

Key resolutions included sensitising families on providing nutrient-rich meals, strengthening sub-county nutrition committees and integrating nutrition into government programmes.

BY ALEX ASHABA

**A**s schools reopened for the first term yesterday, leaders and nutrition activists in Kabarole District urged parents to take immediate responsibility in combating child malnutrition by ensuring that every learner carries packed food to school.

They warn that many children attend classes on empty stomachs, a situation that fuels stunted growth and persistent malnutrition while also negatively affecting academic performance, as hungry learners struggle to concentrate and perform poorly in national examinations.

On Monday, ahead of the school reopening, district leaders, development partners, and community development officers from all 15 sub-counties held a meeting to discuss strategies to end malnutrition among children both in schools and communities.

Key resolutions included engaging parents to ensure all learners return to school with packed lunch, sensitising families on providing nutrient-rich meals, strengthening sub-county nutrition committees, integrating nutrition into all government programmes, and mobilising funding to support interventions.

Despite the Tooro Sub-region being regarded as a food basket, malnutrition levels remain alarmingly high. According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2022, stunting among children under five in Tooro stands at 38.7 percent, ranking the sub-region third nationwide after Karamoja (43.9 percent) and Kigezi (41.5 percent), all above the national average of 26 percent.

The report further shows that severe stunting among children under five in Tooro is at 14.4 percent, ranking second after Karamoja (19.7 percent) and significantly higher than the national rate

# Kabarole leaders push for packed lunch in schools



Some of Kabarole District leaders and stakeholders during a meeting at the district headquarters in Kitumba on Monday. PHOTO/ALEX ASHABA

of nine percent.

Underweight children under five stand at 11.3 percent, slightly above the national figure of 10.2 percent, while severely underweight children account for 3.2 percent.

District leaders have partly attributed the persistent malnutrition to parents who sell off food supplies, leaving children without meals both at home and at school.

The Kabarole Assistant District Health Officer and chairperson of the district nutrition committee, Mr Brian Kitembo, said the district is now advocating for the introduction of a school feeding programme as a long-term solution.

"If all children start eating from school, it will not only address malnutrition but also reduce school dropout and challenges associated with hunger among learners," Mr Kitembo said.

He emphasised that nutrition goes beyond food availability and focus-

## MALNUTRITION LEVELS

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es on the quality of meals consumed.

"We have food, but what are our children being fed on? Food lacking nutrients cannot support proper body growth. We have many children under five who are stunted, and they need nutritious meals," he said.

Mr Kitembo revealed that out of every

100 children in the Tooro Sub-region, about 40 have stopped growing normally, warning that stunting becomes irreversible after the age of two.

He added that malnutrition among pregnant women contributes to anaemia and low birth weight, which negatively affects child development.

"If mothers give birth to low-birth-weight babies, breastfeeding becomes difficult because malnourished mothers may not produce enough breast milk. These children are also more vulnerable to non-communicable diseases later in life," he explained.

He said sub-counties such as Kabende, Harungogo, and Kasenda have registered high numbers of malnourished children, adding that nutrition committees in all 15 sub-counties have been tasked to engage families through community sensitisation on proper feeding practices.

The Kabarole District Chairperson,

Mr Richard Rwabuhinga, said it unfortunate that children are increasingly suffering from lifestyle-related illnesses such as diabetes due to poor feeding habits at home.

"People today grow quantitatively but not qualitatively because of the food they eat. That is why malnutrition persists. Our children perform poorly in class because they cannot reason well when hungry," Mr Rwabuhinga said.

He warned that stunted growth has long-term consequences for future generations and called for increased government funding to address the crisis.

"We need a government-funded budget to tackle malnutrition. This issue affects the future of our children. When a child is stunted and grows up, he or she may not reason well, which contributes to social challenges such as gender-based violence," he said.

The official in charge of nutrition in the district, Ms Catherine Kemigabo, said malnutrition has a severe impact on teenage mothers, many of whom fail to attend antenatal care services and instead rely on traditional birth attendants.

"The impact is worse among teenage mothers because some do not go for antenatal care and prefer traditional birth attendants. This results in low-birth-weight babies," she said.

Mr Steven Ainganiza, the executive director of Platform for the Needy, said his organisation has identified five schools where advocacy for a school feeding programme will begin in Kabarole District.

"We want parents in the selected schools to understand the importance of children eating lunch at school. We don't want learners studying on empty stomachs," Mr Ainganiza said.

He added that the initiative will also involve establishing school and home gardens to grow nutrient-rich crops. "Children will learn how to plant different food crops and become ambassadors of change in their homes. Parents should not sell all their food for money but reserve enough for household consumption," he noted.

The identified schools include Kichwamba, Kaboyo, Kinyakende, New Valley Junior, and Hope Primary School.