

C2A Notes

Agriculture and Food in question

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FROM FIELD TO FORK: HOW CAN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR CONTRIBUTE TO COMBATING MALNUTRITION?

Nutrition is not only a public health problem, it is also a matter of basic human rights and a key issue in global development. Food, health and hygiene, access to water and sewerage, education, family welfare, promotion of women's rights and social protection: all of these are necessary in the fight against malnutrition. None of them are sufficient on their own. Because nutrition needs to be tackled by way of joint efforts in a multi-sectoral approach, it has long been neglected in development policies. The persistence of high levels of malnutrition is a clear sign of the lack of access to basic human rights.

Nutrition has nevertheless become a subject of increasing attention at international level, notably in the agricultural sector where more and more initiatives with agricultural, food and nutrition-related objectives are being taken. What exactly is their role? How can agriculture improve its contribution to combating malnutrition?

Maximizing agriculture's contribution to nutrition

It may seem obvious that food and agriculture go together, as agriculture produces most of what we eat, and food is our source of nutrition. Yet 842 million people are currently under-nourished and 180 million children suffer from chronic malnutrition. The majority of these people are farmers living in rural areas, in developing countries. Worse still, in certain countries such as Mali, the areas with the highest agricultural production are also those with the highest levels of under-nourishment (CIRAD, study on Sikasso). The positive impact of agriculture on nutrition does not always stand to reason, and agricultural development is not always synonymous with better food security and nutrition (CIRAD VISA). The increase in the availability of calories (a criterion often prioritized by approaches advocating food security) does not necessarily result

in an improvement in the quality of the food actually consumed (in terms of proteins, amino acids, vitamins and minerals) and therefore of nutrition.

« The areas with the highest agricultural production are also those with the highest levels of under-nourishment »

All too often, agricultural policies aim primarily for economic and commercial results and fail to participate in the collective efforts to combat malnutrition that necessitate the involvement of all sectors (health, water, sewerage, social welfare, agriculture, etc.). There are also wide gaps in the training, interests and culture of those whose role is to support agriculture and those who wish to improve nutrition. It is crucial to foster links between occupations, knowledge, strategies and practices so that experts speak the same language and are able to persuade policy-makers to see nutrition as a priority.

Agricultural, fishery and forestry policies have several objectives: improved income and profits, environmental preservation, regional development, and access to food. In recent years they have included the struggle against under-nourishment in their objectives. Two trends are particularly important. First, following the food price crisis of 2007-2008, the wish to «reinvest in agriculture» and to prioritize agricultural objectives has almost always been accompanied by a food security objective and often by a nutrition security objective as well. Second, in 2008 the scientific medical journal *The Lancet* published a list of the most effective measures to combat under-nourishment. This scientific consensus served as a basis for the creation in 2010 of the international movement known as SUN (Scaling-Up Nutrition¹), to which 43 countries now belong. *The Lancet*, along with several other studies, concluded that there was no tangible evidence of the positive impact of agricultural measures on nutrition.

Subsequent to these studies, the integration of nutritional objectives into agricultural programmes has started to receive far more

attention by many international players. Evidence of this includes numerous scientific publications (IFPRI, FAO), the implementation of new agricultural strategies that incorporate nutritional objectives, the creation in 2013, by the G8 of the «Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition»², and the organization of the ICN2³, an international conference on nutrition and food systems, scheduled for November 2014.



Kenya © ACF

What is happening on the ground?

What is actually happening in countries and regions with the highest levels of under-nourishment? This question underpinned a recent study by ACF in partnership with the GRET and the CIRAD, in Burkina Faso, Kenya and Peru⁴. The main conclusion was that despite extreme political, institutional, technical and financial constraints, interesting things are presently happening in these three countries (and many others), albeit it on a limited scale in many cases. These initiatives however require more direct support: technical assistance, funding, improved coordination, etc.

The findings of this study, which are consistent with the international literature on the subject, show that the main constraints preventing agriculture from contributing optimally to nutrition are:

- The limited priority granted to nutrition in

the objectives assigned to the agricultural sector;

- The difficulties in appropriately integrating nutrition and food consumption indicators into agricultural information systems for monitoring and evaluation, so that policy-makers can take nutritional issues into account;
- The low level of understanding and interest in nutritional issues within the Ministries of Agriculture;
- The absence or difficulties of inter-sectoral coordination around nutrition, between agriculture and other services;
- The limited number of interventions and the low level of financing devoted to agricultural interventions and policies that impact on nutrition.

Case studies in Burkina Faso, Kenya and Peru show however that with a real will and adequate support, it is possible to overcome

¹ <http://scalingupnutrition.org/>

² <http://www.lidc.org.uk/globalpanel>

³ http://www.unscn.org/en/international_conference_on_nutrition/

⁴ <http://www.actioncontrelafaim.org/fr/content/graines-bonne-nutrition>

these constraints. Good practices have been identified in all three countries. In Kenya and Burkina Faso, for example, nutrition has been taken into account in agricultural policy agenda-setting, especially through nutrition-sensitive agricultural investment plans. In Burkina Faso, nutrition classes are being set up in the national agriculture school, and in recent years, nutrition indicators have been integrated into agricultural surveys and statistics. In Peru, the inter-ministerial coordination mechanism for nutrition functions very effectively and has produced substantial

results within a few years. The reinforcing of the Agriculture Ministries' nutritional mandates has enabled the Department of Domestic Economy in Kenya to carry out remarkable work, and has allowed for the recent creation in Burkina Faso of a Department of Food and Promotion of Nutritional Quality. Finally, in Peru, the «results-focused budgeting» that links the granting of funds to the fact of several Ministries meeting common objectives, has had very positive effects on nutrition. All these experiences are detailed in the country case studies (see the links below).

What should be done to improve the nutritional impact of agriculture?

Hunger and malnutrition are due more to problems of access to and distribution of food than to a shortage of food production. An increase in agricultural production will not suffice to feed the 850 million people suffering from chronic malnutrition. Agricultural development interventions and programmes can lead both to positive effects on nutrition (that need to be maximized and reinforced) and to negative ones (that have to be reduced). It is necessary to take nutritional objectives into account from production to consumption (producing, harvesting, storing, processing, commercializing, preparing, consuming), in order to improve the impact of agriculture on nutrition.

It is for example necessary to promote the production of foods that meet the local demand (rather than products for export markets, such as flowers or bio-fuels) and are produced by small farmers, the main suppliers of food and yet also the main victims of hunger. These foods must be both sufficiently nutritional and diversified (including meat, fish, milk, fruit and vegetables, etc.) to meet the specific food, calorie and nutritional needs of each age group (notable young children and pregnant and breastfeeding women). The diversification of agricultural production has positive impacts on income, the environment and nutrition. Diversified food products have to be processed locally, taking care to preserve their nutritional value, and then made available on the local market at a cost that is accessible to all categories of the population, irrespective of their income level. Providing education on nutrition is crucial so that the food that is

bought and the way in which it is prepared and consumed ensure that everyone benefits optimally from the nutritional value of a balanced diet. Finally, it is important that the foods and income derived from agriculture are fairly distributed, so that the poorest categories of the population (who are the most vulnerable to malnutrition) may benefit from them.

It is also necessary to ensure that agricultural production has no negative impacts on nutrition, essentially by taking appropriate measures for each type of programme; for example, protecting children from diseases transmitted by polluted water (irrigation projects), animals (livestock projects) and chemical products (fertilizers and pesticides). It is also necessary to provide nutritional education and to help women to reconcile their work in the fields with all the other tasks they have in the home (fetching water, cooking, housekeeping and caring for their children), by helping them to save time and energy: animal draught tillage, preserving water and soil to improve productivity, child-minding, systems to improve access to drinking water, etc.

Agriculture can and must do more for nutrition

Nutrition, too often granted little consideration, is a crucial prerequisite for a country's human and economic development and for that of the poorest populations. Good nutrition is an essential indicator of global development, as it reflects the convergent results of a large number of sectoral policies.

In many cases, agriculture could contribute more significantly to combating

malnutrition. There is still much room for improvement, and several experiences in the field show that these two sectors can come closer together. From production to consumption, in every step in the cycle, nutritional objectives need to be included so that the impact of agriculture on nutrition can be improved.

Sources

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- World Bank Report: «Improving nutrition through a multisectoral approach» 2013
- Rapport SOFA 2013, FAO (Sustainable food systems for nutrition)
- ACF experiences: presentation of ACF interventions in the field of «Food security and livelihoods» aimed at reducing and/or preventing malnutrition (<http://www.actioncontrelafaim.org/fr/content/aligning-casestudies>)
- Links: SUN (Scaling-Up Nutrition), ICN2 Conference 2014, global panel on agriculture and food systems

As part of its mission to support the collective advocacy of its members, Coordination SUD has set up working committees. The Agriculture and Food Commission (C2A) brings together international solidarity NGOs working to realize the right to food and increase support for smallholder farming in policies that impact world food security: 4D, ACF, aGter, Artisans du Monde, AVSF, CARI, CCFD-Terre Solidaire, CFSI, CIDR, CRID, Gret, Inter Aide, Iram, Oxfam France, Peuples Solidaires in association with ActionAid France, Réseau Foi et Justice Europe, Secours Catholique, Secours Islamique, Union Nationale des Maisons Familiales Rurales, and one guest : Inter-réseaux.

The aim of the Commission is to coordinate the work conducted by its participants and to facilitate consultation among its members for their advocacy work with social actors and international policy makers. The members of the Commission reach agreements on who represents Coordination SUD in a range of arenas (Concord in Europe, FAO, WTO, UNCTAD) and share information on current international issues. The Commission is mandated by Coordination SUD to formulate the positions taken by the group during the major institutional meetings on the subject of agriculture and food.

This paper was written by Gret and ACF.

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