

Malnutrition: Uganda Is Paying Too High a Price

Uganda has made great strides in reducing poverty, but malnutrition remains a daunting challenge. From 2001 to 2006, the number of children with anaemia jumped by about a third, from 2.93 million to 3.89 million, and the number of women with the same condition nearly doubled, from 1.5 million to 2.9 million. In addition, while the proportion of stunted children (children too short for their age) declined from 1995 to 2006, due to population growth, the number of stunted children increased about 25 percent in that period, from 1.6 million to 2 million.

High levels of malnutrition are taking a huge toll on Uganda in terms of human, social, and economic losses.

Malnutrition kills far too many Ugandans every year.

- Malnutrition contributes to about 60 percent of childhood deaths in Uganda.
- Low birth weight is rampant in Uganda. More than 16,000 children born weighing less than 2.5 kg died in 2009. Other forms of malnutrition were associated with the deaths of more than 67,500 children in 2009.
- Achieving Uganda's Millennium Development Goal 1—reducing the percentage of children who are underweight from 20 percent to 10 percent—could

save more than 100,000 lives between 2006 and 2015.

- Nearly half of Ugandan women have anaemia, and 15,000 mothers will die of anaemia-related causes between 2006 and 2015.

Malnutrition erodes agricultural productivity.

- Anaemia weakens the agriculture sector, the main employer in Uganda. In 2009 alone, more than US\$34 million worth of productivity was lost due to iron deficiency anaemia among adults.
- The agriculture sector also is weakened through time lost when workers must deal with malnutrition-related illnesses or deaths in their families.

Malnutrition exacerbates poverty in Uganda.

- Every 1 percent increase in malnutrition leads to a 4 percent increase in poverty.
- Overall, malnutrition contributes to a loss of about 4.1 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) every year.
- Uganda loses US\$310 million worth of productivity every year due to the high levels of stunting, iodine deficiency disorders, iron deficiency anaemia, and low birth weight.
- Treating diseases associated with malnutrition and cases

of severe acute malnutrition is costly. Treating severe acute malnutrition in children alone costs more than US\$120 per child.

Malnutrition impedes the education and intellectual potential of Uganda's children.

- Iodine deficiency disorder (IDD) is the major cause of preventable permanent mental retardation, brain damage, and physical disabilities in Uganda. Between 2006 and 2015, IDD will cause 19,300 children to be born as cretins and 543,000 children to be born with mild or moderate mental disabilities.
- Malnutrition can cause growth retardation in early childhood, which is both directly and indirectly associated with lower school performance and repetition of school years.
- Stunting causes some children to enter school late because stunted children look too small for their age. In 2006, 1 in 4 7-year-olds had not started school, even with the Universal Primary Education program. Stunting also contributes to absenteeism and repetition of school years.
- Malnutrition-related

absenteeism and other issues play a role in Uganda's low primary school completion rates. Only 56 percent of students finished primary school in Uganda in 2008. Such low rates continue to undermine Uganda's education system, despite the availability of free primary and secondary education.

But there is good news: Just as we worked together to reduce poverty, curb HIV, and mainstream gender into our development agenda, we can work together to fight malnutrition. Agencies, organizations, and industries in the public and private sectors can work together to scale up effective programs that directly address malnutrition. We must increase our investment in fighting malnutrition to fund these programs and to develop a system to coordinate, monitor, and hold accountable the different organizations and agencies that implement them. We are paying a high price for the rampant malnutrition in our country—in human lives, in agricultural productivity, in economic progress, and in education. It's a price too high to ignore. It is TIME to increase investment in nutrition!

