

# THE ROLE OF POLICIES AND HOW THEY CAN STRENGTHEN AGRICULTURE'S RESPONSIVENESS TO NUTRITION AND HEALTH

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Agriculture is the main driver of Malawi's economy and most economies in Sub-Saharan Africa. The high burden of nutritional problems and diseases in Malawi affects productivity and contributes to significant losses in GDP. Estimates using PROFILES, in some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have revealed losses of up to 3% attributable to iron deficiency anemia and stunting. Studies conducted in Malawi have provided evidence of a significant decrease in productivity attributable to HIV and AIDS. The agriculture sector cannot afford to ignore this. The agriculture sector should have a vested interest in being responsive to nutrition and health. Agriculture can be more engaged in strategies that minimize the impact of nutrition and health on agriculture, and contribute to improved health and nutrition in Malawi.

The focus of the panel discussion will be as follows: (i) identify the role of policies in strengthening agricultures' responsiveness, (ii) identify policies and policy gaps that are key to unleashing agriculture's potential for improved nutrition and health and (iii) propose strategies to enhance agricultures potential to be responsive to health and agriculture.

## **1.The role of policies in strengthening agriculture's responsiveness to nutrition and health.**

Given the rather independent way in which agriculture sectors tend to operate, appropriate policies can be useful in enforcing and guiding the required responsiveness to nutrition and health. However, policies work better when the people they are intended for, have a buy-into the policy, appreciate why the policy is there, and more importantly perhaps, how they can benefit from the policy.

## **2.What are policy gaps in agriculture nutrition and health, that may need attention to improve effectiveness and coherence?**

Policies that promote and support multi-sectoral planning, implementation, and monitoring and allocates resources to each sector to implement its nutrition relevant actions are conspicuously absent in most countries.

Policies that facilitate mutual accountability for health and nutrition issues by agriculture, are also not in place.

## **3. Identifying some policies that are key to unleashing agricultures potential**

- ✓ Food and nutrition policy that defines the roles and responsibilities of key sectors in agriculture, health and nutrition outcomes are key to success of agriculture interventions.
- ✓ There is need for nutrition and health friendly agricultural policies that acknowledge the prevailing disease burden and how it impacts on agriculture, and defines strategies to address these within the context of the agricultural sector. Identifying agricultural practices that negatively contribute to the disease and nutrition burden is also vital.

- ✓ There is need for agricultural policies that include household food security as an objective and not national food security only. Systems and strategies that take into account the nutrition burden and promote production processes that are responsive to the prevailing nutritional disorders and promote more diversified food production systems should be devised.
- ✓ Land use policy that ensures that land is appropriately allocated to meet national needs for specific food crops in response to national nutritional requirements as well as household food security.
- ✓ Health policies that protect and enhance the health of the population, and take into account the disease burden of the agricultural workforce (who in the cases tend to be women).
- ✓ Capacity development policies that develop a culture of inter- dependency between agriculture, health and nutrition and produce cadres that can work *multi-sectorally after graduation*.
- ✓ Gender policies that acknowledge women as the nexus of these three sectors and address their specific needs appropriately, and address the workload imbalances inherent in agricultural production, where women carry the burden, at times at the expense of health and nutrition.

### **What strategies can enhance agricultures potential to be responsive to health and nutrition**

1. An appropriate policy framework and institutional arrangements that acknowledge the need for multi-sectoral action to address agriculture, nutrition and health, and has high level coordination, can enhance this potential. Malawi's current policy and institutional arrangements for nutrition and agriculture under high level coordination in the Office of the President, **can unleash this potential**.
2. The development and implementation of integrated plans of agriculture, health and nutrition, based on a national food and nutrition policy, where sectoral roles in these plans are clearly defined, and resources allocated to each sector to ensure implementation. Each sector is then held accountable for the outcome of specific nutrition related objectives. For example, dietary diversity is an important predictor of potential nutrition and health problems. A national campaign to promote improved dietary practices which does not fully engage the agricultural sector to play its part in improving the dietary diversity index, is likely to fail.
3. Need to develop a culture of *multi-sectoralism* in the agriculture sector. Tertiary institutions that are producing graduates for this sector need to produce cadres that already appreciate the value of working together with other sectors.
4. Increase consumers health and nutrition literacy or awareness so that they make informed demands on the market for foods that are more responsive to improved dietary practices.
5. Need for continued advocacy to sustain agriculture's potential for improved nutrition and health. This can be continuously fuelled by an ongoing research agenda that investigates the impact of current agricultural practices on health and nutrition, and provides evidence to enhance agricultures potential.

## **Conclusions**

It is in the interest of the agriculture sector to be more responsive to nutrition and health, since, over 70% of agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa, in both the commercial and small scale sector, is largely done by women in the reproductive age group. This is also the group, in any population, that is vulnerable to malnutrition and disease. The agriculture sector needs to also acknowledge women's multiple roles in the community as these often compete negatively with their role in agriculture, and identifying mechanisms for easing their workload through the food chain. The sector cannot afford to idly stand by, as the disease burden has the potential to reduce productivity, through absenteeism by women, due to the burden of caring for sick members of her family. Any planned growth in agriculture should take into account, the vulnerability of its human capital and identify appropriate corrective measures. However, agriculture's potential to directly contribute to improved health and nutrition is also high. This can be achieved by having more health and nutrition sensitive agricultural policies and programmes, that respond to the prevailing disease and nutrition burden in the country.

This panel discussion should identify some useful mechanisms, policy options and strategies, to inform the agriculture sector's responsiveness to health and nutrition and accelerate progress in Malawi.