

Nutrition a great investment

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Women and children wait to see a doctor at the Preyvihear Health Centre, in Kampong Speu's Chamkah Dong village. Photograph: WHO CAMBODIA

In recent years, Cambodia has enjoyed impressive growth in its economy and agricultural productivity, a reduction in poverty rates, and successes in the social-health sectors.

These gains have flowed from focused interventions that have resulted in maternal, infant and under-five mortality falling by more than 50 per cent during the decade from 2000 to 2010.

These are fine achievements, but more needs to be done to improve the nutritional status of children and women.

This has been the focus for government officials, national and international experts, development partners and civil-society representatives who have gathered yesterday and today for the [fourth National Seminar on Food Security and Nutrition](#), with a particular emphasis on maternal and child nutrition.

As UN country representatives, we were encouraged to see this issue prioritised and led by the highest level of government, with Prime Minister Hun Sen opening the seminar.

As Cambodia moves to become a middle-income country in the region, it is important to be aware that economic growth and increased agricultural production will not on their own improve nutritional status.

The [Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey](#) (CDHS) shows that 28 per cent of children are underweight.

This is a clear indication that, after impressive gains in child nutrition during the 1990s and early 2000s, the improvement in the nutritional status of children is slowing down.

International evidence tells us that, over time, nutritional shortfalls can have an impact on a country's human capital

– the ability of children to learn and the ability of adults to lead productive lives – and can reduce GDP by two to three per cent.

Investment in nutrition is an internationally recognised “Best Buy” to create a productive society that is growing with economic vigour.

It is also one of the most potent remedies to alleviate poverty. Investing in nutrition between pregnancy and a child’s second birthday saves lives and prevents an irreversible impact on the child’s intellectual, physical and social development.

We have been encouraged by the efforts of the Cambodian government and its development partners to implement community initiatives aimed at improving nutrition.

The ministries of health, rural development and agriculture, forestry and fisheries have been particularly active in this area, and a many community members have been trained in nutrition, sanitation and hygiene, health, agriculture and other topics related to nutrition.

As in many countries, however, the challenge in Cambodia lies in scaling up targeted, community-based interventions aimed at addressing food security and nutrition.

Such efforts have been very successful in countries in the region and elsewhere, and we know a community-based program can address the multiple causes of malnutrition.

Action by all concerned partners is critical, as there are strong links between nutrition and key sectors such as agriculture, education, social protection, hygiene and sanitation.

Social safety-net initiatives such as food and cash transfers are known to contribute positively to nutrition levels by increasing access to diverse and nutritious foods, particularly when coupled with efforts to improve awareness of what constitutes a healthy diet and, over time, changing behaviour in this regard.

Cash-transfer programs can help families devote adequate time to child-care practices and address economic constraints to accessing basic health and nutrition facilities.

Clean drinking water, hygienic sanitation and access to basic health care such as vaccination and mother and child health-care programs affect people’s nutrition indirectly.

But more needs to be done in the areas of provision and availability of safe water and sanitation facilities.

Fewer than 40 per cent of Cambodians have access to an improved sanitation facility, and 20 per cent of households lose their access to safe drinking water during the dry season.

We congratulate the leadership by Prime Minister Hun Sen in prioritising food security and nutrition. The success of the above-mentioned solutions to improve nutrition requires the highest level of leadership to press for accelerated results.

Such strong leadership will link ministries and local government with a centralised, multi-sector authority empowered to take the actions needed to address this critical issue.

We acknowledge that upscaling a country’s nutritional interventions is difficult. It requires joint ownership of the problem and strong partnerships.

The UN will continue to stand alongside the Cambodian government and tackle this issue together.

Better nutrition is a powerful investment: it transforms human potential and fuels economic growth and development.

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