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Advocacy for action to reduce malnutrition stepped up

By BRIAN SIWISHA
SELF-EVIDENCE shows that nutrition has always been important for newly-borns so that they grow to become healthier.

Many parents in Zambia today understand instinctively that children are needy little people who must be nurtured and cared for by feeding them properly.

Furthermore scientific research worldwide has acknowledged that the first 1,000 days of a child's life are critical in ensuring that he or she achieves maximum health over the course of their lifetime.

Around the world and Africa in particular, millions of women find it difficult to ensure that their children get proper nutrition during this crucial period because the resources and infrastructure are inadequate.

Zambia has made efforts in ensuring nutrition receives the attention it deserves.

Since independence, the country through the National Food and Nutrition Commission, under the Ministry of Health has continued to address malnutrition and its related complications. Topping this list

has been the problem of stunting which has grappled the country and has scientifically been proven that it can reverse development gains made overtime if not addressed.

This is because stunting is the impaired growth and development that children experience from poor nutrition, repeated infection, and inadequate psychosocial stimulation.

Stunted growth is a reflection of the failure of children especially in the first 1000 days of life to receive adequate nutrition over a long period of time and can also be affected by recurrent and chronic illnesses.

Besides the short stature of most stunted children, stunting is also reflected by poor cognitive development of children.

If not corrected soon enough, it may become an irreversible damage that affects the child's productivity in future as well as the economic growth of the nation at large.

However, through a consortium of donors and stakeholders, the country over the past three years has been implementing the scaling up nutrition (SUN) first 1000 Most Critical Days Programme in 14 districts namely: Mwinilunga, Zambezi, Mumbwa, Kalabo, Shangombo, Mongu,

Lundazi, Chipata, Chinsali, Kasama, Mbala, Kaputa, Mansa and Samfya.

Though some considerable achievements have been recorded by way of having rolled out the programme and created presence signalling governments intensified action to reduce stunting from the current 40% prevalent rate to below 20% as recommended by the world health organisation, more still needs to be done.

NFNC Deputy Director Musonda Mofu equally observes that Zambia is still lagging behind in reducing stunting levels countrywide.

Mr Mofu pointed out that despite the sector having attracted new players and increased funding, there is need for intensified advocacy activities among stakeholders so that the nutrition agenda is taken forward.

Thus new partners have come on board, the latest being the USAID through the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III (FANTA) project where it is supporting the commission to strengthen the nutrition advocacy component through the developing of plans and use of tools such as PROFILES.

Spreading over a period of four intensive and engaging days, the

commission recently assembled a team of experts who included nutritionists, planners, communicators, economists and statisticians in Siavonga to brainstorm on how best malnutrition can further be reduced using advocate tools and strategies.

The outcome was the development of a document dubbed advocacy for malnutrition.

Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III (FANTA), Project Manager Ernest Muyunda reiterated the commitment of USAID to supporting Zambia in addressing many challenges it was facing in the health sector.

"FANTA is collaborating with the Nutrition Commission by providing technical support in nutrition programmes. The development of the nutrition advocacy plan and also PROFILES, a tool used to estimate costs of the negative effects of not mobilising resources towards addressing malnutrition related problems," explained Dr Muyunda.

Dr Muyunda said the development of the plan is aimed at ensuring that all players in the sectors buy into a document which can reinforce advocacy towards mobilising resources and synergies in reducing malnutrition

levels in Zambia.

Advocacy is a planned, deliberate, systematic and coordinated process, where stakeholders can speak in one harmonised voice.

It is a platform to create movement toward greater political and social commitment for nutrition in a country.

Zambia is capable of achieving this and needs such a movement in the nutrition sector as successful advocacy campaigns in the past are on record of having yielded positive results.

The central focus of nutrition advocacy is to promote accountability for nutrition and strengthen nutrition governance.

Nutrition advocacy can serve to support the development of a nutrition policy, investment of resources to strengthen and expand implementation of nutrition services, and greater coordination between government and non-governmental organisations that play a role in providing nutrition services across a country.

Using a collaborative approach, the FANTA III project has facilitated nutrition advocacy in several developing countries using a nutrition advocacy tool, PROFILES, and has developed country-specific nutrition

costing models.

The estimates generated from this tool and models are the cornerstone of this nutrition advocacy process.

According to FANTA, PROFILES consists of a set of computer-based models that calculate consequences if malnutrition does not improve over a defined time period and the benefits of improved nutrition over the same period, including lives saved, disabilities averted, human capital gains, and economic productivity gains.

The results from the tool can be used to engage government and other high-level stakeholders in a collaborative nutrition advocacy process to identify, prioritise, and advocate for evidence-based actions to reduce malnutrition.

Mr Mofu commended USAID for supporting the advocacy component under nutrition and expressed optimism that this will go a long way in the overall development of the country's economy.

It therefore becomes crucial that whilst the focus is now on nutrition, resources available be spread across the country so that the problem of malnutrition is tackled holistically. - ZANIS