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Household Food Security and the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria

D. B. Parakoyi^{1*}, O. I. Musa¹ and I. Yusuf²

¹Department of Epidemiology and Community Health, College of Health Sciences, University of Ilorin, P.M.B. 1515, Ilorin, Nigeria.

²Department of Epidemiology and Community Health, University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital, Ilorin, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Food and adequate nutrition are basic human rights that are necessary for human development. Poor nutrition increase morbidity and mortality among children, pregnant and lactating women and the elderly. These groups are the most vulnerable who must be protected against food insecurity. Endemic poverty and very low income levels are the roots cause of food insecurity in Nigeria. Every household require economic access to food and not mere physical availability at the market place.

Food and the security of its supply are required for proper nutritional well-being and economic development. Improving the nutritional status of the people by promoting household food security is important in achieving many developmental targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs). The ongoing efforts directed towards reducing poverty and hungers are commendable but the implementation of the strategies is too slow to achieve the MDG by year 2015. Private and public partnership should be strengthened to enhance sustainable agricultural and rural development so that adequate, sustainable and reliable food supplies can be assured at the household, community and national levels.

Key Words: Millenium Development Goals (MDG);

Introduction

When one thinks about nutrition, the first thing that most readily comes to mind is food. Since the time of the primitive man Food has been equated with fuel that is burnt by the body to produce strength and power. Scientifically, foods are substances (solid or liquid) which when ingested provide energy and nutrients to the body. It provides materials necessary for the structure and functions of life. No single food item contains all the nutrients in amounts sufficient to maintain life and / or promote optimal growth. Man must therefore consume a variety of foods in order to obtain all the nutrients needed by the body.

*To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: parbayo@yahoo.com

Nutrients are substances derived from food and used by the body for growth, energy, repair and maintenance of the systems. Nutrients are classified as macronutrients (which are required in relatively large amounts) and micronutrient which are required in small quantities. Nutrients function in three main ways: firstly by providing the body with fuel for the release of energy; secondly, by providing the building materials for growth and development of the body; and thirdly, by providing the materials necessary for the regulation of body processes (1). Nutrients work best when teamed together, and this can only be assured by consumption of a wide variety of foods, essentially in a balanced diet.

A nutritional deficiency begins with inadequate or non-availability of one or more nutrients to the body cells or organs. This inadequacy may be due to low dietary intake of food (primary nutritional deficiency) or poor / impaired absorption and / or high rate of losses from the body even when a diet that meets the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) is consumed (secondary nutritional deficiency). Malnutrition occur when there is deficiency or excess or imbalance of the supply of nutrients and / or calories to the body.

Nutritional deficiency is the form of malnutrition that is very common in Africa and attracts more attention than nutritional excess that are found in developed countries. The problems of malnutrition are closely related to major socio-economic problems such that one can not effectively tackle them in isolation from the major problems of the society. It is becoming increasingly more evident that malnutrition is associated with many interrelated social, political and economic factors; and the widespread prevalence of malnutrition is usually a symptom of a sick society (1).

Poverty (which is defined as lack of access to resources required for obtaining the minimum necessities essential for the maintenance of physical efficiency) (2) is the root cause of mal-distribution of food at the household level. This connotes that the poor have little access to food- either produced or purchased or consumed. Families with limited access to productive resources such as land, inputs and capital, required for attaining physical efficiency in food production always have food insecurity. Households, Communities and Nations that can assure or provides all its members sustained access to sufficient and quality food to live active and healthy live is said to have food security. Food security is a precondition for nutritional well-being and economic development of a nation.

FOOD SECURITY

Food security is a situation that exists when all people, at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active, healthy life. The main goal of food security is to ensure that individuals obtain adequate food at all times, and to be able to utilise the food to meet the body's requirements. Food insecurity results from unavailability of food, poor purchasing power, inappropriate distribution and inadequate use of food at the household level (2).

Household food security (HFS) is the availability and access to food at the household level throughout the year. This involves food production, processing, storage, marketing, distribution and consumption (2). Food insecurity at the Household level lead to hunger, poor nutrition and development especially among the most vulnerable groups including children, pregnant women and nursing mothers. The burden of household food insecurity always manifest as increase in morbidity and mortality among infants, under fives and the mothers. Other problem of food insecurity include: stunts development (both physical and mental), predisposition to and aggravation of spectrum of diseases, and diminished quality of life and longevity (2,3).

Food Insecurity can be transient or chronic. Transient food insecurity usually doesn't last for more than 1-3years and can result from drought of one or two years. For example, the 1973 and 1974 Sahelian droughts involving the northern part of the country which made Nigeria to depend on food aids from the international communities (2). Occasional communal clashes (like that of the pastoralists and arable crop farmers over grazing and cropping rights over a parcel of land) is another major contributory factor. Natural and man - made disasters that lead to large scale displacements of people, loss of purchasing power and farm lands destructions including stored food can cause transient food insecurity. Policy failures in specific years such as delayed fertilizer procurement, shortfalls in food imports or ban on food importation without short term domestic substitute; and acute job losses resulting from government economic reforms of down sizing and right sizing of personnel in the civil service (2,3).

Chronic food insecurity is usually due to perennial poverty and unemployment, loss of productive land, or water and traditional rights of hunting, fishing and agriculture. Other causes are prolonged drought of over 3 years, desertification and erosion; and bad cultural practices, customs and food taboos. Agrarian farming practices, poor storage techniques, use of local implements and harsh economic policies (such as increase tariffs, poor price control system, taxes, removal of subsidies etc) are factors that predispose to persistent and chronic Food Insecurity. Prolonged civil strife, conflicts / wars; and political instability, poor budgetary allocation to Agricultural sectors and perennial neglect of rural infrastructures are other major causes of long term Food Insecurity at household, community and national levels (3).

EPIDEMIOLOGICAL BURDEN OF FOOD INSECURITY

About 1.2 billion people worldwide live on less than \$1 per day, 800 million people go to bed hungry everyday while 1.8 million people die annually from diseases associated with food and water (4). Malnutrition is the largest contributor to disease in the world with childhood and maternal underweight alone being responsible for 138 million disability adjusted life years (DALYs) lost and 9.5% of the global burden of disease (4). Over 6 million children under 5 years die yearly from malnutrition (4). Two billion people worldwide have inadequate iodine intake, 140 million pre-school children and more than 7 million pregnant women suffer from Vitamin A deficiency while Iron deficiency anaemia among pregnant women is associated with an estimated 111,000 maternal deaths each year (4).

Chronic food insecurity due to drought, civil unrest and famine is common in Africa; with an estimated 600,000 persons dying of hunger everyday, two-third of which are children mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa (3,4). In 2005, it is estimated that 11.7 million children in West Africa are underweight compared to 0.8 million in South America (5). In Nigeria, up to 19% of the total population is undernourished while 6 million children less than five years are malnourished (2). Infants, children and adolescents are considered at risk of food insecurity due to their rapid growth which demands quality diet. Also, pregnant and lactating women are at risk of developing nutritional problems because of their physiologic state in which there is increase nutrient requirement. The elderly are also at risk because of various social, psychological and emotional problems that may prevent them from obtaining adequate nutrition. Their nutritional problems could be due to edentulous teeth, poor appetite and constipation, loneliness and lack of money to buy food.

CHALLENGES OF PROMOTING HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY IN NIGERIA

Farming is an age long practice of many Nigerian families especially in rural areas. Nigerian agriculture is dominated by talented small scale farmers, with small land holdings that are rented or leased. Many practice subsistence agriculture because of little or no access to mechanized implements and their near total dependence on rain fed agriculture. Despite this crude method of farming, about 80% of the food requirements of the entire population are produced through this means for domestic consumption at the household and extended family levels. High population growth with severe economic recession has made food security to fluctuate in many Nigerian homes/families.

Many households are rising to the challenge by adopting coping strategies like: poly-cropping, agro forestry and "strategic buying" of farm produce during harvesting period to stockpile in their homes against scarcity in the dry season. The role of women in ensuring food security is crucial and cannot be over emphasized. In spite of the numerous deprivation and discriminations suffered by the girl child in some cultures, women still discharge their multiple responsibilities of food production (by engaging in subsistence agric.), reproduction and the care of the family. Given necessary support, resources and nutritional education, women perform better than men in securing access to food; better food preparation, preservation, handling and distribution, all of which are germane to household food security (6).

Communal life is a prominent feature of our social economic life. There are over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria all of which practices agriculture in one form or the other. Farming communities do come to the rescue of their neighbours in times of drought. Some also constitute themselves into farm cooperatives / trade organizations to enjoy subsidies from government, engage in self-help farm support services, encourage fair marketing practices and regulate food prices. If the problem of food insecurity overwhelms a community, they look up to the state or federal government for help.

Nigeria was once a nation of great agricultural potentials globally renowned for its unparalleled exports but lost focus as a result of distraction due to the discovery of oil. Since then, various governments have initiated several programmes aimed at reviving the nation's agricultural potentials. Such programmes

included: Operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, Back to Farm, DFRRRI etc. most of which yielded little dividends. The long period of military dictatorship also caused a further decline in agricultural development due to poor budgetary allocation, stoppage of World Bank agricultural loan in 1995, discontinuation of international organization's support for various agricultural projects, sanctions as well as the unfriendly attitude of the international community towards Nigeria (2).

The return of democracy in 1999 re-energized efforts towards combating extreme poverty and hunger as food security is one of the cardinal programmes of the democratic government. Huge investments aimed at repositioning the agricultural sector have been made through various initiatives like the Special Programme on Food Security, National Fadama Development Project, Root and Tuber Expansion Project, provision of infrastructure and farm inputs, irrigation projects, Presidential Initiative on Cassava, Rice and Palm oil etc.

The Nigerian government initiated a special programme on Food Security in partnership with FAO in which 25million US dollars was transferred from the nation's foreign reserve as a trust fund to be recycled back to Nigeria. This trust fund was later increased to \$45 million signalling a renewed technical cooperation between the federal government of Nigeria and FAO as well as other development partners (7,8). Also, there has been stakeholders' forum culminating into the launching of the Presidential initiatives on cassava, rice, cocoa and palm oil with different goals and specific targets to be met. For instance, the goal of cassava production and processing is to earn \$5 billion annually from exports of cassava products within 3 years of cultivating 5 million hectares to produce 150 million tons of tuber; from which 37.5 million tons of processed cassava products like "gari", starch, chips, ethanol etc. can be obtained. Some of the strategies in place towards achieving these objectives include increasing agricultural production (especially land productivity), rehabilitation of small scale irrigation infrastructure, expansion of hectareage, timely availability of farm inputs (fertilizer, tractors etc), effective research support, strengthening agricultural cooperative and encouraging community participation, improved storage and processing techniques; and sustained Government policy on fertilizer subsidy (9).

The Strategic Grain Reserve scheme is also on course with 8 out of 33 silo complexes (24%) completed and operational with a combined capacity of 186,000 tons. Through these silos government have been able to develop and maintain the national food security stock and there were instances of purchase and release of grains to stabilize prices. Even with this, there has been an increasing trend in food import in a bid to boost adequate nutrition and complement shortfall in local production (10).

Also, the Federal Government of Nigeria is collaborating with state governments in key areas of agriculture like irrigation farming, farm inputs and machinery procurement, facilitating technical cooperation, implementation of commercial agricultural schemes. Through the initiative of the Kwara state has become a national agricultural laboratory with the farm settlement schemes initiative in different parts of the state and the new Nigerian Commercial Farming project in Tsonga, which is a public-private partnership project involving the expatriate Zimbabwean farmers. The State government is also providing an enabling environment for the successful implementation of National Fadama Development Project (FADAMA II). Problem of effective conflict resolution mechanism among Fadama resource users remain a major challenge to the nation's food security. The African Development Bank (ADB) programme has been redesigned to address these shortcomings and improve the income of Fadama users by empowering communities to take charge of their developmental agenda. In order words, it encourages community participation in public- private partnership through the engagement of advisory service providers (11).

It is quite unfortunate that in spite of all these laudable initiatives, majority of the Nigerian population by all standards are still having food insecurity. Perhaps, there has been a policy shift from boosting massive production for local consumption to increasing production for export as a source of foreign exchange. Therefore, government needs to focus on encouraging production of sufficient food to meet the food security requirements of the people at affordable prices; and then earn foreign exchange from surplus of food and agricultural products that are exported (10,11).

At the international level, a unique opportunity for addressing the problem of poverty, hunger and malnutrition exist in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). One of the goals is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger with target of reducing the proportion of people who suffer from poverty and hunger by 50% by the year 2015. Specific indicators to measure this expected outcome include: prevalence of underweight among children under five years and the proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption (12).

Conventionally, nutrition is seen as integral of the first goal of MDGs, but it is also an important instrument to achieving other MDGs, especially those relating to improvements in primary school enrolment, attainment of gender equity, maternal & child health and combating diseases like malaria, HIV /

AIDS and tuberculosis. For example, malnutrition erodes human capital, reduces resilience to shocks and reduces productivity and impaired physical and mental capability. Malnourished children are less likely to enroll in schools, or have delayed enrolment. Hunger and malnutrition reduces mental development and school performance. Malnutrition is directly or indirectly associated with more than 50% of all child mortality and it is a major contributor to the burden of disease in the developing world. Stunting and micronutrient deficiency increases the risk of Cephalo-pelvic disproportion and obstructed labour. Poor nutrition also hasten onset of AIDS among HIV-positive, weaken the resistance to opportunistic infections and reduces malaria survival rates.

From the foregoing, it is clear that improving the nutritional status of the people by ensuring food security is crucial in the attainment of many developmental outcomes embodied in the MDGs.

In September 2005 (five years after the MDGs were adopted and ten years before the goals are due) the world leaders met at the UN in New York to assess how far their pledges have been fulfilled and to decide on other steps that are necessary. The UN Secretary General reported that the overall global poverty rates are falling especially in Asia, but millions of people are still below poverty level in sub-Saharan Africa, where the poor are getting poorer (13).

Indeed some progress has been made but slow growth of agricultural output and expanding populations have led to setbacks in some regions. Based on recent UNICEF report, Nigeria's efforts is still not sufficient to meet the MDGs because current 2.2% annual rate of reduction of underweight in children; low practice of exclusive breast feeding of 17% and Vitamin A supplementation 27% (14).

Therefore, there is need to scale up actions and activities if the World Food Summit goal of halving the number of hungry people in developing countries and indeed the MDGs by the year 2015 is to be achieved in the country.

Conclusion

Efforts directed towards reducing poverty and hungers at community and national levels are being implemented at a pace rather too slow to achieve the MDG by year 2015. Focus should be on how to increase access to productive resources which affect food availability in the household. Individuals and family should understand and accept the need to control population growth by adopting birth control measures as a way of checking rapid population growth; while the government continues to pursue with renewed vigour the implementation of its food and nutrition policies so that adequate and sustainable food supply at affordable prices to all citizens can be achieved.

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