



## SUMMARY NOTE - ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION V

### **INVESTING IN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL WELLBEING: RETHINKING THE ROLE OF PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

This discussion event took place on Wednesday 13 July 2016.

This fifth event in the series focused on **supporting innovation to promote greater food and nutritional security across Africa**. This is particularly significant for women and girls given the interface between agriculture, rural economic development, and the need to build sustainable food systems to improve nutrition. The discussion explored:

#### **SUMMARY**

- Women's empowerment and nutrition – a policy focus on practical action and social justice
- Prioritising nutrition interventions well beyond the first 1,000 days post-birth
- Informal markets matter for driving improvements in nutrition
- Supporting the development of local food systems and promoting indigenous crop diversity
- Beyond Africa - balanced nutrition is a universal challenge which needs to be addressed by all
- A focus on building health systems, not just developing nutrition products
- Harnessing private sector resources and innovation to improve nutrition
- Transforming social norms on nutrition through mass media

#### **Women's empowerment and nutrition – a policy focus on practical action and social justice**

In spite of progress towards greater gender equality through the advancement of policies that support women's empowerment, this not been matched by concrete sustainable action. Paradoxically, this failure has created a situation in which women (who are at the heart of improving nutrition and food production) are unable to maximise their potential with respect to food security and are disproportionately affected by malnutrition. Yet, women represent 60 per cent of agricultural labour and are responsible for over 80 per cent of food production. The structural challenges associated with food and nutritional security take place within a context of cross-cutting constraints experienced by women which hinder progress. In essence, women still have very limited access to political and decision-making power which creates obstacles such as limited access to land; scarcity of access to credit finance; limited market access (particularly on a national and regional scale); restricted access to relevant and timely information; and limited access to appropriate technology and extension services (which are overwhelmingly targeted at and delivered by men). Nevertheless, such technical services need to be designed and delivered by women for women in order to make these services responsive to women agriculturalists and to improve nutrition outcomes as well as incomes, livelihoods and living standards. These challenges illustrate the importance of social justice for girls and women. The recently adopted UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an important opportunity to embed greater equity for girls and women in meaningful ways. The challenge however is how to practically achieve this.

#### **Prioritising nutrition interventions well beyond the first 1,000 days post-birth**

There are a number of critical questions regarding how empowerment and greater equality can be achieved to advance the nutrition agenda. How might rights for girls and women to secure improvements in nutrition outcomes be most effectively realised? How best can programme interventions be defined, designed and driven by women for women? How can monitoring and evaluation programmes ensure better outcomes for girls and women? How can effective interventions be scaled up and what expertise can the private sector bring to this process? Improving the nutritional status of women and girls beyond the first 1,000 days after birth, where nutrition interventions are currently concentrated, is critical, particularly for adolescent girls and for tackling intergenerational cycles of malnutrition (girls and women eating least and last in households). Improved data disaggregated on the basis of gender can provide better policy insights and enable the development of more targeted nutrition-sensitive interventions which can be more appropriately scaled-up. However, such interventions need to develop a better understanding of the diverse and specific contexts in which girls and women (they are far from homogenous) live. Given the potential issues of social exclusion and isolation, the voice of girls and female adolescents need to be supported by enhancing their participation in shaping initiatives which work best. Improving equality of access to education via healthcare systems, maternity rights, family planning (including advocating the benefits of spacing



pregnancies), conditional cash transfers, skills training and enterprise opportunities (creating decent skilled employment) are all critical.

## **Informal markets matter for driving improvements in nutrition**

There are a number of challenges which need to be addressed to tackle improving nutrition for those at the sharpest end of poverty: (1) Affordability - many markets and value chains are failing to serve the most vulnerable groups. Food fortification (adding iron, zinc, iodine and vitamin A to seed crops and food products) remains relatively expensive. While local fortification standards have been developed, they have yet to be effectively enforced (lack of local enforcement capacity). There have been attempts by global brands to distribute locally adapted products by producing smaller quantities at lower price points but these products remain out of reach for consumers on very low incomes. (2) Quality - how might consumers verify if food is adequately fortified (and free from contamination), given the weak regulatory environments and fragile institutional capacity to oversee quality standards? All of this can provide a breeding ground for counterfeit products, compromising customer safety and trust. (3) Convenience - the speed of food preparation plays a significant role in consumers' nutrition choices. More wholesome foods may compromise the already limited time constraints suffered by poor people. (4) Availability - while micro, small and medium sized enterprises provide low cost fortified products, expensive distribution costs are prohibitive and therefore make fortified products unprofitable to provide - particularly to rural and remote areas. For example, in one case, face-to-face marketing in Ghana absorbed a staggering 70 per cent of the product cost, leaving very little profit margin for local producers. Attempts to simultaneously address all four of these challenges are likely to challenge profit margins. Therefore, innovative ways to cross-subsidise profits from premium products to fund the access and distribution issues associated with reaching underserved communities may provide an important and scalable response which the formal private sector could implement.

Micro and small enterprises operating in informal markets also provide important opportunities to address some of the key obstacles to improving nutrition. More significantly, the inability of formal value chains to adequately address nutrition challenges experienced by the poorest and most vulnerable without sufficient focus on informal markets should not be underestimated. This can be illustrated by the aflatoxin contamination (a by-product fungus that grows on crops) in ground nut cultivation. In one case Ghanaian farmers were able to sell their high quality and uncontaminated nuts at a premium price in formal value chains yet, contaminated nut harvests clandestinely found their way into the informal market.

Ultimately, improvements in nutrition need to be demand-driven by consumers and not supply-dominated by producers. A narrow focus on producers, products and value chains will be ineffective.

## **Supporting the development of local food systems and promoting indigenous crop diversity**

In spite of over 7,000 plant species having been cultivated for human consumption, 60 per cent of global food intake comes from a very limited group of major staples (rice, wheat, potatoes and maize) and a mere 30 crops provide 95 per cent of current energy needs. This is wholly inadequate given the vast diversity of food crops and varieties that are available to consumers locally. There is insufficient knowledge and research into the value and use of local sources of nutrition. As underlined by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, consumers need to be supported to exercise their right to access wholesome and affordable food which is less resource intensive, more ecologically sustainable (minimising the excessive use of chemicals and fossil fuels) and that promotes community development and integration through the linking of local economic sectors and the creation of responsive domestic markets. This supports the use of locally sourced and produced food resources to transform domestic food systems and improve health and sustainability practices. Agro-ecology and the promotion of indigenous and local seeds, food crops and technology for greater dietary diversity can also support the substitution of food imports which are expensive and can be of low nutritional value. This has the ability to rapidly increase both the quantity and quality of local food production; mitigate the impact of climate change, excessive water use and soil erosion (due to intensive farming); and create opportunities to develop local brands focused on improving nutrition and food quality. In addition, it provides an invaluable opportunity to drive structural transformation through improving incomes and creating skilled as well as decent employment. How can consumers be supported to identify nutritional quality, demand substitutes to food imports and change nutritional habits? The importance of promoting local food systems and cultivating a greater diversity of locally produced staple foods, as well as promoting food aid sourced from local or regional hubs across the continent, as opposed to imports from Europe or North America cannot be overstated. In addition, while regulatory standards should prioritise food safety and nutritional quality, it should not be disproportionately burdensome by deterring local producers and distributors - as was the case for a domestic Malawian factory producing a peanut-based paste for the treatment of acute malnutrition which was closed down following minor production infractions. Improving the way agricultural



cooperatives operate, particularly those supporting female producers, represents an important intervention to strengthen local food systems and support local market access and distribution channels. By way of illustration, Nestlé's Cocoa Plan Initiative aims to promote women taking up key positions in cooperatives coupled with the provision of high yield cocoa seeds and targeted technical support to increase productivity (including in staple food production) and income.

### **Beyond Africa - balanced nutrition is a universal challenge which needs to be addressed by all**

The need to tackle malnutrition and under-nutrition (as well as the emerging issues associated with over-nutrition) is a universal challenge (across Africa and beyond) and therefore responsibility should not be disproportionately carried by women. In addition, improving the cultivation of protein-rich foods (such as beans, peas, nuts and a broad variety of legumes) across agriculture have proved to be more environmentally sustainable compared to the dominance of carbohydrates. In the case of Malawi, groundnuts, cashew nuts and macadamia nuts have all experienced rises in global demand which drives export growth. Raising awareness through education and campaigns such as the 2016 UN Year of Pulses or establishing a Global Nutrition Day (championed by leading global nutrition experts) would provide help to better inform people about what they should eat and why (sourcing, nutritional content, quality, wellbeing, etc.).

### **A focus on building health systems, not just developing nutrition products**

Improving nutrition through health strategies which promote equitable and accessible health systems underpinned by a robust tax base – as opposed to simply promoting the development of health products – is critical. Currently, approximately one third of global nutrition expenditure is spent on micronutrients and fortification. Such interventions are important short term responses. Yet, in the long term building health systems requires a cross-sectorial approach across: health, education, agriculture, food production, markets and distribution channels (including informal markets) and beyond. In addition, beyond behaviour change, such an approach might help to reform the political environment to ensure improvements in nutrition are deeply embedded via effective evidence-based policy and practice.

### **Harnessing private sector resources and innovation to improve nutrition**

Beyond contributing meaningfully to the development of a tax base in economies in which they operate, business and enterprise can also accelerate creativity and innovation through education, the development of distribution channels, improving market access and harnessing the impact of trust through the reliability of brands. For example, Nestlé has developed a community engagement programme. Its Maggi Cooking Caravans promote home cooking, developing healthy balanced diets and raising awareness about micronutrient deficiency through cooking competitions. In addition, the engagement of business and enterprise in addressing nutrition issues, such as the prevalence of nutritional anaemia in adolescent girls, could also have a direct impact in terms of the productivity of potential future workforce and consumer base for business. This provides a compelling case to support such interventions. How might innovation in nutrition diagnostics be made easier and more affordable? For example, simplifying nutrition tests using urine samples instead of blood might lead to test results being delivered more efficiently.

### **Transforming social norms on nutrition through mass media**

Mass media is an important tool to advance improvements in nutrition. Mass media programming via print, online, digital, mobile and broadcast media can promote participation and empowerment through sharing evidence-based, unbiased information. This can help challenge prevailing social norms and address misaligned incentives which hinder progress on nutrition in non-confrontational and positively disruptive ways. For example, informing young people about the high fat and sugar content of certain 'status foods' such as crisps and sugary snacks or normalising the engagement of boys and men in promoting the empowerment of women and girls (without reinforcing existing inequalities- eg. access to mobile phone technology). BBC Media Action has developed a programme in Ethiopia with a male presenter focused on maternal and child nutrition and health. The popularity of the programme has attracted a 50:50 audience ratio of men to women. How might the media be used to challenge issues relating to a number of nutrition challenges such as promoting breastfeeding in the workplace, tackling gate-keepers such as mothers-in-law who often impose strict limits on food consumption by wives and girls in low income households, addressing the impact of early marriage, child labour and delaying childbirth, all of which can affect overall nutrition.





## **USEFUL LINKS PROVIDED BY PARTICIPANTS**

[How can we use markets to reach the poor with nutritious foods?](#) by Katherine Pittore  
(Institute of Development Studies, 2016)

[Can the Private Sector Tackle Under-nutrition amongst the Poorest People?](#) by Katherine Pittore  
(Institute of Development Studies, 2016)

### **The Foreign Policy Centre's *Africa Rising* series**

[Employment, enterprise and skills: Building business infrastructure for African development](#)  
(Foreign Policy Centre, 2014)

[Enterprising Africa: What role can financial inclusion play in driving employment-led growth?](#)  
(Foreign Policy Centre, 2016)

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