



From hand to hand.
From heart to heart.

Von Hand zu Hand.
Von Herz zu Herz.

Malnutrition on the prowl

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Health experts lament rising consequences of undernourishment among Nigerian children, adults

By Ola Kehinde-Balogun



<http://sunnewsonline.com/malnutrition-on-the-prowl/>

Today, many Nigerian homes can no longer afford three square meals daily. Since the onset of the prevailing economic hardship, food, one of the basic essentials of life, has increasingly become hard to come by. Many children now suffer deprivation and hunger, and lack essential nutrients to help them grow up and become healthy adults.

Medical experts and nutritionists affirm that good diet is central to the wellbeing of every child. However, these days, most parents have little or nothing to offer their children because they have almost nothing to eat, no thanks to the economic hardship in the land.

In many war-torn countries like Somalia and South Sudan, images of frail babies and children suffering from acute hunger and malnutrition have often dominated world media space.

But the truth now is that in Nigeria a large number of parents are finding it difficult to fend for their offspring and wards; most children are growing up without proper nutrition, and, in some instances, some parents have expressed extreme worry over the plight of their children who are manifesting signs of kwashiorkor and other symptoms of malnutrition.

Suicide over hunger

The situation is so dire that nowadays, some parents are simply taking their own lives for failing to provide for their children. For instance, a taxi driver and father of four recently committed suicide by hanging himself in the Oke Aro area of Akure, Ondo State. The deceased, identified as Dayo, reportedly took his own life after finding it increasingly difficult to fend for his family such that he was apparently fed up with life.

In another instance, a man in his 50s recently hanged himself in Dutse Makaranta in Bwari Area Council of the FCT. The deceased, simply identified as Tijani, a father of five, had worked with the FCT Water Board as a casual staff before he was laid off. He reportedly committed suicide because he was unable to feed his family.

Hunger in society, IDPs camps

It is no longer news that many children are dying at various Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states, the areas most affected by Boko Haram's reign of terror.

According to unofficial reports, nearly 30 children die daily in those facilities due to insufficient food supply or lack of right nutrients in the food they eat.

Children who escaped the sword of the terrorist group, Boko Haram, are daily being lost to malnutrition. Now, it seems every child in the IDP camps is fighting a war of survival. Even those outside the camps are not spared. From the North to the South, reports show that many children are suffering the pangs of hunger and malnutrition.

In Lagos, it is common these days to see children begging for food on the street. Nursing mothers are equally seen begging for food and money to feed their malnourished babies.



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What is malnutrition?

According to a medical writer, Dr. Ananya Mandal, malnutrition is a situation that comes from a diet deficient in vital nutrients, vitamins and minerals. Over the long or short term, this may lead to severe debility and damage to the vital functions of the body.

“Symptoms of malnutrition are easily distinguishable among both adults and children. The muscles of the body appear to waste away and may be left without adequate strength to carry out daily activities. Many people complain of tiredness all day and lack of energy. This may also be due to anaemia caused by malnutrition.

“It can also lead to increased susceptibility to infections, delayed and prolonged healing of even small wounds and cuts. Depression is common in malnutrition. This could be both a cause as well as an effect of malnutrition. Children with malnutrition will suffer from irritability and sluggishness. Of course kwashiorkor in such children is a common problem,” he said.

Effects of malnutrition

In her write-up released in March 2016, Harohalli Shashidhar, Managing Director of Medscape, an online health magazine, said that, every year, malnutrition was directly responsible for 300,000 deaths among children younger than five years in developing countries. She noted that this contributed indirectly to more than half of all deaths in children worldwide. Even the World Health Organisation (WHO), has affirmed that undernourishment, as witnessed in many parts of the world, is very dangerous.

“Malnutrition is estimated to contribute to more than one-third of all children’s deaths, although it is rarely listed as the direct cause. Lack of access to highly nutritious foods, especially in the present context of rising food prices, is a common cause of malnutrition. Poor feeding practices, such as inadequate breastfeeding, offering the wrong foods, and not ensuring that the child gets enough nutritious food, contribute to malnutrition. Infection, particularly frequent or persistent diarrhoea, pneumonia, measles and malaria, also undermine a child’s nutritional status,” WHO said in a recent report on the subject.

Poor diet, poor IQ

Nutritionists and medical doctors are often worried about the future of children plagued by malnutrition. Even when some children survive hunger, they are worried about its future effects on them, with some suggesting that the consequence might be low intelligence quotient (IQ).

A surgeon at the Federal Teaching Hospital, Ido-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Dr. Dayo Oloidi, explained to Daily Sun that, low IQ was among many other symptoms that children who suffer malnutrition may encounter in life.

Wikipedia defines IQ as “a total score derived from one of several standardised tests designed to assess human intelligence.” Simply put, IQ is an assessment of a person’s ability to think and reason, and children who suffer from a poor diet might not grow up to low intelligence later in life.

Dr. Oloidi also stressed that: “Poor nutrition in children has many side effects, which no government should ignore.

“Clinical signs and symptoms of protein-energy malnutrition include poor weight gain, slow linear growth, behavioural changes like irritability, apathy, decreased social responsiveness, anxiety and attention deficit. Children with deficiency in meals can have low IQs when grown up. And of course the implication of this is enormous.

“When a society cannot turn up right-thinking individuals, building strong institutions is not feasible. In the same way, you cannot have a sound system and good society by extension. Physiologically speaking, it means such a society would breed persons that do not have a mind of their own, and as such their contribution towards the development of the country would be near zero.”



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Under-fed kids can't solve problems

Recently an expert spoke on other consequences of under-nutrition on the society. Dr. Chika Ndiokwelu, Country Representative of the International Confederation of Dietetic Associations and immediate past president, Dieticians Association of Nigeria, said malnourished children usually experience developmental delays, weight loss and illness as a result of inadequate intake of foods containing proper amounts of protein, calories and other nutrients.

“Because so much development occurs in the first few years of life, nutrient deficiencies can have major short-term implications in young children. Mal-nourishment can greatly compromise the immune system of children, making them more susceptible to infectious diseases.

“In IDP camps for instance, where there are poor sanitary practices, children are vulnerable to infections from other children or caregivers. A child may contract an infection due in part to poor nutrition. Nutrient deficiency, combined with infection, can cause growth retardation.

“Additionally, the short-term implications of malnutrition often give way to long-term complications, such as growth and cognitive (learning) delays. Malnutrition not only impacts growth in the short term but can also limit total bone growth. Children classified as low height-for-age (stunted) may never be able to regain lost growth potential if they continue to live in a nutritionally-deprived situation.

“Malnutrition negatively affects brain development, causing delays in motor and cognitive development, such as decreased IQ scores, memory deficit disorder, impaired school performance, reduced social skills, learning disabilities, reduced problem-solving abilities and reduced language development,” she said.

Bleak future for the country

Given the challenges of malnutrition in the country at the moment, Dr. Ndiokwelu expressed fears that Nigeria's future might be adversely affected as the condition could go on to rob Africa's most populous nation of intelligent leaders: “The picture is very bleak for Nigeria because this will negatively affect the contribution of these children to the productivity of the future workforce when they become adults. How would we expect an area being ravaged by malnutrition to produce future scientists, ambassadors, medical doctors, permanent secretaries, dieticians, nutritionists, pilots, who can compete in the comity of nations?”

She, therefore, advised that thorough work should be done to rehabilitate the affected families nutritionally, socially, educationally and, most importantly, through economic empowerment to adequately fend for themselves without having to depend perpetually on charity.

NEMA to the rescue

Meanwhile, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) has been tackling rising cases of malnutrition, especially in the IDP camps in the North-East, with the support of other local and international donor agencies. NEMA has been supplying food items and nutritional supplements to some of the state governments to tackle malnutrition in some of the IDPs camps especially in the northern zone of the country.