

# Nutrition is an investment we cannot afford to ignore

“Investing in early childhood nutrition is a surefire strategy. The returns are incredibly high.” These words by Anne M Mulcahy resonate strongly with the conversations emerging from the recently concluded Second National Nutrition Financing Dialogue held in Kampala.

Nutrition financing is not just a social obligation, it is one of the smartest economic investments any country can make. Evidence consistently shows that every dollar invested in nutrition yields up to 24 dollars in returns.

These gains come through improved workforce productivity, reduced healthcare costs, enhanced cognitive development, and ultimately, stronger economic growth. Investing in nutrition saves lives, reduces stunting, and builds resilience in food systems, especially in the face of climate shocks.

The importance of investing in nutrition as an engine for growth is no longer in question. Uganda's development path is hinged on quality human capital that will spur growth. Malnutrition negatively affects the quality of human capital and so investment in ending malnutrition is investment in the country's development.

This challenge is particularly relevant in the context of Uganda's development ambitions under the Fourth National Development Plan (NDP IV). The country's 10-fold growth strategy aims to expand the economy from approximately \$50 billion to \$500 billion by 2040, with agro-industrialisation identified as a key driver. Yet, this ambition is being undermined by declining and insufficient public investment in the sector.

While Uganda had projected an investment of Shs688 trillion in agro-industrialisation under NDP IV, the Second Budget Call Circular for the Financial Year 2026/27 limits planning to Shs1.7 trillion, lower than the current allo-

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cation of Shs1.833 trillion. This has a direct relationship with the quality and quantity of agriculture productivity and our commitment to end malnutrition.

This downward trend sends a contradictory signal at a time when agriculture remains the backbone of Uganda's economy and the primary livelihood for millions. The financing gap is most acutely felt by smallholder farmers, who face significant barriers to accessing private capital, including high interest rates, stringent collateral requirements, and limited financial literacy.

As a result, many remain trapped in low-productivity, subsistence farming systems, unable to invest in irrigation, improved inputs, or value addition.

The implications are far-reaching. Without targeted public investment that directly supports smallholders, Uganda risks stalling its agro-industrialisation agenda, limiting job creation, suppressing rural incomes, and weakening resilience to both economic and

climate shocks.

Parliament now has a critical opportunity to reverse this trajectory by prioritising increased and well-targeted financing that unlocks smallholder participation and crowds in private investment. This situation will negatively affect our fight against malnutrition.

Beyond direct financing, government has powerful fiscal tools at its disposal to improve nutrition outcomes. Policies such as taxing unhealthy foods and subsidising nutrient-dense options can shape consumption patterns and make healthy diets more accessible. When implemented as part of a comprehensive strategy, such measures can significantly reduce the burden of diet-related diseases while improving overall nutrition.

Equally important is strengthening coordination across sectors and levels of government. Given the multi-sectoral nature of nutrition, effective coordination ensures that limited resources are used efficiently and that interventions are aligned for maximum impact.

Both national and subnational systems must be empowered to plan, implement, and monitor nutrition-sensitive investments in a coherent manner.

Encouragingly, the dialogue highlighted that Uganda has made notable progress in improving its nutrition indicators over the years. However, there was a shared recognition that progress is not enough. The country must now look beyond traditional funding sources, embrace innovative financing mechanisms, and improve efficiency in the use of available resources.

Ultimately, financing nutrition is not just about budgets—it is about choices. It is about recognising that the foundation of Uganda's future prosperity lies in the health and potential of its people.

The evidence is clear; the returns are undeniable, and the opportunity is within reach. So, the question is no longer whether Uganda can afford to invest in nutrition. It is whether we can afford not to.

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