Invest in agriculture to overcome malnutrition-experts

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Investors in the agricultural sector 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," said Prof George William Otim-Nape, the Agriculture to Nutrition: Improving Nutrition Outcomes Through Optimized Agricultural Investments (ATONU) steering committee member.

Otim-Nape also CEO of the Africa Innovations Institute in Kampala said the investments must include bio fortified foods as well.

He said bio fortification is the process of breeding food crops that are rich in micronutrients, such as vitamin A, zinc, and iron.

"These crops "bio fortifies" themselves by loading higher levels of minerals and vitamins in their seeds and roots while they are growing. When eaten, they can provide essential micronutrients to improve nutrition and public health," he said.

Malnutrition leads to half of all child deaths under five while chronic diseases, many of them diet-related, are now the leading cause of death worldwide. Many deaths today are diet-related diseases like heart disease, Type-2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer.

The launch of the Agriculture to Nutrition (ATONU) initiative sets out to improve nutrition outcomes through optimized agricultural investments.

The programme is implemented by the Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), which is based in Pretoria, South Africa.

In order to ensure that people have food to eat, there has been an overemphasis on quantity, which has seen an increase in yields without reductions in malnutrition.

"We need food that is nutritious in the right quantity and quality," said Dr Lindiwe Sibanda, CEO of FANRPAN.

"In our quest for a green revolution, we have emphasised quantity over quality in Africa. We are concerned with monoculture. What happened to variety? There are no vegetables anymore for children to eat. It is the mothers who eat last when a meal is served. They prepare the food but they don't enjoy eat. When chicken is slaughtered, they eat the soup," she said.

She called for the acceleration of actions towards improved nutrition of expectant mothers to lead to well-nourished babies.

"The importance of first 1,000 days of the child cannot be overemphasized. The ATONU project focuses on changing the behaviour of people especially smallholder farm families,"
"Malnutrition for most children starts well before they are born. If expectant mothers have nothing to eat or are eating foods that are not dense in nutrients, they will give birth to babies that are not well nourished," Dr Sibanda further explains.

In Africa, ATONU, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for six years seeks to see that the cost the continent will have to pay for malnutrition is curtailed.

Malnutrition costs governments in treatment of diseases and the work hours lost when employees can't be on their jobs.

"Treating malnutrition costs most countries an average of 4-9% of their annual GDP," explained Prof Catherne Bertini of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. "Malnourished workers are less productive," Bertini said.