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INVESTING IN FAMILY PLANNING AS A PATHWAY TO IMPROVED NUTRITION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Article:

NUTRITION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ghana's success at her development efforts, particularly in reaping the demographic dividend and attaining an upper middle income status depends largely on the health of its people. With strong healthy, educated and economically empowered citizens, Ghana will prosper and thrive as her citizens would be able to contribute meaningfully to her wealth creation and prosperity. One of the best ways to ensure good health is through proper nutrition especially at the early stages of life. However, in many parts of the country, proper nutrition remains a big challenge especially among poor communities.

Good nutrition has tremendous benefits for individuals, families and communities in countless ways. It improves physical growth and intellectual development. This leads to better performance at school by young people and in the long run, greater productivity in the labour force as well as increased household wages thus lifting many families out of poverty. Recent findings associate 10.5 percent of all class repetitions in Ghanaian schools to stunting. This makes issues of nutrition exceptionally critical in our development efforts. A key way to improve the nutritional status of women, infants and children is through investment in Family Planning.

PROPER NUTRITION HAS BENEFITS OVER A LIFETIME

Adequate nutrition is critical to a persons' overall growth and development. The period from birth to age 2 is especially important for physical and cognitive growth. According to research, children who are not exclusively breastfed for at least the first six months of life and complementarily fed with diverse, nutritious, solid food from six months of age have reduced immunity and are more susceptible to recurring illnesses. They are also eight times more likely to die than their well-nourished counterparts. After birth, infants that receive good nutrition face better chances of survival. Well-nourished children are physically well shaped and mentally healthy.

For women, good nutrition has important implications for their health and that of their children. Malnutrition in women results in reduced cognitive and physical productivity, increased susceptibility to infections and slow recovery from illness. Other adverse effects of malnutrition are low body mass index and short stature, anaemia and other micro



nutrient deficiencies. These result in increased risk of complications during pregnancy and adverse pregnancy outcomes.

GHANA'S CONTEXT

Evidence from the 2014 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey suggests that malnutrition is highly prevalent and persistent in Ghana with 66 percent of children aged 6-59 months and Forty-two percent of women aged 15-49 being anaemic. The report also indicates high chronic malnutrition among under-five children in Ghana (19 per cent stunted and 5 percent wasted) with Stunting increasing in the second year when children are usually weaned while wasting peaks around the seventh month of age.

Each year, several children and infants die from malnutrition related causes in Ghana. The National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) in a report on the Cost of Hunger in Ghana (COHG) 2016, links 24 percent of all child mortality cases in the country to malnutrition. According to the GDHS 2014, 1 in every 24 Ghanaian children die before reaching age 1, and one in every 17 do not survive to his or her fifth birthday.

Malnutrition also has severe economic consequences. It contributes to both infectious and chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease which among others exert tremendous costs on sufferers, health workers, health institutions and the state. According to the Cost of Hunger in Ghana report, malnutrition has reduced Ghana's workforce by 7.3 percent and costs the country an estimated 4.6 billion Ghana cedis annually, equivalent to 6.4 percent of GDP.

There are many different ways to improve nutrition. Interventions to address malnutrition in Ghana have included the use of vitamin supplementation or the development of crops with high nutritional content. However, one often overlooked approach is voluntary, accessible, affordable and optimal method mix of family planning which is vital for good nutrition and national development.

HOW DOES FAMILY PLANNING IMPACT NUTRITION?

Ghana currently has a high fertility rate of 4.2 percent, (GDHS, 2014). This means every woman of child bearing age is likely to give birth to four children even though their ideal is 3.6. Closely linked to the country's fertility rate is the high unmet need for family planning which refers to women who would like to postpone their next birth, or stop childbearing altogether, but are not using a modern method of family planning to avoid pregnancy. In Ghana, unmet need for women is 30 percent, (GDHS, 2014). This means that 3 in 10 women would like to postpone their next birth but are not using any modern method of contraception. Improving access to and voluntary use of family planning will not only help women to achieve their own reproductive health goals, but would also benefit maternal and child nutrition in profound ways. The following are some of the ways:

SPACING PREGNANCIES OPTIMALLY

World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines recommend waiting at least two years after having a child before trying to become pregnant again. When the time between the birth of one child and the conception of another is too short, mothers and their children can face many challenges including poor nutrition.



Women use nutritional reserves in their body during pregnancy and breastfeeding, when children are too closely spaced, mothers are at risk of depleting those reserves. Family planning can help avert such outcomes by enabling women to optimally space their pregnancies, thus permitting their bodies to recuperate and replenish essential vitamins and other nutrients.

Closely spaced pregnancies increase the chance that infants will be born early/ preterm or be stunted. Stunted children do not grow as well physically or intellectually. This prevents them from thriving and living up to their full potential. When children are well-spaced, mothers are more likely to have the time, energy, and resources for good feeding practices for all their children. If a woman becomes pregnant too soon after giving birth, she may prematurely wean the older infant from breastfeeding or lack the nutrient reserve to satisfy the nutritional needs of both the nursing baby and the growing foetus.

DELAYING ADOLESCENT PREGNANCIES

According to the GDHS 2014, unmet need for family planning is highest 51 percent among adolescents 15-19 years. The high unmet need among adolescents is one key reason for the large number of adolescent births. The barriers to family planning that young people experience include stigma, issues of confidentiality, and affordability. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to under-nutrition because they are undergoing a critical period of growth and development when about half of adult body weight and 15 to 20 percent of adult height are attained. Good nutrition in adolescent especially girls helps prevent stunting, allows them to reach their full growth potential, including that of the pelvic girdle.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding during adolescence can exacerbate this vulnerability due to competition for nutrients between the mother and foetus. As a way of adjusting for increased energy needs during pregnancy, some adolescent girls can stop growing altogether during pregnancy.

ENHANCING MATERNAL HEALTH

Expanding the use of voluntary family planning can help women meet their fertility desires and also lead to declines in maternal deaths by reducing exposure to the risks of pregnancy, childbearing, and unsafe abortions. According to GDHS 2014, In Ghana, there is difference in fertility preference among married women and men (15-47) is 4.7 and 5.1 children respectively. This means that, overall, Ghanaian women have about 0.6 children more than their ideal number, implying that the total fertility of 4.2 children per woman is 17 percent higher than it would be if unwanted births were avoided. Addressing Ghana's challenges with unmet need would go a long way to avert unwanted pregnancies and reduce exposure to risky pregnancies and ensure a reduction in maternal deaths.

By ensuring that women survive childbirth, nutrition considerations for infants and children would be greatly improved. Mothers are often the primary caretakers, purchasers and preparers of food for children; thus, their own survival is an important determinant of child survival, health and nutritional status.

When mothers die, breastfeeding for younger infants is compromised and the needs of older children can go unmet. Various studies show that orphaned infants are significantly more likely to experience under-nutrition and die from diarrhoea diseases and nutritional deficiency than those whose mothers survived. The fact that the risk of death remains high for orphaned children through the first decade of life also shows the importance of the mother's role as the primary source of nutrition.



EMPOWERING WOMEN

The ability to choose the number and spacing of children increases with women's empowerment and autonomy through pathways such as labour force participation, formal education, and participation in household and healthcare decisions. When the status of women improves, so does their own nutritional status and the nutritional well-being of their young children. Better- educated mothers are more likely to maintain their own nutritional status, which can have the cyclical effect of reducing the risk of poor birth outcomes. The greater earning power that comes with education also means that mothers will not only have the knowledge, but also the financial resources needed to feed themselves and their families the right quantity, quality, and diversity of foods.

Education and earning power can also improve other measures of women's status, such as mobility and access to markets; exposure to nutritional information and resources; and financial autonomy and decision-making power in the household. Increase in education for women can lead to greater productivity, empowerment, and control of resources, allowing them to make better choices that ultimately benefit the health and nutrition of children and families.

CALL TO ACTION.

Family planning can play a vital role in solving Ghana's under-nutrition problem. Its potential to strengthen current approaches to attaining the country's nutritional goals has often been underestimated. A prudent approach would therefore be to ensure improved investments into family planning services and programmes both at the national and local levels as well as employing a multi-sectoral approach in the integration of family planning into nutrition strategies to harness synergies between the two. This will facilitate achievement of the best possible outcomes for strategies on nutrition in the country.

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