



Speaker Summary Note

Session: Africa

Speaker: Rosanna Agble

Former Chief Nutrition Officer, Ghana Health Service
Ministry of Health, Ghana

Title: Rethining on How We Do Business:
Regional and actors perspectives—The Ghana experience

Background

International, regional, national and sector policies and frameworks that have been developed in recent times seek to address the multi-dimensional nature of nutrition and stress the need for all stakeholders to collaborate and coordinate their efforts.

At the Africa regional level two frameworks on Food and Nutrition are recognised:

- The Africa Union Nutrition Strategy 2005-15 has two objectives that indicate clearly (1) the need to ensure regional, national and household food security within 10 years and (2) the need to define mechanisms for collaboration and coordination among the various actors concerned with food and nutrition problems at national, regional and international levels.
- The third principle of Pillar 3 of Framework for African Food Security (FAFS) states that it is necessary to ensure that all parties and players automatically seek to understand and address hunger and nutrition

In Ghana over the years, several national and sector policies and plans have addressed the need to link nutrition and agriculture. Apart from national development plans such as the Ghana Vision 2020—The First Step and Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy 1&2, sector plans have objectives to address these relationships e.g.

- The Health Sector Medium-Term Development Plan 2010–2013 states that “In order to address the identified challenges the sector will collaborate with Ministry of Food and Agriculture in food security the fortification and targeting of food and supplements and create awareness on proper nutrition in targeted population”
- FASDEP-Agriculture Sector Plan 2009–2015 also states that “There is recognition that there is need to give support to improved Nutrition because there are several nutrient-rich foodstuffs whose production and consumption can be promoted alongside fortification technologies to get the best out of nutrients. The target is that stunting and underweight (in children) as well as Vitamin A, iron and iodine deficiencies (in children and women of reproductive age) would be reduced by 50% by 2015”

With all these policies what does it take to move into action? What institutional structures are needed to be effective at national and regional levels and what key actions need to be undertaken?

Challenges in Ensuring Institutional Collaboration

(1) *National level structures*

Experience in Ghana and some African countries have indicated that there is really no need to create or develop new policies and that any suggested intervention should aim at strengthening existing programmes and national structures. Lessons from managing nutrition and agriculture related interventions have revealed that there is need for a strong and effective coordination mechanism among the sectors. The question is: Who is best placed to do this? Agriculture and health sectors are huge and have huge challenges and usually nutrition issues fall between the cracks. The challenge is to identify a national agency which has the mandate of bringing the two principal sectors –health, nutrition and agriculture-together and is also capable of ensuring linkages in sector planning processes and making efforts to ensure integration.

Most countries have such national coordinating structures with the mandate to ensure synergy in the implementation of national programmes. In Ghana, the National Development Planning Commission, a Government organization with the mandate to coordinate the development agenda and has also a clear understanding of the government decentralization process was involved in a programme that linked health, nutrition and agriculture to reduce malnutrition in selected communities. The organization took the responsibility to ensure that (1) the health, nutrition and agricultural sectors especially at district levels worked together, and (2) the beneficiary communities were empowered with necessary health and agricultural facilities and materials to aid in the dissemination of both agricultural and health messages. The advantage of involving established government organization is that it ensures institutionalization of such programmes which will eventually leads to sustainability.

2. *Sub-regional level structures*

There are political structures in the various sub-regions in Africa such as ECOWAS in the West Africa sub-region. ECOWAS has the agriculture and health structures but they are scarcely seen actively working together, e.g. the ECOWAS nutrition forum is convened regularly under the West Africa Health Organisation (WAHO) but the agriculture sector of ECOWAS does not seem to play any role or participate in the nutrition forum. Again, meetings of the Ministers of Health and Agriculture are held separately with each one issuing its own communiqué. The technical meetings which precede the meetings of Ministers are usually attended by the technical officials from the Ministry concerned. The challenge is that if integration is not evident and practiced at the regional/sub-regional political levels it becomes difficult for individual countries to get the necessary political support to integrate programmes.

Need for Action

1. *Advocacy*

These challenges, lead to issues that ought to be addressed urgently. The misunderstanding of nutrition as a developmental issue is widespread across sector at both national and regional levels. The situation therefore calls for a strong and continuous advocacy drive using appropriate evidence-based outcomes which are specific to given situations at regional, sub-regional and national levels. This is necessary given the fact that the countries in the Africa region and are faced with both new and old natural and/or man-made challenges continuously and in the effort to address them, these linkages are usually lost. Having a statement inserted into sector policy document is only the first step but more effort has to go into advocacy within a lead country institution and among the agriculture and health sectors to translate such policies into action.

2. *Nutrition lens approach*

The situation also calls for the application of the “nutrition lens” which is a tool for analysis, planning and programme delivery across sectors. Use of the nutrition lens encourages awareness of the impacts of poor policy decisions; ensures that development investments “do no harm;” encourages coordinated management, information exchange and monitoring.