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4D – Dialogues on Demographic Diversity and Dividends

Food Security and Nutrition for Demographic Dividend(s)

Introduction

Following more than a decade of continuous decline in the number of individuals worldwide affected by hunger, the number has been slowly rising again since 2014. In 2019, almost 690 million people, or nine percent of the global population, were undernourished. Africa has the highest prevalence of malnutrition, with one in five individuals affected. Asia still hosts the largest number of undernourished people, yet there has been a considerable drop in prevalence over the last 15 years. New challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic could exacerbate the situation: In a worst-case scenario, it could cause an additional 130 million people to suffer from chronic hunger. This makes it even harder to “leave no one behind”. As food security has important implications for health and education, it is central to the empowerment youth need to realize their full potential.

Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, especially SDG 2 to “*end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture*” varies considerably by region. Food poverty is most prevalent in areas with some of the highest population growth rates in the world. Strong population growth can, amongst other factors such as climate change and civil conflict, increase the pressure on natural resources and land for agricultural production. But not only will food demand increase due to population growth: changing age structures, urbanization and rising income levels will increase the pressure on the agricultural workforce to produce food in sufficient quality and quantities.

Ending hunger thus requires a systemic and multi-faceted approach: On the one hand, food security increases the likelihood of achieving demographic and gender dividends. A well-nourished youth is key to societies’ developing human capital, nutrition education can improve the participation of girls and women in all aspects of life, and promoting healthy lifestyles can enable people to stay in good health throughout their later years. Moreover, stunting and wasting have life-long effects on health, well-being and productivity, and high infant mortality as a result of malnutrition means that fertility rates remain high, thus delaying the onset of a demographic transition.

On the other hand, successfully harnessing a demographic dividend can, in return, contribute to food security because it holds great potential for a country’s socioeconomic development. It can increase agricultural output, incomes and, in the long run may result in fewer “mouths to feed” – when health care continues to improve, schools and universities offer new educational opportunities, more formal jobs for the largest generation of young people are created and women gain more rights.

Aspiration 1, Goal 3 “*Healthy and well-nourished citizens*” of the AU’s Agenda 2063 confirms the significance of food security and nutrition. The same holds true for the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD-PoA) and its regional implementing framework, the Addis Ababa Declaration on Population and Development (AADPD). It is time to act now to reaffirm that concrete measures should be taken to strengthen food security at all levels to realize demographic dividend(s).

Need for Action

- **Investment in maternal and newborn nutrition**

Young women are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition; for example, around half of pregnant women in developing countries have an iron deficiency. If unaddressed, micronutrient deficiencies can lead to significant health complications during adolescence and pregnancy for both mother and child. Health campaigns should therefore integrate nutrition education and assistance into sexual and reproductive health counselling and support services to reduce the gender-based dimension of “hidden hunger”. This empowers women to make informed, nutrition-sensitive choices and lower barriers to get the nutrients they require. In addition, malnutrition during the “1000-day window” – pregnancy and the first two years of childhood – causes irreversible health issues and reduces life expectancy. For example, in West Africa, around one in three children is stunted due to malnutrition. This lowers lifetime incomes, increasing the likelihood of poverty. By providing information on healthy nutrition and subsidized food products to families, a more productive workforce can develop, increasing the potential for a demographic dividend.

- **Free school meal provision**

While it can be hard to change eating habits in households, policies that have provided nutritious school meals have been shown to have positive health effects. As a result, learning outcomes improve as children are better able to concentrate on their education. Moreover, incentives for children to attend school and invest in human capital increase. The benefits for health and educational outcomes are largest for girls, who are more likely to stay away from school to help in the household. This enhances gender equality and the potential for female employment.

- **A skilled agricultural workforce to feed a growing population**

Rural youth can particularly benefit from investment in agricultural technical and vocational training (ATVET). Around two-thirds of the workforce in Sub-Saharan Africa works in agriculture; most are small-holders with low incomes, often affected by food insecurity. By developing new skills in ATVET programs, a fast-growing youth population is more likely to secure decent work in the agricultural sector or to set up own innovative agri-businesses. As a result, rural incomes will rise. Moreover, skilled young producers can adapt production methods or use new technologies to sustainably increase output and lower food prices.

By providing jobs and contributing to food security, ATVET is an important part of realizing a demographic dividend.

- **Adapting agriculture to climate breakdown through leapfrogging**

To feed a growing population, agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa must become more productive. Yet climate breakdown is already negatively affecting yields. Leapfrogging – i.e. avoiding environmentally damaging agricultural practices while adopting new technologies – can support sustainable forms of intensification. For example, providing advisory services in climate-smart agriculture while spreading weather information quickly and cheaply via mobile phone reduces farmers’ environmental vulnerability. Particularly women can benefit from the greater decision-making power granted by better access to new technologies.

Best practices

There are many different approaches to improving food security. In this respect, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach, every country must decide for itself which food and nutrition-sensitive policies are useful and best meet its own needs in reproductive health, education, agriculture and other relevant areas. Sharing knowledge, experience and best practices from different countries – that show different approaches to improving food security and providing a foundation for a demographic dividend – is key to achieving positive results.

- **Productive Safety Net Program – Ethiopia**

In Ethiopia, the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) was launched in 2005 in response to food insecurity. The latest extension of the program was in 2015, aiming to increase resilience to external shocks and enhance food security while improving environmental management. The PSNP helps meet the needs of chronically food-insecure households in identified vulnerable areas in rural Ethiopia. The program supplies food, cash or a combination of both to households most affected. Such payments are made to households that can contribute in labor-intensive public work, such as road infrastructure. When work is limited or impossible, unconditional support is provided. This helps households to smooth their consumption, avoid asset depletion and plan with greater certainty. Since the introduction of the safeguard program – the largest on the African continent – the mortality rate of children under five has been reduced by more than half.

- **South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative – several countries**

The South Asia Food and Nutrition Security Initiative (SAFANSI), supported by the United Kingdom, Australia and the European Commission, was created in 2010 to raise awareness and encourage behavioral change for improved food and nutrition security. Malnutrition remains high in the region despite strong economic growth. SAFANSI has projects in various South Asian countries where population numbers are still rising, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The initiative worked in a number of ways, for example focusing on nutrient-dense foods, combining social safety net programs with nutrition education, integrated in reproductive health, including interventions for pregnant and nursing women, young children, and adolescent females. The program worked with South Asian policymakers and decision-makers, officials, development partners, and technical experts to build consensus on necessary actions.

- **Babban Gona – Nigeria**

The social enterprise Babban Gona, Hausa for “Big Farm”, was founded in 2012 by Kola Masha. The concept involves young small farmers joining together to form cooperative “Trust Groups”. Through its size and risk sharing across members, Babban Gona is able to offer members loans at far better conditions than traditional banks and microfinance institutions. Rather than money, the farmers then receive quality seeds, fertilizers and pesticides for the amount borrowed. By buying in bulk, Babban Gona can also offer these inputs below market prices typically available to smallholders. Local employees train the smallholders in various stages of production to increase yields and effectively market their goods. In the 2019 season, Babban Gona’s “Trust Groups” counted almost 20,000 smallholders in various regions of Nigeria. As a result, these young farmers can provide nutritious food and higher incomes for the families, as well as gain better life prospects.

- **Women in the Driving Seat – Ghana**

The program “Women in the Driving Seat” dismantles traditional gender norms by providing women in Ghana with vocational training in mechanized agriculture. As part of the continental project ATVET for women, spanning six African countries, the training program is organized by AUDA-NEPAD and the GIZ, together with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. In Ghana, women lack access to employment in high-value activities and must instead work in labor-intensive processing. “Women in the Driving Seat” aims to overcome the gendered division of labor with courses on tractor operation and maintenance. As they are empowered and benefit from productive employment opportunities, women are able to increase their incomes and thus their decision-making power at household level, make better choices for themselves and their children and produce more food for healthier families.