to be important in nutrition-focused activities and their coordination. On the other hand, there is seemingly little engagement by national civil society groups in nutrition advocacy.
- The study countries have different levels of expertise in addressing problems of nutrition, but there is little evidence that the prospects for the undernourished depend on the number of trained nutritionists. How human capacity in nutrition is used is certainly as important as the
presence of trained nutritionists. Where policymaking is centralized and relatively ordered, a few motivated nutritionists are adequate to guide policymakers in formulating policy and allocating resources to address undernutrition. Where local governments are responsible for nutrition activities, however, they need considerably more information on the costs of the problem at the local level and on ways of reducing it. In decentralized systems of government, technical support from significantly greater numbers of nutritionists is needed to enable local governments to work effectively to address undernutrition.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The inability of the governments of the study countries to prioritize undernutrition effectively among their development objectives occurs in part because undernutrition as a public policy problem does not fit neatly within the sectoral organization of government. The underlying determinants of improved nutritional status fall across several sectors, including health and agriculture. Given this poor fit and the consequent problems for establishing leadership on the issue of undernutrition within government, national advocacy coalitions should be formed around the issue. The creation of such coalitions can be problematic, and, to some degree, leadership for and participation in such advocacy efforts will be dependent on the personal qualities of the participants.

However, if established, such coalitions should take several actions:

- Consistently link nutrition policy narratives to those of the master development framework for the country. The ambitions of these frameworks are unlikely to be attained if the constraints imposed by undernutrition are not removed.
- Emphasize that it is part of the duty of the state to ensure that its citizens are properly nourished.
- Make it clear to senior government leaders that improving nutrition requires a broader set of actions across multiple sectors than that needed to attain food security. Food security is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ensuring that all enjoy adequate nutrition.
- Cultivate policy champions, particularly senior political and bureaucratic decisionmakers. This is particularly important in countries with more disordered and personalized policy processes, such as Nigeria.
- As a foundation for political dialogue, raise the general public’s awareness of the burden that undernutrition imposes on their well-being and what can be done effectively to reduce this burden.

Advocates for nutrition must present clear and consistent messages of the roles and responsibilities that the government and sectors within it should play in reducing undernutrition in a concerted and harmonized manner.

CONCLUSION

In sum, it is crucial to alter the perception that undernutrition is part of the normal order of things. Advocacy groups should generate a perception of crisis related to undernutrition in order to foster significant, urgent, high-profile action by government. Although a perception of nutritional crisis cannot be sustained in the long term, it should be possible to exploit incremental changes in the perception of the undernutrition issue to promote more effective actions to assist the undernourished. Given that undernutrition is a solvable problem that, in part, requires public action, governments can and should be held accountable for the persistent presence of undernourished women and children in the population, the unnecessary suffering that they experience, and the limited potential that they have to live long, healthy, productive, and creative lives.