

# ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL OF AGRICULTURE IN ENHANCING NUTRITION AND HEALTH IN MALAWI

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## 1.0. Introduction

Agriculture remains the most important sector of the economy contributing to over 90% of foreign exchange and employing over 80% of the population. ***Even though the sector is largely driven by rural smallholder farmers, their nutritional status is still appalling. According to MDHS 2010, 47% of under-five children have chronic malnutrition with higher prevalence (48%) in the rural areas, 4% of under-five children are wasted and 17.4% are underweight.*** Micronutrient deficiency of Vitamin A, iron, iodine and zinc is also a big challenge. According to National Micronutrient Survey 2001, it is estimated that over 38% of the population, with more than half (60%) under-five children and expectant women (57%) have vitamin A deficiency (MOH, 2003). It is also estimated that 80%, 47% and 44% under-five children, pregnant and non pregnant women respectively are anemic (MICS, 2006).

***The role of agriculture in addressing malnutrition cannot be overemphasized. Agriculture is the source of all the six food groups. Achieving food security is necessary but it does not automatically translate into nutrition security, therefore with appropriate advocacy messages and proper communication strategies the agriculture-nutrition-health linkages can be understood by people in all circles of life.***

Integrated and harmonized efforts in promoting self sufficiency in crops, livestock and fish will greatly unveil the potential agriculture has towards improving nutrition and health status. While Malawi has done very well in encouraging the community to be food self sufficient, the efforts have been concentrated on staples only, therefore there

is need to upscale the country's efforts to include other commodities. Production and consumption of animal food including dairy and fish is on the lower side than crops. According to FAO (2005) Malawi's' per capita meat consumption has relatively been around 5kg when the world's average is 46Kg while that of dairy products per capita consumption stands at 4.7 liters per year. ***Despite that a lot more people raise livestock in their households, the majority does not utilize them to improve their nutrition status, rather they keep them for prestige or other purposes.***

Communication is a key tool for advocacy. Filling the communication gaps is also vital towards enhancing nutrition. There is need, therefore, to deliver the appropriate messages to the right audience, using the appropriate media to reach the right target audience. ***Most of the times it is only women who have access to nutrition messages through the antenatal care and growth monitoring centers leaving out men and youth, thereby impacting less in the communities. Often it is assumed that policy makers and politicians have information at their fingertips. Therefore, politicians are often not targeted, who then with their insufficient knowledge are misguided when making decisions. For instance the National Nutrition Policy has sound agriculture intervention which can transform the nation's nutrition status i.e. promotion of dietary diversification, nutrition education as well as promotion of backyard gardens. However, lack of knowledge on the economic losses malnutrition bring to the nation, decision makers are not committed enough to put sufficient funds and efforts towards the implementation of the interventions.***

***The communication channels used are also crucial. The choice of the channels must be guided by the fact that it will be found feasible and credible by everyone including the rural communities. Through whatever channels, the message must be clear therefore it should not have a lot of technical terms or jargon. The message must also be simple and easy to understand.***

Harmonization of the message as well as standardizing the delivery of the message is also vital. The capacity of personnel responsible for delivering messages should be built so that they deliver the message with confidence. ***Incorporating nutrition education in primary education curricula will bring awareness to all to people. In addition, Government has to realize and initiate a multi-sectoral approach to nutrition. There are various ministries and departments that may have a totally different goal from the Department of Nutrition and HiV/AIDS.*** However, if looked at from a different perspective, their presence in Nutritional Programmes would be invaluable. For instance, the Fisheries Department, Natural Resources, and even Tourism and Culture all have a stake in nutrition. Most farmers are being trained in apieru (bee-keeping). They keep the bees for honey which they normally struggle to sell. Most farmers however, are oblivious to the nutritional value of this product. The ironic thing is that, there is a high probability that the elderly people know its sentimental and cultural value. ***Therefore, it is high time the country enacts the multi-sectoral approach that has always been advocated.***

***Considering that nutrition cuts across all members of the society, the target audience for advocacy on nutrition also cuts across a wide spectrum of society including farmers, community leaders, opinion leaders, politicians, technical specialist and policy makers at various levels.***

With appropriate communication and advocacy strategies agriculture's potential towards improving nutrition status of all people in the country can be unleashed.