

The Contribution of Nutrition to Achieving the Millennium Development Goals

FAO's Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division

Overview

Nutritional status is a key indicator of poverty and hunger, poor health, and inadequate education and social conditions. Good nutrition is crucial to reach the health, education and economic goals contained in the MDGs since good health, cognitive development and productivity cannot be achieved without good nutrition. Poorly nourished children cannot grow and develop properly, resist infections or learn to their full potential. Malnourished adults are less capable of performing work and are severely disadvantaged in terms of their social and economic security. Nutrition has a singularly important role to play in helping people living with HIV/AIDS and in mitigating the impact of the disease among affected household members.

Nutrition improvement programmes have a unique, essential role to play in efforts to reach the MDGs. Good nutrition makes an essential contribution to the fight against poverty. It protects and promotes health; reduces mortality, especially among mothers and children; and encourages and enables children to attend and benefit from school. By indirectly strengthening communities and local economies, good nutrition contributes to the achievement of other development objectives which in turn impact upon the MDGs. For example, the increased participation of the poor and vulnerable and of women in the development process that may arise from effective community nutrition programmes will likely lead to more effective demands for improved services and to better use of existing resources. Clearly, comprehensive, mutually supportive policies and interventions designed to achieve the agreed goals and targets of the MDGs are needed. The use of nutritional goals and indicators and of participatory community nutrition approaches to design and monitor interventions would facilitate the development and implementation of such interventions.

Introduction

Fundamentally, the MDGs are about improving the health and welfare of the world's poor in a timely and sustainable manner. Together the MDGs are intended to ensure that social and economic development focus on the poor with the specific aim of creating well-nourished, healthy, and educated populations with adequate and equitable access to basic goods and services and who live and work in safe and secure environments. It is the well-being of people, especially the poor and vulnerable, that is at the heart of MDGs. The MDGs are built on the recognition that problems of poverty, hunger, poor health, lack of education, social and economic discrimination and environmental degradation are commonly interconnected and must be addressed in concert if sustainable improvements in the poor's health and wellbeing are to be achieved.

Success can only be achieved if the full potential of agriculture development to improve human welfare is recognized and channelled properly. This will require that the multiple roles of agriculture be recognized, and that the diverse opportunities to deal with the many social and economic issues affecting the well-being of the poor are exploited as best possible. In the context of the MDGs this translates into people-centred development or "putting people first" and means looking beyond food availability and incomes as the primary objectives of agriculture development or as the sole determinants of food security. It means that, while

recognizing food and incomes (and thus the production and trade of agricultural commodities) as crucial components of the agriculture-led development needed to achieve the MDGs, the most important aspect of agriculture development is that it expands, enhances and sustains people's ability to acquire and utilize the amount and variety of food they need to be active and healthy. It redirects agriculture to focus on the livelihoods of the poor, and gives priority to looking at farmers, households and communities - not just at crops, livestock, fish and forests. It places issues of food, food security and agriculture firmly within the framework of social and economic development and recognizes that in addition to food supplies, prices and incomes, people's knowledge, preferences and attitudes, coupled with social pressures and time constraints, are also critical factors affecting their food security.

People-centred development also gives nutrition a central role as nutritional well-being is recognised both as a primary objective of development and an important input into the social and economic development process. The nutritional status of a population is recognised as a key indicator of poverty and hunger, and of poor health, and of inadequate education and social conditions. More importantly, good nutrition is recognised as being crucial for reaching the health, education and economic goals contained in the MDGs. Simply put, good health, cognitive development and productivity cannot be achieved in the absence of good nutrition. Poorly nourished children cannot grow and develop properly, resist infections or learn to their full potential. Similarly malnourished adults cannot be optimally productive or healthy, and are severely disadvantaged in terms of their social and economic security. Nutrition has a singularly important role to play in helping people living with HIV/AIDS and in mitigating the impact of the disease among affected household members.

In summary, nutrition improvement activities must be seen as having a unique, essential role to play in efforts to reach the MDGs. Good nutrition contributes enormously to the fight against poverty. It also protects and promotes health; reduces mortality, especially among mothers and children; and encourages and enables children to attend and benefit from school. In addition by indirectly strengthening communities and local economies, good nutrition contributes to the achievement of other development objectives which in turn impact upon the MDGs. For example, the increased participation of the poor and vulnerable and of women in the development process that may arise from effective community nutrition programmes will likely lead to more effective demands for improved services and to better use of existing resources. Clearly, comprehensive, mutually supportive interventions designed to achieve the agreed goals and targets of the MDGs are needed. The use of nutritional goals and indicators and of participatory community nutrition approaches to design and monitor interventions would facilitate the development and implementation of such interventions.

Specific contributions of FAO activities in nutrition to the MDGs

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

FAO focuses on poverty and hunger reduction through a "twin-track" approach: improving agricultural productivity and promoting better nutritional practices at all levels; and promoting programmes that enhance direct and immediate access to food by the neediest. Its programmes contribute to all dimensions of food security: availability, access, stability and utilisation of safe and nutritious food.

Improvements in the productivity of agriculture and related sectors directly increase farm and rural incomes and household food security. At the same time, agricultural growth focused on

small farmers promotes overall rural and non-farm employment and has a strong poverty-reducing effect. Emergency relief and rehabilitation operations aim to reduce the vulnerability of those affected by natural and human-induced disasters. By facilitating better access to the skills, tools, services and rights that help the rural poor make lasting improvements in their own livelihoods, programmes addressing this overarching Goal increase the impact of work directly targeted to other Goals.

Food insecurity and poor nutritional status are correlated with poverty and social inequity, and therefore, there is much overlap between initiatives to fight poverty, alleviate malnutrition, ensure food security and promote sustainable livelihoods. However economic development alone will likely not lead to a reduction in hunger by half by 2015. A twin-track approach that combines pro-poor economic growth, particularly agriculture-led development, with direct nutritional support for the most vulnerable populations is commonly considered the preferred means to achieve and sustain the dual objectives of reducing poverty and hunger as quickly as possible. This type of people-centred and nutrition-focused development has long been advocated and promoted by FAO, and has served as the basis for Community Nutrition Programmes. Experience has shown the approach to be effective with two major points of emphasis. First, all forms of malnutrition need to be addressed, not just hunger or the lack of sufficient food to meet energy needs; and second, the pro-poor aspects of the interventions are best assured by using a participatory, community-based approach that aims to improve the nutrition and food security of the poorest and most vulnerable segments of the population within the context of securing sustainable livelihoods. The objective of such an approach is to ensure that the poor and marginalised are able to participate in and specifically benefit from the development process. This approach also emphasises the importance of capacity-building and of working with local institutions.

FAO's activities aimed at helping countries and communities deal with the medium and long-term effects of natural disasters and complex emergencies to better protect and promote the nutrition well-being of those affected also contributes directly to this goal. Underpinning the work of both these activities is work on nutrition information, communication and education. Given the sustainable reduction of hunger and malnutrition requires year-round access to and consumption of an amount and variety of foods sufficient to provide nutritionally adequate diets, it should be clear that all the impediments that constrain a household's ability to acquire and utilise the food it needs to meet each member's nutritional needs must be addressed. Obviously this includes factors such as the amount and variety of foods available within households and in local markets, food prices, and household incomes. Perhaps less obvious but of no less importance are other non-monetary factors such as nutritional knowledge and attitudes of caregivers about foods, social and dietary customs, family/child care and feeding practices, household hygiene and the competing demands on women's and other care-giver's time that may constraint their ability to secure, prepare and serve food. Effective nutrition education can often make a significant contribution to reducing hunger and malnutrition even with improvements in food supplies and incomes.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Poor families often cannot afford to send their children to school. The learning ability of children is compromised by hunger and malnutrition. Hungry children cannot learn well and in general good nutrition improves educational outcomes. Improved nutritional status arising from better care and feeding at home and from effective feeding programmes at school, coupled with the increased awareness of the importance of nutrition and the practical

knowledge and skills acquired from nutrition education can lead to higher rates of school enrolment, better attendance and greater educational achievements by children. This may be especially important for girls. In addition, the more families are able to feed themselves, the less restrictive they may be regarding sending their children to school.

Good nutrition must be recognised an essential component of efforts to achieve universal primary education and to help ensure that the investment in education pays off. By supporting efforts to improve both the nutritional well-being of school children and the quality of nutrition education in schools, in promoting the development and effective use of school gardens, and in advocating for strong school-community collaboration to improve nutrition, FAO has made a significant contribution to this goal.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

In countries where agriculture is still labour-intensive, women produce up to 80 percent of food. Helping to eliminate discriminatory policies against women, improving their access to land, agricultural inputs, financial services and skills, and promoting labour-saving technologies all work in favour of empowerment, equality and better lives for women and their families.

Better nutrition among women, coupled with improved food and nutrition-related knowledge, attitudes and practices by women, girls and other community members, can contribute to women's empowerment and gender equality, significantly reduce child mortality and morbidity, improve maternal health, play a crucial role in the prevention of both communicable and non-communicable diseases and mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS infection.

It is particularly important that women of childbearing age and small children cover their nutritional needs. Virtually all of the household food security, community nutrition and nutrition education initiatives supported by FAO have strong components of gender equality and women's empowerment to encourage women to care for themselves and their families. Women are the keys to good family nutrition in virtually all societies. In addition to being the primary food preparers and caregivers within most households, women have major responsibilities for provisioning the household as well. Empowering women, therefore, is often essential if improvements in hunger and malnutrition are to be achieved, and this is reflected in the high priority given to gender within our programme of work.

To a large extent, care and feeding practices are often determined by indigenous knowledge and cultural norms, as is the allocation of tasks, responsibilities and resources within the household. Gender issues also play a major role in how many of these various practices, social status and behaviours, including care and feeding practices, are determined and put into effect. However, traditional practices and social perceptions and status can change, but often this requires concerted efforts by various change agents to help people acquire new knowledge and insights so they may adopt new attitudes and actions. Experience shows that the use of participatory, community-based nutrition improvement interventions can be highly effective tools for empowering women.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

It has been estimated that about five million child deaths each year can be traced to hunger and malnutrition. Improving the nutritional status of children and their mothers has very strong effects on reducing child mortality. Good nutrition saves lives, and if the achievement of this MDG to reduce child mortality is to be through development, there must first of all be an improvement in child nutritional status. Programmes to improve household food security and nutrition information increase children's chances of growing to adulthood.

Goal 5: *Improve maternal health*

Similar to the discussion of the diet-nutrition-health relationships in children, links between maternal health and maternal nutritional status are clear. Widespread reductions in maternal mortality rates will only be possible when there are widespread improvements in maternal nutritional status. For example, severe anaemia is considered to be the most serious risk-factor for maternal mortality in Africa and many other parts of the world. However, improving the overall nutritional status of women throughout the life-cycle is also important if maternal health is to be achieved. Girl children who fail to grow and develop normally due to malnutrition at any time of their life – including during their foetal development - and women who become malnourished at any time during their pregnancy are at greatly increased risk of experiencing peri-natal problems and possibly death. Accordingly, improving maternal nutrition is also important for improving maternal health in the next generation.

Closely associated with improvements in maternal nutrition and health are improvements in the social status of women. This means that efforts to end gender inequality and empower women will also lead to improvements in maternal health. Again, the contributions of FAO are considerable and include both efforts to improve women's nutritional status directly and to empower women to obtain better health care and services. Promoting nutrition awareness among women, especially in rural areas, introducing labour-saving technologies, and ensuring greater household food security all contribute to better maternal health.

Goal 6: *Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases*

Although great strides are being made to provide drugs and medical support for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHIV), the vast majority of HIV+ individuals because of their poverty and numbers will not receive adequate medical care let alone any form of anti-retroviral therapy. For such people, good nutrition is the only practical treatment that they can gain access to that can make a difference in their lives. Good nutrition is not a cure, but it can slow the progression from HIV+ to AIDS, it can help strengthen the immune system to fight off secondary infections, it can help people be more comfortable and productive for longer and it can help create a greater sense of well-being.

Adequate nutrition is important in the fight against illness. Efforts to improve nutrition need to be directed at those affected by the disease even if they are not infected themselves. Given that HIV/AIDS takes so many productive individuals out of households and communities, those that remain are also often at great risk of malnutrition. Orphans are a particularly susceptible group of victims whose food security and nutritional well-being must be protected. Special support services including "Farmers' Field Schools" for HIV/AIDS orphans and nutrition programmes in rural areas also help to mitigate the disastrous effects of AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

Recognising the importance of nutrition in efforts to combat HIV/AIDS, FAO has embarked on a range of normative initiatives and field activities to protect and promote individual and household food security and dietary intakes and to provide nutrition counselling and support. FAO has been particularly active in fostering inter-divisional, inter-departmental and inter-agency cooperation in this inter-disciplinary area.

Goal 7: *Ensure environment sustainability*

Hunger and poverty often compel the poor to over-exploit the resources on which their own livelihoods depend. However, the diverse array of goods and services provided by ecosystems – clean water, fertile soils, vegetated landscapes, biodiversity and carbon sequestration to name a few – must be managed in ways that sustain human populations, not only meeting their food requirements but also a variety of other environmental, social and economic needs.

Food insecurity is often greater in marginalised areas where the combination of environmentally fragile ecosystems, low productivity, geographical isolation, and limited access to health or education services makes life difficult. People may be forced to adopt inappropriate natural resource management practices increasing the risk of natural disasters. Food insecurity and destitution fuel potential conflicts. Supporting livelihoods and improving household food security and nutrition and supporting land rights reduces the need for households to adopt environmentally unfavourable practices.

FAO supports the integrated management of land, fisheries, forest and genetic resources, including through conservation agriculture, integrated pest management, water conservation and responsible water-use practices, and the protection of biodiversity. Other activities are designed to address the sustainable development of environments at risk and to assist those living in marginal areas with livelihood support programmes based on ecosystem management principles

FAO's participatory, community-based nutrition initiatives have proven to be very successful in many instances in helping communities address problems of environmental degradation in a constructive manner. This has occurred in the context of both development and emergency rehabilitation.

Goal 8: *Develop a global partnership for development*

Rapid and sustainable progress in reaching the MDGs can only be achieved through the establishment of effective partnerships at local, national and global levels. A similar situation existed following the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition which recognised that collaboration was needed across the entire spectrum of strategies and actions contained in the ICN Plan of Action if the goals of the World Declaration on Nutrition were to be achieved. Since then FAO's nutrition division has worked to foster a number of partnerships and collaborative efforts to arise awareness of problems of hunger and malnutrition around the world, to advocate for action and to design and implement programmes and initiatives to address priority nutrition-related problems. Particularly noteworthy has been work with other UN Agencies within the framework of the Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN), the global Feeding Minds, Fighting Hunger partnership, and collaboration with academia, the private sector and with global NGOs. New opportunities for building global initiatives and partnerships will continue to be sought.

FAO, working with its Members and the WTO, is an active partner in efforts to create an open, fair and rules-based multilateral trading system, in particular through its support for food, agricultural trade and overall trade policies conducive to food security. In advocating a central place for food security on the global agenda, it works with IFAD and WFP, other UN partners, governments, civil society and the private sector to promote the International Alliance against Hunger called for in 2002 by the World Food Summit: Five Years Later.

Conclusion

In the past the struggle against poverty and hunger was compromised by the lack of political will and necessary resources. The very significant roles which food security, rural development and agriculture play in reducing poverty in all its multiple and inter-dependent manifestations was also not fully recognised. However, there are signs of increased awareness that what is needed now is action that focuses on agriculture and rural development in ways that have the greatest impact on poverty, food security and nutritional standards, coupled with social safety net programmes to ensure access to and consumption of food on the part of the most needy.