



Taking Stock of Nutrition Accountability Scorecard

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All Protocols Observed

It is an honor for me to address this most distinguished audience and participate in this significant event on what is one of the most crucial issues facing humankind in the 21st century: the persistence of malnutrition across large swaths of the world.

Over the last 15 years, economies in the developing world have grown spectacularly. Largely driven by increases in production, rises in productivity and development of agri-food value chains, this growth has had a significant role in reducing poverty rates.

Despite major increases in food production, access to balanced healthy diets has remained a challenge for people in many parts of the world. Nowhere is this more evident than in Africa, where the prevalence of malnutrition has risen since the turn of the century. As we grapple with the challenges posed by climate change, rapidly increasing populations and the need to live within our planetary boundaries, we must focus on producing more nutritious foods with less inputs. The costs of failure are too simply high.

Malnutrition compromises the immune system, causes stunting and wasting in children, and increases the likelihood of death. It hinders the healthy development of children's brains and bodies, robbing them and their countries of opportunities to reach their full potential. Devastating for children, malnutrition also represents a long-term drain on economic growth costing African countries between 2 and 11 percent of annual GDP.

Nearly a quarter of sub-Saharan Africans suffer undernutrition. Despite historic progress, malnutrition has risen in many countries in the recent years, especially in West and Central Africa. In 2017, an estimated 58.7 million African children under 5 suffered from stunting; up from 50.6 million in 2000. This is an alarming trend, especially during a period marked by a reduction in the global stunting rate from 32.5 to 21.9 percent.

This is why the Continental Accountability Scorecard for Nutrition—launched last February by the African Union and African Development Bank—is so welcome. It employs 12 indicators to provide a comparative snapshot of the status of African countries in achieving their nutrition goals. It helps bring greater transparency and accountability to efforts to tackle the complex challenges of micronutrient deficiency.

The Scorecard will help African policymakers focus on the actions needed to address these challenges and monitor progress toward meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, the African Union Vision 2063 and the 2014 Malabo Declaration.

It also highlights examples of areas where African states have already made substantial progress. Seven African countries have reduced the prevalence of childhood stunting to less than 19%, below the global average of 21.9%. Inspiring examples include Ghana, which halved national stunting rates in just 11 years, and Malawi, which reduced the prevalence of vitamin A deficiency in children under five from 59% in 2003 to just 4% in 2016.

Another encouraging trend is the increase in the rate of exclusive breastfeeding of infants in their first five months, with 18 African countries surpassing the target rate of 50% by 2017.

The Scorecard highlights a number of areas which need urgent attention. It calls upon African governments to increase investment in multisectoral nutrition initiatives to address the conditions that perpetuate malnutrition. It also rightly highlights the need for better quality data to guide complex interventions. Poor data impedes effective responses, learning, accountability and measurement of success.

I would like to touch upon some potential opportunities not covered by the Scorecard that organizations like CGIAR can support key stakeholders in:

1. Biofortifying key crops to complement food fortification and supplementation policies;
2. Mainstreaming 'nutrition education' to increase consumption of more nutritious foods;
3. Combining 'nutrition education' with efforts to enhance crop yields and value chain development; and
4. The inclusion of climate-smart traits in all crop breeding programs.

Biofortification

Governments and international organizations have traditionally focused on the distribution of vitamin and mineral supplements and the fortification of processed foods in efforts to tackle micronutrient deficiencies. While these are effective approaches under many circumstances, they are not necessarily the best option in all circumstances. They require significant institutionalization, long-term government commitment and private sector buy-in. The persistence of undernutrition suggests that these approaches alone won't be enough to solve the problem.

The Scorecard recommends that governments enforce compliance with mandatory food fortification legislation, and food fortification can be quite effective in urban areas where consumers have access to processed foods. However, it may be less effective at improving the nutrition status of the more than 60 percent of Africans live in rural areas, where access to processed foods is limited. Rural Africans primarily consume the food they produce on their own farms or source in the immediate vicinity.

Resource-poor city dwellers—reliant on informal food markets—also frequently lack access to, or understanding of the value of, fortified foods and other healthy options. And weakly regulated food markets may undermine access to fortified foods as unhealthy products can be marketed as nutritious.

CGIAR has thus focused on biofortification—the use of breeding to increase the nutritional content of staple crops—and the dissemination of the resulting nutritious varieties. Once biofortified crops have been integrated into an agriculture system, they can become a sustainable solution to micronutrient deficiencies. And unlike fortification and supplementation, they can provide food security and income benefits for small-scale growers, traders and sales outlets.

CGIAR centers have partnered with governments, NGOs and civil society organizations to facilitate the development and delivery of biofortified crops to nearly 40 million smallholder farm households across Africa and Asia. Hundreds of biofortified crop varieties with elevated levels of essential micronutrients have been released or are under evaluation in developing countries, whereas many more are in the research stage.

One of the biofortification success stories is orange-fleshed sweetpotato, of which scaled delivery to six and a half million households in 16 African countries, about 25 million people, over the past decade. Just 125 grams of one of those varieties meets the daily vitamin A needs of a preschool child, which can help ensure that he or she won't be one of the estimated 500,000 children who go blind each year for lack of vitamin A.

Just as important as the millions of households reached with nutritious crop varieties over the past decade are the scientific knowledge, technologies and approaches that have been generated in the process. Those tools and knowledge will enable us to take nutritious crops to scale in the coming years.

Nutrition education for healthier diets

Biofortified crops can save lives, but their introduction and promotion needs to be part of a holistic approach that extends from breeding and seed system development to agronomic training and market interventions.

They can result in sustainable nutrition outcomes and other benefits, such as income improvements, as CIP has demonstrated with sweetpotato. But rather than focusing on just one crop, interventions should use agri-food system approaches that include increasing the diversity of crops that people grow and eat.

One important component here is nutrition education, complemented with options for diet diversification. Evidence from past interventions demonstrates that people will change their dietary practices if they are presented with nutritional information and given opportunities to make appropriate choices.

In promoting micronutrient-rich crops, governments and international organizations should raise awareness of the importance of healthy diets, which in turn can result in the development of value chains for nutritious foods, and improved incomes for the farmers who grow them.

An example of the multiple benefits of these crops is the adoption of orange-fleshed sweetpotato puree by bakeries and supermarkets in various countries across the African continent. By replacing 40 percent of the imported wheat flour used in bread and other products with sweetpotato puree, bakeries have reduced their production costs and provided income opportunities for local sweetpotato farmers. They also produce a visibly different

product that not only boosts vitamin A intake of consumers but can also increase their awareness of the importance of nutritious foods.

Whatever the chosen strategy for delivering essential vitamins and minerals, raising awareness and educating people about nutrition issues is extremely important. As more and more Africans move to cities, many hoped that urbanization would contribute to better nutrition, but the latest global nutrition reports show that isn't the case. On the contrary, urban Africans increasingly suffer from obesity – the continent's other malnutrition problem.

Because of a limited understanding of nutrition and healthy dietary habits, and the proliferation of unhealthy foods, we can increasingly find Africans who are both overweight and undernourished. This is yet another reason why efforts to raise awareness of nutrition and make nutritious foods more accessible are so important

Combining 'nutrition education' with efforts to enhance crop yields and value chain development

Improving the incomes of rural families can make an important contribution to nutrition outcomes, since it enables them to purchase nutritious foods that they are unable to produce on their farms. As an example of the kind of work done by the CGIAR, CIP has contributed to this through initiatives to improve the production of potato—an important cash crop.

Efforts to expand access to quality seed potatoes of high-yielding, climate-resilient varieties, improve crop management and train farmers in value chain approaches have enabled more than two million small-scale farm households in Africa and Asia to increase their yields and incomes since 2013.

There are also examples of the potato's potential for improving incomes here in China, where CIP has been collaborating with agricultural universities and other government institutions for decades. Potato varieties bred by CIP or Chinese institutions using CIP germplasm constitute roughly a quarter of the land dedicated to potato production.

One successful variety, Cooperation 88, cultivated on more than 160,000 hectares in the country, generated an estimated USD 3.73 billion for local farmers and consumers in Yunnan province over a 20-year period.

Combined with nutrition education, improving yields and incomes can drive multiple benefits for farm families, including healthier more balanced diets. Nutritious, resilient and high-yielding crop varieties can have an important impact on the health and wellbeing of farming families in Africa, and we have just begun to tap their potential.

One current Africa-wide example is the African Development Bank's Technologies for African Agricultural Transformation, or TAAT, initiative. Led by our colleagues at CGIAR sister center, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, this collaboration aims to boost productivity and make Africa self-sufficient in nine priority commodity agricultural value chains, including sweetpotato. By facilitating the production of 120 million tons of additional raw food, TAAT expects to contribute to lifting about 40 million people out of poverty by November 2021.

Climate-smart, healthy crops

While rural families need to understand the nutritional value of crops before they choose to grow them, those crops also need to be productive and profitable, otherwise land-constrained farmers will likely abandon them.

In sub-Saharan African, crop breeders strive to develop high-yielding, nutritious varieties that tolerate environmental stresses such as drought and have the qualities demanded by farmers, processors and consumers.

The CGIAR Excellence in Breeding platform is helping those breeders develop ‘product profiles’ that combine the most important traits in their countries. Those profiles will accelerate the pace of the breeding and release of nutritious varieties that are likely to be widely adopted and consumed and will improve farm resilience and family diets.

Climate change will continue to erode the resilience of small-scale farms, and negatively impact nutritional outcomes in rural and urban areas, unless we accelerate the development and adoption of more productive, climate-smart varieties. Malnutrition and climate resilience cannot be tackled in isolation, but addressed through holistic interventions.

With growing awareness of the burden that malnutrition constitutes, tools like the Continental Scorecard for Nutrition, and more holistic approaches, we can reverse the trend of recent years and move toward the eradicating this scourge from the African continent.

Thank you.

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