EDITORIAL

Nutrition has come of age? What is Nutrition?

According to Wikipedia “Nutrition (also called nourishment or aliment) is the provision, to cells and organisms, of the materials necessary (in the form of food) to support life. Many common health problems can be prevented or alleviated with good nutrition”.

The First Uganda Nutrition Congress which was held mid February this year was real “proof in the eating of the pudding”. The diverse nature of the representation at this meeting has proved to us and continues to do so, that nutrition and its implications whether positive or negative, affects all of us and all sectors. This, of course is not the first time this concept is being brought forward. Indeed in 2004, IFPRI organized a roundtable meeting of African Heads of State to discuss the role of food and nutrition in human development and sustainable nation building. The IFPRI sponsored meeting was in the same venue as the UAN meeting of February 2009. About four Heads of State attended, many did not and clearly, that should not discourage us. A seed was already planted.

One of the startling statistics presented 969 million in 2009 by Bibi Giyose of NEPAD was that of the 969 million people worldwide consuming less than the FAO recommended 2100 kcals per day, about ½ are in sub-Saharan Africa. The mood at this gathering was one of optimism and that we should not stop complaining and being negative and start offering answers and solutions. Only then might we start seeing a positive trend in these indicators. More than 80% of Africans depend on agriculture, yet they are the most malnourished and that is where we need to intervene. The poor produce to feed others and leave nothing for themselves.

It indeed is absurd that those who produce food to feed the economically well-off are the same ones who depend on good aid and handouts; they constitute the poorest in Africa. Sometimes we complain of lack of policies. However that is not altogether true as many governments know that donor countries will fault them if they do not formulate policies that can guide development programs. To a large extent therefore, policies are there; however, what is lacking is implementation plans. Implementation calls for allocation of resources and in many instances this requires political goodwill which often is lacking. In many African countries, resources for development are rarely allocated and monitored in a transparent manner. The lion’s share of the national cake goes to politically correct and favoured areas and very rarely do people on the ground receive their due share of that allocation.
If resources were properly allocated, then one might begin to see the very poor starting to exit abject poverty. Only then might we begin to see better nourished citizens who can contribute robustly to national development.

“Good Nutrition is the Foundation for Good Human Health and National Development; strategies are simple, not rocket science” said Joyce Kikafunda, President of UGAN (Uganda Action for Nutrition Society).

Prof. Roger Whitehead was honoured by the Congress for his early research on child malnutrition in Uganda when he helped establish Uganda’s Medical Research Council in 1959; Prof Whitehead came back to Uganda to assist Makerere University to start an MSc in Human Nutrition. The World Food Program was represented by Uganda’s Country Director. He pleaded for those who toil on the ground to be allocated the needed resources.

He noted that the practitioners toil on the ground with minimal funding. WFP is the largest food aid agency in the world and thus the food they manage needs to be safe and nutritional, and more importantly it needs to be moved to those who need it without affecting its nutrient levels and overall quality. These aspects of food quality and safety were emphasised. He went on to say that at the end of the day, there must be political will as it is only then that many supporters and donors, both local and international can come forward to assist.

WFP, we learnt is changing it from a Food Aid Agency to a Hunger Agency to be able to address more effectively issues of development by addressing the causes of hunger and poverty. All this good information was coming from WFP-Uganda and reflected the extent of consultations that have taken place between WFP and the Government of Uganda. One wonders whether what we heard in Uganda applies to all sub-Saharan African countries where WFP operates.

Other programs operating in Uganda with development partners included:

- a) Food-based approaches including kitchen gardens by Food and Agriculture Organization
- b) Food fortification and the private sector
- c) Orange-fleshed sweet potato through bio-fortification.

A resounding message came from the First Lady of the country Hon. Janet Museveni, also Patron of UGAN, that families an especially women of the families need to be equipped with the right information to be able to feed their families and especially children properly. Uganda has a serious problem of micronutrient deficiencies and clearly a concerted effort is required, involving all stake holders, spearheaded by the government to ensure effective interventions and close monitoring. It was a good meeting attend by nearly
300 participants from 19 countries.

By Ruth Oniang'o, Editor-in-Chief

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