Although children all over the world have the same potential for growth and cognitive development in childhood, many of them don’t have the nutrition necessary to realise this common potential, which Dr Shelly Sundberg of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation calls “a birthright for every child.”

This lack of nutrition undermines the child’s chances to survive and thrive. This has also been neglected because the public perception of malnutrition is a child needing treatment. “Malnutrition is largely a “hidden” problem. Often, in the public’s mind, “malnutrition” is the emaciated child needing treatment. This is only the tip of the iceberg. Many nutritional deficits are not visible. They are hidden by their ubiquitous nature — when many or most children are short for their age, families and communities assume this is the norm. And conditions such as anemia, for example, do not have any telltale physical markers,” explains Dr Sundberg.

Dr Sundberg has played a key role in the initiation of the Agriculture to Nutrition (ATONU): Improving Nutrition Outcomes Through Optimized Agricultural Investments Project, which is being implemented by the Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) and six other partners including Uganda’s Africa Innovations Institute. The project is being implemented in several African countries.

Addressing malnutrition requires concerted action on the part of many sectors including health, water, sanitation, social protection, and education as well as agriculture. “Malnutrition in the past was regarded primarily as an issue of not having enough food — a deficit of calories. The emphasis was on increasing yields to solve the problem. Yields across Africa have increased for many staple crops, and yet malnutrition persists,” Dr Lindiwe Sibanda, CEO of FANRPAN says.

She calls for the need to reconsider how the agricultural sector measures success. “Is it simply how much maize or how much millet has been harvested? How do you capture the impact of agricultural development on household well-being, particularly of the most vulnerable?” she asks before answering, “agriculture can do more for nutrition beyond increasing yields.”

However, Dr Sundberg has also observed an increasing appreciation of the importance of dietary quality, not simply quantity. “There has been a coalescence around a vision of agriculture and nutrition working together to create food systems which ensure year-round access to safe, affordable, nutritious diets. This is the new end game,” she emphatically adds.

Investments in the agricultural sector — and this is true in all countries, not just Africa — must prioritize increasing the productivity of non-staple, nutrient-dense foods to make them more affordable to low-income consumers. “Among these are dairy, eggs, fish, legumes, fruits, vegetables — and we must include biofortified foods as well,” adds Prof George William Otim-Nape, an ATONU Steering Committee