

GUEST Editorial

Why African nations must consider poverty reduction as a priority agenda

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The African continent continues to grapple with chronic poverty with its consequent implications on increased hunger and child nutrition. According to the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), out of the world population of 7 billion people, there are an estimated 925 million hungry people, thus 13% or 1 in every 7 people are hungry [1]. Poverty and hunger are closely intertwined, causing a spiraling effect on child under nutrition.

The UN member states in 2000 affirmed reducing poverty and hunger by half by the year 2015 as the first Millennium Development Goal. However, Africa is not yet on target to meet this goal as agreed. Whereas, East Asia (particularly China) has achieved significant progress in eradicating severe poverty, African nations continue to have a high population living in poverty. According to a World Bank report (2012), out of the 1.29 billion people living in extreme poverty (less than \$ 1.25 per day), 396 million live in Africa [2].

This increase in the number of poor people in Africa may be attributed to a number of factors; there has been a reduction in investment in smallholder agriculture relevant to the poor by governments and international agencies; the current economic crises, the significant increase of food prices in the past and more importantly according to FAO most people lack land to grow food and income to purchase enough food [4]. Instead, more resources have been allocated to education and health sectors at the expense of agriculture. Other causes of poverty are climate change; harsh environmental conditions which have led to desertification and contributed to famine in Somalia, Mali & Ethiopia and the increased drought and flooding patterns in most parts of the continent have all exacerbated poverty and hunger.

On the other hand, poverty is the principal cause of hunger owing to insufficient resources, unequal distribution of income and regional imbalances, harsh economic and political systems which favor only a few well to do while the poor barely survive. Sporadic conflicts on the continent have witnessed an increase in humanitarian assistance, specifically: internal conflicts, natural disasters and the HIV/AIDS epidemic leaving millions of victims at the face of chronic hunger and poverty. Lastly, hunger in itself causes poverty by causing poor health, low energy levels, mental impairment and by reducing peoples' ability to work and learn [3]. It is clear that poverty and hunger form a vicious cycle whose consequences are dire and need urgent action.

Research shows a strong link between adequate nourishment and child growth during the critical stage of development (from conception to age 2). The negative effects on stunting, weakened immune system, micronutrient deficiencies and the irreversible effects of cognitive development have huge implications on children and in adulthood. Furthermore, these effects are responsible for total disabilities and most of the lives lost.

This, therefore, calls for policy makers to increase efforts and resources towards ensuring that every child on the continent has quality nutrition during this time. Access to food is a basic human right and governments have a duty to ensure provision of sufficient and nourishing food to its population and especially children.

It is noteworthy that although some progress has been made towards poverty reduction a lot still needs to be done. Indeed the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU) have spearheaded efforts in tackling poverty, enhancing good governance, promoting peace and security and managing and resolving conflicts on the continent. In this regard Mozambique is a case in point where poverty levels have reduced from 70% to 55% in the past five years while Ghana, Tanzania and Uganda have also made notable progress towards this venture [5]. Additionally, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) was established under NEPAD by the AU assembly in 2003. CAADP focuses on improving food security, nutrition and boosting economic development in Africa's largely farming based economies. To achieve this, CAADP aims at four key areas; sustainable land and water management, market access, food supply and hunger and agricultural research.

In recognition of the fact that persistent poverty and child under nutrition results in irreversible costs to human and economic development, developing countries and international agencies need to intensify their efforts to increase and re-direct their resources towards improving programs which will have the largest impact on the poor. Investments should therefore focus on agriculture because it is the main sector

which drives economic development in most nations and also because a large percentage of the poor in developing countries derive their livelihoods from agriculture. This would not only improve economic development in the long term but would in the short term reduce hunger and poverty. So far, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) has done very well in enhancing food security through promotion of rapid, sustainable agricultural growth based on smallholder farmers.

Other strategies being implemented elsewhere such as reduction in food prices, taxation on food, and on import tariffs on staples have an immediate and positive impact on the poor. Further, other strategies which have been implemented elsewhere, for instance food based safety net programs and social protection such as cash transfers, require proper monitoring by effective government institutions and proper targeting otherwise the benefits would not reach the needy [6].

There is need for the right policies to be put in place. Productive land policies such as land tenure systems which can allow the majority of the poor to own land should be formulated and implemented. Tax policies need to be revised so as to facilitate investments and wealth creation. Furthermore, African nations need to have nutrition policy champions who can raise awareness of the burden that under nutrition imposes on the well being of populations and what can be done effectively to reduce this burden. They would consistently remind the government and related sectors of their roles and responsibilities in reducing under nutrition. These advocates would probably portray a crisis situation which would necessitate significant and urgent actions by governments.

In conclusion, poverty reduction is imperative in order to ensure proper nutrition. Improved nutrition is an excellent investment as it empowers people and communities. In doing so it fuels development process and leads to poverty reduction.

References

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