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Eradicating malnutrition in Cameroon

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Despite the numerous interventions for the amelioration of socio-economic status and food security in Africa, the output still does not show any significant effect, leaving people to wonder if it will ever be possible to eradicate poverty and malnutrition in that part of the world. Malnutrition can effectively be eradicated but it will all depend on the strategies put in place as well as the monitoring systems, coordination and resources available for their proper functioning. In Cameroon, the situation keeps deteriorating with an estimated 229 000 cases of malnourished children (34% being severe cases) noted at the start of 2015, compared to 186 000 cases noted in 2014 (29% being severe cases). It was also noted that 8 out of 10 cases of malnutrition came from the North and Far North regions of Cameroon with more than half of the remainder coming from the East region of the country.¹

Malnutrition is a term used to describe health disorders due to the inappropriate intake of food nutrients, either insufficient or are too many, which causes health problems and can increase morbidity and/or mortality.² Malnutrition is a broad term that refers to both under-nourishment and over-nourishment, higher rates of which affect the developing and developed countries, respectively. Symptoms of malnutrition include fatigue, dizziness, weight loss and increased vulnerability to infection. Malnutrition can be moderate or severe presenting with underweight, wasting and stunting, and can cause irreversible physical or mental disability especially in children.³ The World Food Program defines malnutrition as “a state in which the physical function of an individual is impaired to the point where he or she can no longer maintain adequate bodily processes such as growth, pregnancy, lactation, physical work, and resisting and recovering from disease.”

Many factors are linked to malnutrition in Cameroon with the most important being the problem of food availability. This is coupled with the problem of accessibility, affordability and transformation especially in the northern and eastern parts of the country, marked by the entry of refugees and other internally displaced persons due to transnational instability. Poor nutritional habits, on the other hand, ironically make malnourished persons out of those having plenty. The situation worsens in pregnant and breastfeeding women, thus affecting the nutritional status of their babies.^{4,5}

Primarily, malnutrition can be successfully addressed by putting in place and actively monitoring strategies and projects to reduce poverty as well as ensure food availability and security. The economy of Cameroon is predominantly agricultural with a great diversity of foods across the various regions of the country. This is due to the four climatic zones in the country, which also influence food availability thus the problem of nutrient equilibration, especially in the northern and eastern parts of the country.⁶ The Agriculture-Nutrition Advantage project funded by the USAID

and implemented in some strategic sub-Saharan countries from 2001 to 2004 showed a remarkable degree of success. Here, the aim was creating a network of leaders and advocates to act in collaboration and promote the fight against poverty and hunger by linking agriculture to nutrition, thus bringing together the resources from the diverse nutritional climate zones in the country, taking into consideration the gender implications. The strategy aimed at bringing together aspects like cultivation, livestock, food processing, food availability in households and markets, affordability of prices, balanced dietary intake and health.⁷ Implementing the above initiative in Cameroon will demand a lot of political will from the government and other stake holders. Despite this, it can be achieved in a more practical context by putting in place policies that promote agriculture. Strategies like subventions and available agricultural loans at affordable interest rates can prove to be very important in promoting mass cultivation. This may be coupled with provision of knowledge on the technical know-how for the amelioration of mass cultivation. The amelioration of the agricultural output from the above initiative will only show its impact if the produced foods reach the needy persons, therefore the equilibration of nutritional status across climate zones will only be made possible if an effective transportation network linking all those regions of the country (including farm to market roads) is constructed, as well as putting in place food preservation mechanisms that will ensure quick and safe transportation. This will lead to a good level of collaboration and exchange increasing the availability of multiple and balanced dietary intakes for the population.

In keeping responsible and healthy living and nutritional habits, the large scale implementation of communication for behavioral change targeting issues like diversification and balancing of dietary intake, adequate nutrition of babies as well as mothers, personal hygiene and food security is required.⁸ Nutrition can also be included in all the levels of the country's education system. Systemic infections, especially those concerning the digestive system, should be diagnosed and treated early so as to reduce its influence on the severity of malnutrition. Periodic treatment of intestinal infestation accompanied with food supplementation programs, especially in children, can be very effective.⁹

Bearing in mind that Cameroon needs a strong labour force to be able to achieve economic emergence, due consideration should be afforded to the consequences linked to overpopulation especially when the children are not fended for. Family planning interventions, through adequate birth spacing, have been shown to reduce risk for low birth weight and stunting and to decrease infant and maternal mortality.¹⁰ As birth weights increase in a population, nutritional status improves and mortality decreases. As children's nutritional status improves, so do their cognitive development and performance in school, leading to higher educational attainment and improved earning capacity in adulthood.

In Cameroon, a good number of the above numerated areas of interventions are currently being adopted to solve the problem of food security and malnutrition, like communication for behavioral change, promotion of family planning, mass treatment of intestinal parasites and related programs. However, these interventions have been influenced negatively by a number of internal and external factors at all levels, which include the problem of durable funding, insufficient qualified human resources, globalisation (through trade policies unfavourable to local production), mismanagement of resources and insufficient coordination of the already implemented nutrition programs.¹¹ Also, the participation of the community at all levels of the programs, from planning through to implementation, is still very precarious, negatively affecting the outcome of the interventions.¹¹ This leads to problems of scaling, effectiveness and durability of the interventions adopted by the government. For a better functioning of these interventions, all the setbacks should be identified and solved. This will be made possible through the promotion of operational research in the domains of agriculture, nutrition and food security.

The appropriate implementation of a nutrition strategy and surveillance to address the enumerated setbacks is an absolute imperative in the struggle to tackle malnutrition in Cameroon in accordance to the recommendations of the World Health Organisation. So far, the government has elaborated on its nutrition policies and has put in place nutrition programs to reduce poverty and hunger as well as to promote research in the domain of nutrition, though much is still left undone. An optimally-nourished person is a healthy person and a healthy person is a productive person, thus nutrition should be given great attention in Cameroon's drift towards becoming an emerging country.

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