

OVER TWO MILLION CHILDREN IN UGANDA ARE STUNTED, STUDY FINDS

GOVT, UNICEF LAUNCH NUTRITION CAMPAIGN

PHOTO BY MIRIAM NAMUTEBI

By John Musenze

The Ministry of Health, in partnership with Unicef, has launched a nationwide nutrition campaign amid growing concerns that one in every four children under the age of five is stunted. This highlights a persistent crisis that continues to undermine the country's health and development.

The campaign, dubbed "Nutrition for All", is being rolled out starting with a one-month pilot that will be scaled up to tackle malnutrition through awareness, behaviour change and stronger community engagement.

Despite years of interventions, malnutrition remains one of Uganda's most pressing public health challenges. According to government data, 26% (over two million) of children under five are stunted, meaning they are too short for their age due to chronic undernutrition, while 4% are wasted, or dangerously thin.

Uganda is facing a triple burden of malnutrition, where undernutrition, overnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies exist side by side, reflecting deep inequalities in access to

INSIDE THE SURVEY

According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS 2022), about 26% (over two million) children under five are chronically malnourished or stunted, while 3% (about 230,000 children) are wasted and in urgent need of care.

At the same time, another 3% of the children are overweight, highlighting a growing but often overlooked challenge. Beyond this, many children suffer from deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals such as iron, iodine, zinc and vitamin A, largely due to poor dietary diversity, especially in the critical first 1,000 days of life.

Experts warned that malnutrition is driven by poor feeding practices, rising food prices, climate shocks and limited awareness at the household level.

The consequences are severe and include stunting, causing irreversible physical and cognitive damage while being overweight increases the risk of non-communicable diseases later in life.

nutritious and diverse diets.

Regions such as Karamoja, Toro and refugee-hosting districts remain the hardest hit due to persistent food insecurity and disease burden.

The assistant commissioner for nutrition at the Ministry of Health, Dr Samalie Namukose, warned that the consequences go far beyond physical growth.

"A child who is stunted has poor school performance, cannot develop well and cannot contribute fully to the

socio-economic development of the country," Namukose said.

She said although Uganda has made some progress in reducing stunting from 29% in previous years to 26%, the pace is too slow to meet national and global targets.

The burden is unevenly distributed, with regions such as Karamoja, parts of Toro, and refugee-hosting districts recording the highest levels of malnutrition.



Left to right: Dr Samalie Namukose, assistant commissioner nutrition; Zakaria Fusheini, nutrition manager UNICEF Uganda; Dr Charles Olaro, director general of health services at the Ministry of Health and Dr George Upenytho, public health nutritionist Ministry of Health during the launch of the nutrition advocacy campaign at the Ministry of Health headquarters in Kampala yesterday (Scan picture using the Vision Digital Experience to watch video)

SHIFT TOWARDS PREVENTION

During the launch, Zakaria Fusheini, the nutrition manager at Unicef Uganda, who represented the Unicef Uganda country director Dr Robin Nandy, said the burden is not just a lack of food but also the type of food consumed.

"In many households, children are eating mainly carbohydrates like matooke and cassava, but not enough proteins and other nutrients needed for proper growth," Fusheini said.

He added that nearly 90%

of children in Uganda are affected by what Unicef describes as food poverty, meaning they do not receive the diverse diets required for healthy development.

He said the new campaign will shift the focus from treating malnutrition to preventing it, particularly during the first 1,000 days of a child's life from conception to age two when nutrition is most critical.

Fusheini said investing in nutrition is one of the most cost-effective ways to improve a country's future.

"Every dollar invested in nutrition can generate up to 23 dollars in returns through improved health, education and productivity," he said.

Dr Charles Olaro, the director general of health services at the Ministry of Health, said the initiative will promote infant feeding practices.

"This campaign is about changing behaviour in our communities. You can have food on your plate and still be malnourished. What matters is the diversity and quality of that food," Olaro said.