

DIETARY IMBALANCE HAMPERS CHILDREN'S ABILITY TO LEARN

What children eat in their earliest years shapes survival, learning and future productivity. Yet for many families, nutrition is constrained by habits, misinformation and limited choices. As Uganda confronts persistent malnutrition, there is growing recognition that change requires informed communities and stronger policies. Through a month-long campaign from April to May, *New Vision*, in partnership with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Ministry of Health, spotlight the challenges and solutions shaping children's diets and their chances of a healthy start.

By Jacky Achan

In many homes across Uganda, mealtime is predictable. Staple foods that include steamed bananas, posho and millet are served day after day. The food fills stomachs, but they rarely provide the full range of nutrients that the body needs to thrive. Meat, fish and vegetables are scarce or often absent from these diets. Even where greens are available, they are dismissed as food for the poor.

"About 80% of Ugandans rely on staples such as matooke, sorghum or millet, but they don't include other food groups, which leads to an unbalanced diet. It's essential to eat from all the food groups to meet your nutritional needs," says Gaston Ampe Tumuhimbise, a food and nutrition scientist.

According to UNICEF Uganda, nearly 90% of children in the country or two million Ugandan children are chronically undernourished as they are not receiving nutritious diets.

This dietary imbalance, Zakaria Fusheini, UNICEF's nutrition manager in Uganda, explains, not only hampers children's ability to learn, but also prevents them from reaching their full potential.

"It's concerning that many children are not getting the best start in life. Food consumption remains limited in many households across the country," he adds.

This points to malnutrition.

UNDERSTANDING MALNUTRITION

The term 'malnutrition' refers to an imbalance between the nutrients the

STAPLE DIETS FUELLING UGANDA'S MALNUTRITION



From left: Fusheini, Olaro, Upenytho and Namukose during the launch of the Good Nutrition Advocacy Campaign at the health ministry headquarters in Kampala on Tuesday, last week

body requires and what is consumed.

"Malnutrition means poor nutrition, including both undernutrition and overnutrition," says Tumuhimbise, who is also a senior lecturer at Makerere University's School of Food Technology Nutrition and Bioengineering.

Undernutrition, he explains, occurs when a person does not receive enough calories or essential nutrients. This can result in stunted growth, weakened immunity and a range of developmental issues, particularly for children. 'Wasting', which means being too thin for one's height and 'stunting', where a child is too short for their age, are common consequences of undernutrition.

Conversely, overnutrition occurs when people consume more food than their bodies need. The rise of the fast food culture also affects nutrition. Tumuhimbise explains that fast food lacks essential nutrients and is high in calories, salt and fat. Meals like fried chicken, chips and carbonated beverages are often packed with empty calories, while providing little nutritional value. This trend is partly responsible for the rise in obesity and chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease.

Tumuhimbise warns that both forms of malnutrition are detrimental to health.

CONSEQUENCES OF MALNUTRITION

Without good nutrition, there is no health, according to Dr Charles Olaro, the director general of health services in the health ministry. Without health, there is no survival. And without survival, there is no productivity.



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"For the future productivity of our country, we must have good nutrition, good health and ultimately, survival," says Olaro.

Around 4% of children under five in Uganda are too thin for their height, according to Dr Samalie Namukose, the assistant commissioner of nutrition at the health ministry. Additionally, 26% of children in the country are stunted, meaning they are shorter than they should be for their age. This condition has long-lasting consequences.

"Stunted children may perform poorly in school, struggle to grow properly and fail to reach their full

potential. Stunting is used as a proxy indicator for national development," Namukose says.

Beyond stunting, malnutrition has far-reaching effects on education. Children who are stunted may struggle with their education, leading to high dropout rates.

Robert Ikwap shares from his teaching experience that students who come to school hungry struggle to concentrate and perform well in class.

"The brain needs fuel to function and that comes from food," he explains. "When children are hungry, they can't focus and this affects their learning outcomes."

In fact, the lack of meals in schools is one of the main reasons children drop out. Ikwap recalls a time when his school provided food from the institution's garden and attendance was nearly 100%. However, when there was no food, attendance dropped drastically.

"Food is critical to a child's ability to learn and succeed in school," Ikwap says.

Tumuhimbise backs this up with research: "In primary school, for example, you might start with two million children, but by the time they reach P7, you may only have 600,000 or 800,000 left. High dropout rates are a direct consequence of poor nutrition."

Overnutrition, too, comes with consequences. Individuals who suffer from obesity or diet-related diseases like high blood pressure or diabetes often need medical care, which places a strain on the health system and reduces productivity.

LOOKING AHEAD

Improving nutrition in Uganda requires a collective effort from various stakeholders, including the Government, schools, parents and communities.

To tackle this crisis, last Tuesday, the Government, in partnership with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), launched the "Good Nutrition for All" campaign. This initiative aims to raise awareness about the importance of nutrition, particularly during the first 1,000 days of a child's life, which are critical for growth and development.

According to Zakaria Fusheini, UNICEF's nutrition manager in Uganda, this campaign focuses on prevention rather than just treatment. "We want to shift the focus from treating malnutrition to preventing it by addressing the underlying drivers, such as food availability and access to nutritious diets," Fusheini, says.

The campaign also emphasises the role of caregivers and parents in ensuring children receive nutritious food, particularly from locally-available sources. Such awareness will include the importance of balanced diets, food diversity and proper food handling, which are crucial for preventing malnutrition.

"Many children are affected by poor diets because families lack the right information and support systems. Parents need practical knowledge about how to feed their children to ensure they are getting the right nutrients," says Dr George Upenytho, the public health nutritionist at the health ministry.

The campaign is also an opportunity to place communities at the centre of nutrition action.

"We must work together to promote behaviour change and build a shared responsibility for child nutrition," Dr Samalie Namukose, the assistant commissioner of nutrition at the health ministry, says.

"When people are sick, they can't work," Tumuhimbise explains. "They spend time in hospitals, which affects their ability to contribute to the economy."

According to studies, malnutrition costs Uganda as much as sh1.8 trillion, about 6% of the country's gross domestic product. This figure includes healthcare costs, lost productivity and the educational costs associated with children repeating grades due to poor health.

Namukose says: "If we don't address it [malnutrition], Uganda's progress will be severely hindered."