

Unleashing agriculture's potential for improved nutrition and health in Malawi
 Conference in Lilongwe, Malawi; 26-27 September 2011

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Speaker notes for panelist in plenary session one:

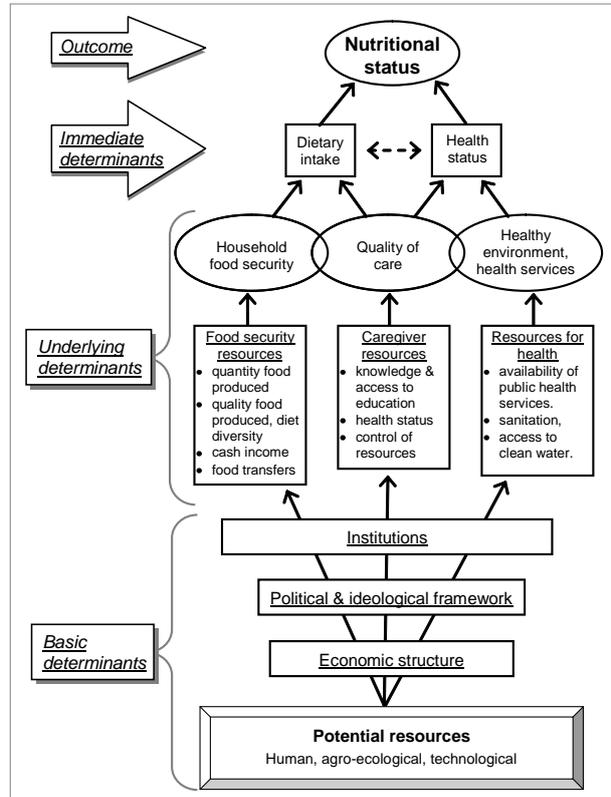
Unleashing agriculture's potential for improved nutrition and health in Malawi – global perspectives

To inform a plan to address undernutrition in Malawi through agricultural means, we require an explicit model of:

- why food and nutrition are important development issues,
- how the two are related, and
- what must be done to sustainably enhance nutrition security in Malawi.

The UNICEF global model of the **determinants of child nutritional status** is used here. It identifies the cascade of factors from the most foundational and structural to the most immediate that determine whether or not a young child is malnourished. For our purposes, a key point to draw from this conceptual framework is that agriculture cannot do it alone.

For purposes of determining how best to address undernutrition, it is considerably more useful to talk of “food security” and “**nutrition security**”. The key point is that food security is a component of nutrition security, but only one of three sets of underlying determinants. Equally important are proper nutritional care and a healthy environment, with access to appropriate health services. Food security is a necessary element in achieving nutrition security, but not sufficient in itself to assure that individuals and households will enjoy good nutritional status.



However, the fact that there has been in recent years sufficient food produced in Malawi to meet the caloric needs of the population reduces the power of claims of national food insecurity in Malawi and, what is closer to the purpose of our conference, the demands for principally agriculture-led strategies to reduce nutrition insecurity that are based simply on increased farm production. Moving from a focus on food security to broader nutrition security introduces a range of issues for we in the agricultural sector to consider. The other elements of our conceptual framework allow us to do so. We need to focus on food distribution and food access issues, of course. Also key to our efforts within agriculture is attention to food quality and increasing dietary diversity. But we also need to be concerned with whether people know how to provide proper nutritional care to those in need in their households and that the nutritionally vulnerable receive such good care. We also need to concern ourselves with whether people live in healthy environments, and whether they have access to appropriate health care, clean drinking water, good sanitation, and so on.

Moreover, we can extend our analysis to examine the **broad basic determinants which establish the quality of the underlying determinants of nutrition security. Do Malawi's economic systems contribute to generally improved nutrition? Do government and its political leaders acknowledge that they have a duty to assist all Malawians to meet their nutritional needs?** If so, are the

mechanisms that govern the allocation and use of public resources supportive of these aims? On this point, it is useful to distinguish *pressing* and *chosen* policy problems. When a policy concern is pressing, substantive policy reform and action to address the issue is more likely to occur than when the concern is viewed as optional, or politics-as-usual, and policymakers can choose not to address it without incurring political risk. Most of the issues related to improved health and nutrition that involve agriculture are in the latter category, politics-as-usual. Malnutrition may be widely viewed as primarily a responsibility of the household and not of the government. In Malawi, as in most developing countries, the effectiveness and legitimacy of political leaders is rarely called into question because of, say, the continuing high prevalence of stunted children. Unfortunately, malnutrition is treated as a political issue of choice rather than urgency.

To achieve sustainable nutrition security requires cross-sectoral action. However, actually achieving effective cross-sectoral action is more the exception than the rule. The institutions and government of Malawi, like most national governments globally, are not set up to facilitate addressing cross-sectoral issues. Budgets follow sectoral lines. Sectoral objectives motivate staff in sectoral institutions. Sectors are more often found to be in competition for limited financial and human resources than to be working in a collaborative manner to attain an important societal goal, such as nutrition security. Similarly, sector-specific criteria form the basis for evaluating sector effectiveness and hence for the allocation of resources. No matter how important, the attainment of objectives requiring cross-sectoral, coordinated action will rarely be advanced by routine sector-planning mechanisms.

There are good reasons for the sectoral structure of government. The organization of government in Malawi is not perverse. However, it does have the unfortunate effect of not being sufficiently flexible to effectively address those issues which do not fit neatly into the structure. Nutrition security is one such issue. Given the awkward place of nutrition within the sectors, **advocacy** is a critical element of any effort to raise the policy profile of nutrition. People tend to be quite ignorant of the important human and economic development benefits of improved nutrition. Moreover, policymakers will not increase the resources allocated to activities that enhance nutrition security on an automatic basis. The motivation must come from elsewhere.

Consequently, advocacy is much more central to the role of nutritionists and nutrition planners than it is for most other professionals. How will they know unless someone tells them? Hence, the need for advocacy. As such, there is a real need for independent nutrition advocates to emerge, such as from nutrition-oriented civil society organizations. Does such an organization exist in Malawi? If so, how central is advocacy to its objectives. If it does not exist, how might it be formed to serve as an independent voice to seek action on behalf of the nutritionally vulnerable?

Finally, improved nutrition ultimately concerns the individual. Consequently, there is a need to translate the national level policies and programs developed in Lilongwe into action that will enable households and individuals far from here to enjoy nutrition security. As such, the decentralized system of local governments is an important feature of efforts to improve nutrition in Malawi. There are many constraints to local governments and communities effectively engaging in nutrition efforts.

- 1. In participatory systems of local government, physical infrastructure development is usually preferred to investing in social programs. In part, this is because it is far easier for a politician to point to a school building or road than to a nutrition program at the next election. Consequently, education is a critical input to build knowledge of the importance of good nutrition and of the broad public goods that contribute to it. Only then can we expect political demand at local government levels for nutrition-oriented services.**
- 2. Secondly, local governments are unlikely to have trained staff to comprehensively address malnutrition. Sectoral specialist may be present in communities – health workers, agricultural extension agents, and so on – but nutrition will not be the principal focus of their work, nor is**

their individual performance assessed on what contributions they might make to improved nutrition.

- 3. Finally, financing of local government is the key challenge in decentralization for Malawi. There are far more failures than successes to date.**

All of these constraints need to be addressed if local action, whether agricultural or otherwise, is to be effective in reducing malnutrition here in Malawi.