Agriculture to Nutrition (ATONU) project launched in Kampala

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Agriculture to Nutrition (ATONU), a six-year project, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, focusing on agriculture to deliver positive nutrition outcomes to smallholder farm families was launched in Kampala on Wednesday October 28, 2015. Dr. Lindiwe Sibanda, Head of Mission and CEO of the Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), the lead implementer of the project, noted that “It’s the Agriculture to Nutrition (ATONU) Improving Nutritional Outcomes Through Optimized Agricultural Investments Project. The continental initiative was launched today, seeks to address the disconnect between agriculture and nutrition and improve nutrition outcomes,”. FANRPAN based in Pretoria, South Africa will work with six Consortium Members in delivering the project in Sub Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania.

“Our policy makers need to say no to any investments that only focus on yields. We need them to push for agriculture that focuses on both yield and dense nutrient foods,” Dr Sibanda emphasized.

Dr. Sibanda made the remarks at the launch of the ATONU project at the 6th Africa Day for Food and Nutrition Security (ADFNS), an annual event of the African Union Commission that serves as a rallying point to intensify political and financial commitments at all levels to address contemporary challenges of food and nutrition insecurity in Africa.

According to FAO, Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest prevalence of undernourishment in the world – at 23.2 percent, or almost one in every four people. With such statistics the ATONU project is a welcome one. The project that specifically targets women of child-bearing age and children in the first 1,000 days of life, the most nutritionally vulnerable, is being implemented in Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania. ATONU’s primary beneficiaries will be smallholder farm families in the three countries before it is rolled out in other countries depending on demand.

The ATONU project has been endorsed by His Majesty King Letsie III of the Kingdom of Lesotho. King Letsie III is Africa’s nutrition champion. “I call upon Africa to embrace ATONU because it puts emphasis on smallholder farm families and empowers women as agents of change towards achieving household food and nutrition security and health outcomes,” the king said in a video message during the launch of the project. The project will run for six years with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation providing funding to the tune of US$16 million (approximately 56.8 billion Uganda Shillings).

“Malnutrition has been primary looked at as lacking enough food. Yields have increased but malnutrition persists. Agriculture needs to reconsider how success is measured. Agriculture can do more for nutrition by focusing on quality as opposed to high yields alone,” explained Dr. Shelly Sundberg of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “Investments in agriculture must emphasise high quality nutrient foods and ensure that they are affordable by poor people,” she added. The foundation is launching a similar project in India to cover the Asian region.

Prof George William Otin-Nape, an ATONU Steering Committee Member and CEO of the Africa Innovations Institute in Kampala noted that “Agriculture has arrived at a place where the focus should widen beyond production and income to improved nutrition,” Isatou Jallow, Senior Nutrition & Partnership Advisor – Head, Food Security & Nutrition Programme at NEPAD called for
“strengthening institutional capacities and systems, partnerships and knowledge sharing for enhanced delivery of food and nutrition security interventions.” This, she said, will accelerate action towards improved nutrition of mothers when pregnant leading to well nourished babies.

A report titled “Healthy Food for a Healthy World: Leveraging Agriculture and Food to Improve Global Nutrition” was launched by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs; Prof Catherine Bertini represented the council. “Malnutrition is a global challenge affecting every country on earth and placing more than one quarter of the world’s population at serious health risk,” she added “Given that nutrition is driven largely by the food people eat, making nutrition a priority in developing the global food system could give more people access to the healthy foods they need to thrive, drive economic growth in poor countries, and increase incomes of 2.5 billion small-scale farmers, many of whom themselves are malnourished.”

The project’s ultimate objective is to ensure that policy makers and investors support agriculturalists to design and implement projects that deliver positive nutrition outcomes, reducing malnutrition in smallholder farm families.