



Speaker Summary Note

Session: Reimagining How Agriculture, Nutrition, and Health Can Link Better

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At the start of this conference the Prime Minister of India Dr. Man Mohan Singh reminded us that agriculture is a necessary, although not a sufficient condition, for improved nutrition. That is certainly true! Agriculture productivity growth has a proven track record as an engine of economic growth and poverty reduction, especially when it is focused on smallholder systems. Agriculture growth has triggered positive nutrition benefits in the vast majority of cases.

Yes, there are several examples of disconnect between agriculture growth and nutrition important, this conference is being held in a country that is seen as a major outlier where malnutrition levels are still unacceptably high despite decades of Green Revolution lead productivity growth. That has been a major concern of this conference.

A closer examination of the data, disaggregated by districts, shows that malnutrition levels are disproportionately concentrated in areas of low agricultural productivity. For these areas, investing in small holder agriculture productivity growth is a necessary first step to better nutrition. Complimentary investments in water, sanitation, literacy and gender empowerment are needed to ensure sustainable improvements in nutrition and poverty reduction.

While I am a strong proponent of smallholder agriculture productivity growth, I also acknowledge that we can learn from the past and minimize some of the unintended consequences of past experiences. Historically agricultural intensification has been associated with particular crops, rice and wheat in Asia, maize in Latin America and Africa. Technology R&D, infrastructure and policy support have all been directed towards the rapid and sustained adoption of particular crops. Policies that promoted staple crop production tended to crowd out the production of non-staple crops, such as pulses & legumes, such as in the Indo-Gangetic plains of India. Relative prices of micro-nutrient dense foods rose relative to the staples. Can we design a policy that promotes agricultural intensification and productivity growth without being biased towards particular crops. A crop neutral intensification policy leaves crop choice to the farmer who bases it on market signals. In most areas the dominant crop would still be the staple cereal, given the high demand for staples, however we would also observe a higher level of diversification that we see today.

Despite the rapid rise in demand for non-staple food, especially for fruit, vegetables, milk and meat, the supply response has been extremely limited. It's puzzling that there has not been as much attention to this issue as one would have expected. Part of the reason for the slow supply responsiveness is the policy disincentives that I discussed earlier—the bias towards staple cereals. Part of the reason is also because of the structural impediments to enhancing non-staple food production. Market infrastructure, storage systems, and transactions costs associated with linking to organized retail chains have limited

diversification. The lack of a vibrant private sector in the early stages of development adds to the problem of poor supply responsiveness. Targeted efforts towards market development and reducing smallholder transaction costs associated with market participation can enhance the supply of micro-nutrient rich food and reduce their relative prices.

Food Quality and safety are directly related to improved nutrition. Food borne pathogens, mycotoxins, etc., limit nutritional intake and increase the risk of chronic diseases. IFPRI's research shows that Aflatoxin contamination in maize and peanuts in Africa for instance, could have resulted in 36 million DALYs lost per year. R&D on varietal improvement, biocontrol and improved post harvest practices are urgently needed to combat the Aflotoxin problem.

Finally, I would like suggest that a major gap in our work is the lack of useful and credible data, especially at the household level that can allow us to understand the links between agriculture, health and nutrition. Without such data, it is hard for us to assess who the malnourished are, where they live and the progress or the lack thereof in their nutritional status. Lack of representative and credible panel data also prevents us from being able to assess the impacts of alternative pathways to nutrition improvement. Investing in better data will allow us to understand the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and malnutrition among rural households and a better understanding of the opportunities for improving their lives.

I would like to congratulate IFPRI for a great conference and I thank you for your attention.