Investing in Nutrition to Reduce Poverty

Summary of published research

Sierra Leone suffers from endemic and pervasive poverty due to long periods of economic decline and mismanagement. The 10-year civil war has further exacerbated the depth and severity of poverty. As a result, malnutrition rates are among the highest in the world. However, policymakers do not always recognise the fight against malnutrition as a priority to ensure the healthy human capital needed to fight poverty and achieve sustained, positive economic growth. In view of this, the Ministry of Health and Sanitation in Sierra Leone, with technical support from Helen Keller International and UNICEF, organised a two-week workshop on nutrition policy analysis and advocacy. The analysis was conducted by an intersectoral and inter-agency group of Sierra Leonean senior policy advisors representing a large number of government ministries. The analysis covered the period from 2002 to 2006, the five years following the democratic elections that took place in May 2002. The objective of the analysis was to quantify both the consequences of malnutrition on human capital and productivity, and the potential benefits of improved policies and programmes to reduce malnutrition.

The analysis revealed that 46% of child deaths in Sierra Leone are attributable to malnutrition, the single greatest cause of child mortality in the country. In the absence of adequate policy and programme action, malnutrition will be the underlying cause of an estimated 74,000 child deaths over the next five years. The analysis also revealed that if current levels of iodine deficiency remain unchanged over the same period, 252,000 children could be born with varying degrees of mental retardation as a result of intrauterine iodine deficiency. Finally, the analysis showed that in the absence of adequate policy and programme action to reduce the unacceptable rates of anaemia in women, the monetary value of agricultural productivity losses associated with anaemia in the female labour force over the next five years will exceed $94.5 million.

A main conclusion of the work was that sustained investment in nutrition in Sierra Leone could bring about enormous human and economic benefits to develop the social sector, revitalise the economy, and attain the poverty reduction towards which Sierra Leone is striving towards.