We can overcome Undernutrition: Rwanda Case Study
A recent global report\(^1\) recognised Rwanda as one of the countries that is leading the way in nutrition. This largely comes down to a clear vision; committed government leaders ready to take the challenge seriously and steer strategies; the implementation and scaling up of promising measures; and a community based approach across the country’s 30 districts. Rwanda is achieving progress through advocacy, leveraging funds to support implementation of multi-sectoral district plans informed by reliable nutrition information systems. In ten years, the country has seen stunting rates drop from 51% in 2005 to 38% in 2015.

But if Rwanda has achieved a lot, it still has a long way to go. The country is on course to meet the global World Health Assembly (WHA) targets for wasting. But it is off course on the WHA’s other nutrition indicators. This includes not just overweight and anaemia in women of reproductive age, but also stunting in under-fives. If Rwanda continues to reduce stunting at its present rate, 35% of under-fives will be stunted in 2018 and 28% in 2025 —compared with WHA targets of 31% and 24% respectively, as shown in the figure.

The Government of Rwanda has committed to reduce stunting in children under two years of age from 44% in 2010 to 24.5% in 2018. Given the country’s excellent track-record so far and given foreign funding (including through EU budget support), this target could well be exceeded if all partners step up their efforts. And Rwanda can count on the firm commitment of the EU to support better nutrition in line with the Nutrition Action Plan of the European Commission (EC).

### Nutrition in Rwanda: context and trends

**Targeted stunting reduction (million Under 5’s stunted children)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2025</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target prevalence</td>
<td>0.87 million</td>
<td>0.52 million</td>
<td>0.35 million</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduction needed to achieve WHA target (4.63%)</td>
<td>0.52 million</td>
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Despite a 13 percentage point drop in stunting over ten years, in 2015 an estimated 0.7 million of the country’s 1.9 million children under-five are stunted. There are considerable regional disparities (45% of children are stunted in the West, as opposed to 12% in areas of Kigali). Stunting is also more than twice as prevalent among children of uneducated mothers and those from the poorest households. Although anaemia rates have fallen from 52% in 2005 to 36.5% in 2015, they are still high. Almost 70% of children aged 6 months to 1 year, and 19% of women, are anaemic. High stunting and anaemia rates put a strain on the human capital and development potential of the country as highlighted in the box on the next page.

### Malnutrition – Still a huge problem

Effects of Stunting

Children who suffer from chronic malnutrition fail to grow to their full genetic potential, both mentally and physically. It significantly increases the likelihood of premature death, and those that survive are prone to ill health and are less able to contribute to an active and productive life. The condition is measured by stunting –shortness in height compared to others of the same age group– which manifests itself in the early life cycle of children, and the effects of which are irreversible.

\(^1\) Unicef 2013 Improving Child Nutrition: The achievable imperative for global progress.
The costs associated with undernutrition in Rwanda are estimated at US$820 million (504 billion Rwanda francs) annually — the equivalent of 11.5% of its annual GDP.

It is also estimated that stunting was the reason 13.5% of all students repeated grades at school in 2012, and that nearly half of all adults of working age experienced stunting as children, affecting their ability to contribute to the economy.


Undernutrition – Challenges to sustain progress

Significantly fewer children die in Rwanda now than in 2000, mainly as a result of health sector investments. There are also encouraging results in the reduction of undernutrition. However, to sustain this progress, Rwanda faces a complex set of social, cultural, and economic factors and challenges:

- Poor feeding and caring practices. According to a 2015 survey, only 56% of infants 6-8 months receive timely complementary foods and about 1 in 5 children aged 6-23 months (18%) have a minimum acceptable diet. Gender and associated sociocultural practices are key factors implicated in nutrition. The heavy workload on women in rural areas is often at the expense of time spent on caring for their children and for themselves. Frequent births also undermine maternal health.

- The paradox of stunting in high production areas. Forward-thinking agricultural policies, aimed at raising incomes and improving food security and nutrition, have not had the anticipated impact on reducing stunting rates. Even in areas of very high agricultural productivity in the North and West, stunting levels can substantially exceed 40%.

- Inadequate access to food. Undernutrition is not necessarily a problem of lack of food, rather more about having access to a diversified and nutritious diet and good health. More than 50% of families surveyed in 2012 were found to lack access to food at different times of the year, and the diet of 78% of children aged 6-23 months lacked vital nutrients.

- Socio-economic disparities. Despite improvements at national level, undernutrition disproportionately affects rural areas where the rates of stunting are nearly double those of urban areas. The problem is still far too high among the poorest households where changes in stunting prevalence over time have been less noticeable (see figure). Stunting levels are also influenced by the mother’s education level.

Source: Demographic and Health Survey 2015; third Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis and Nutrition Survey (CFSVA) conducted in 2012.

“Malnutrition is now a huge priority to the government. It became an issue at governance level (through the prime minister’s office), education level [...] , the ministry of agriculture and the ministry of gender and family promotions for us to change family practices.

The strategies and policies we have now make it a holistic approach. All this is in line with our vision 2020 and goals especially elimination of poverty which will enable more people access better nutrition.”

Dr. Agnes Binagwaho, Minister of Health
Policies and structures: Rwanda gets it right

Rwanda joined the Scaling up Nutrition (SUN) Movement in 2011, signalling its ongoing commitment to addressing undernutrition. The country has made significant progress against three of the four SUN global markers and ranks 12 (out of 45 countries) in the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index ranking governments on their political commitment to tackling hunger and undernutrition. Judicious political choices resulted in a prioritisation of initiatives and investments that explain much of the success seen in stunting reduction as explained hereafter.

- The Government of Rwanda’s policies and health sector reforms prioritise reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health. Strong national ownership and a decentralised health sector have resulted in remarkable reductions in maternal and child mortality rates3. Various complementary interventions have dramatically improved access to health services. For instance, the use of innovative and mobile technology in the Rapid SMS programme, links community health workers to pregnant women, enabling monitoring of antenatal care.

- Effective multi-sectoral synergies have been achieved. In 2012, President Paul Kagame challenged the nation to eliminate the root causes of stunting by using a community-based, multi-sectoral approach, including education, nutrition, water and sanitation. Prevention has been emphasised. Strategies include the diversification of food sources, a systematic monitoring of growth, early detection of malnutrition, access to clean drinking water, and, most importantly, widespread awareness about nutritious diets and how to prepare them.

Ministry of Agriculture does its bit

At the programme level, Rwanda’s Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI) is strengthening its interventions to promote access to a balanced diet among the most vulnerable, and new initiatives have been launched to fill gaps. MINAGRI has continued to provide leadership in the national Girinka (One-Cow-per-Family) programme, Akarima k'Igikoni (kitchen gardens), and One Cup of Milk per Child programmes; and the central government has supported these initiatives by doubling the agriculture budget between 2006 and 2011.

Rwanda’s recipe

Rwanda’s approach has involved several elements, including:

- “Strong national resolve to eliminate malnutrition, by both the national government (championed by the President) and citizens.
- Rapid action to implement an emergency response followed by development of a long-term multi-sectoral strategy that incorporated lessons learned from earlier experiences.
- A community-centred approach to reducing stunting, with investment in both food security and behaviour change strategies to promote optimal nutrition practices in a sustainable manner.
- Decentralized planning, with strong monitoring and evaluation systems to improve programme performance”.


- Clear vision and national leadership. Since Rwanda’s adoption of the National Nutrition Policy in 2005, the President and Prime Minister’s Office has led an inter-ministerial, coordinated and district-based approach to addressing malnutrition. The National multi-sector Strategy to Eliminate Malnutrition (NmSEM) (2010) and the corresponding National Joint Action Plan (2012) to Eliminate Malnutrition (JAPEM) are being implemented primarily in communities, and guided by district-level multi-sectoral plans to strengthen and scale up nutrition interventions. District Plans to Eliminate Malnutrition (2011) are scaling up community-based nutrition programmes in all of the country’s 30 districts. A New National Food and Nutrition Policy and National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan (2013-2018) provide an updated legal framework, strategic priorities and implementation guidelines for effective nutrition guidance of multi-sector stakeholders.

- Governance and accountability: The government’s emphasis on cross-sector collaboration, decentralization and a sector-wide approach framework has promoted accountability at local and national level. The Ministry of Local Government has primary responsibility for reporting on the multi-sectoral progress against the benchmarks of National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan. The Ministry of Health has stepped up efforts to increase the quality and transparency of its reporting through a web-based Nutrition Dashboard.

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Looking forward – Challenges and future priorities

Despite notable achievements in boosting maternal and child health and nutrition, many challenges remain. In order to eliminate under-nutrition across the country, Rwanda will need to focus on some key priorities such as:

• Further strengthening coordination mechanisms as the nation moves from sector-specific to multi-sectoral planning and implementation;

• Improving the nutritional components of Rwanda’s flagship social protection Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP). Numerous studies have looked at ways to increase the impact of VUP on nutrition such as by exempting pregnant women and mothers of infants from the labour requirement, and introducing less demanding work;

• Maintaining the quality of its interventions as efforts are scaled up nation-wide, along with timely monitoring and evaluation for constant improvement;

• Mobilizing additional resources, both externally, and progressively through its own funds, to ensure predictable funding sources for nutrition. Stakeholders must ensure that nutrition funding is protected in national budgets and effectively and transparently managed.

Rwanda growing attention to nutrition

In 2014, Rwanda hosted high-level nutrition events including the 3rd National Nutrition Summit “Promote the first 1,000 Days to Prevent Child Stunting”; the 2nd Global Conference on Bio-fortification; and the Rwanda Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) II High Level Meeting.

The European Union lends a hand

EU support is evidenced by (1) the EU’s strategic focus on Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security and (2) the provision of budget support to help implement the National Strategy to Eliminate Malnutrition. EU support to improve food security and nutrition in Rwanda dates back to 2011 and is increasingly focused on reducing under-nutrition. There are several good reasons for maintaining a strategic focus on the integration of nutrition into a Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security sector as highlighted in the box on the right.

It will take time for improvements in national indicators to reach the poorest segments of the population. It will also take time to register a reduction in stunting as a result of improvements in agricultural productivity and income levels, higher food intakes, better access to health care, improved water and sanitation, better infant and young child feeding practices, and better care for women, etc. The EU is currently in the design phase of the 11th EDF programming and in that framework, discussions are being held with various ministries to address maternal and child undernutrition. The actions highlighted below against the strategic priorities of the EC Action Plan on Nutrition include ongoing interventions, as well as key elements identified for the new programme cycle.

Sustained focus on integrating nutrition in agriculture

The EU’s focus on nutrition in Rwanda has consistently been through the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security sector. That will continue. There are good reasons for this:

✓ The prevalence of stunting in children under five is still high;

✓ While agricultural policies have boosted cereal crop outputs, food and nutrition security at household level has not improved at the same pace;

✓ EU involvement in preparing the Nutrition Action Plan of the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources resulted in the integration within this plan of a new National Food and Nutrition Security Policy;

✓ It is vital to further develop capacities at local and national level, to build ownership for the implementation of the plans at all levels, and to strengthen linkages between various sectors; and

✓ Nutrition is currently high on the national development agenda. It needs to remain there. There are at least three reasons to assume that it will. First, food and nutrition is included as a foundation element of Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS) II. Second, EDPRS II explicitly includes substantial reduction of child stunting as a national priority. And third, the Social Cluster Ministries are taking a more active sectoral and multi-sectoral role in the country’s efforts to eliminate malnutrition.
Strategic Priority 1: Enhancing mobilisation and political commitment for nutrition

The EU is contributing to sustaining the political dialogue and enhancing mobilisation for nutrition in several ways. It is an active member of Rwanda’s Nutrition Technical Working Group (since July 2013) and co-chairs the Agriculture Sector Working Group (since October 2013). In addition, the EU has provided strategic funding (€30 million in Budget Support), and helped oversee a regular multi-stakeholder dialogue on the Sector Reform Contract (SRC) to support Rwanda’s National Multi-sectoral Strategy to Eliminate Malnutrition (NSEM).

For this the Ministries of Health and Agriculture are beneficiaries, hereby increasing the resources available and leveraging their contribution to the NSEM. The use of centralised funding mechanisms can generate greater incentives for different sectors to cooperate in the design, implementation and monitoring of nutrition interventions. This will accelerate progress on undernutrition reduction.

Strategic Priority 2: Scaling up actions at country level

The principal support of the EU in Rwanda for the nutrition agenda at national level is through the three-year (2013-2016) €30 million in Budget Support and complementary measures contribution to the multi-sectoral Sector Reform Contract (SRC). The SRC focuses on nutrition security during the first 1,000 days of life by supporting community-based growth-screening and growth-promotion activities, investments in water and sanitation as well as nutrition-sensitive development of livestock value chains. Key partners at sectoral- and community-level will be the 500 Health Centres and 45 000 Community Health Workers. The principal components of this support are highlighted in the box.

Agriculture’s potential to contribute to improved nutrition has not yet received enough attention in Rwanda. The study commissioned by EU in 2013 was an important contribution to diagnose and identify appropriate interventions to support sustainable agriculture and food security in Rwanda under the 11th EDF programming and included a nutrition focus.

For instance, the study proposed a universal child grant scheme (possibly conditional cash transfers) as proposed in the National Social Protection Strategy and as a means of addressing agriculture and food security in Rwanda under the 11th EDF programming and included a nutrition focus.

Eu steps forward in budget support for nutrition over the next 3 years

The comprehensive Joint Action Plan to Fight Malnutrition is costing on an annual basis. The EU has signed a financing agreement with the Government to provide €30 million budget support for nutrition over the next 3 years. The additional funds will add about €10 million annually to expenditures for the three fiscal years from 2013/14 to 2015/16. This represents about 0.5 % of total projected government expenditures in these years. The implementation of the first Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy shows that Rwanda is committed to allocate national budget resources in line with its declared policies and strategies.

Nutrition Budget Support

Complementary measures of the Nutrition Budget Support assist Government establishing a web-based multi-sectoral database to track progress against the National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan, the introduction of regular country-wide height-for-age measurements of children aged 6-24 months, the establishment of model nutrition gardens in schools and vocational training centres, the improvement of the methodology for seasonal livestock assessments and a Management Information System for the entire agriculture sector. This supports government’s capacity to attain performance targets in the areas of stunting and household food security, animal protein availability, micro-nutrient deficiencies among others. The EU is measuring progress with well-defined targets and indicators which trigger the release of variable tranches of budget support.
Strategic Priority 3: Strengthening the expertise and the knowledge base

Both expertise and knowledge-base are being strengthened in Rwanda including with EU funding. This includes, for example, support for the Government to incorporate *Length for Age Measure*ements into *Growth Monitoring and Promotion* activities. Such monitoring data can make an important contribution to the monitoring and evaluation components of the comprehensive *Joint Action Plan to Fight Malnutrition*. Child growth data flowing through multiple information systems at all levels, from local to central, helps keep tracking of undernutrition rates up-to-date, and also increases nutrition accountability systems at all levels. For instance this will enhance the potential for community-health workers to guide families and mothers. Measurements can also be used to highlight adjustments required within the 1st 1000 Days programmes.

**Filling a data and analysis gap**

Food security and nutrition relevant information and data is already collected in different systems and surveys/reports, but there is currently no system where this data is being gathered and presented in a national overview. The lack of such an easily accessible system makes it difficult to track in a comprehensive and timely manner progress against food and nutrition targets. The EU supports Social Cluster Ministries in Rwanda in the process of developing and implementing a web-based multi-sectoral national nutrition dashboard to fill this gap and help track progress and results of the National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan. A pilot system will be accessible by the end of October 2015.

The EU has funded nutrition expertise through the Technical Coop-eration Facility in 2012 and 2013 to the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI) with the aim of mainstreaming food security and nutrition in Rwanda’s third phase of the Strategic Plan for the Transformation of Agriculture.

This expertise helped MINAGRI finalize its sectoral Nutrition Action Plan. This was achieved through, cross-sector coordination and reporting between the Ministry and the Social Cluster and Nutrition Technical Working Group, as well as reviewing capacity building initiatives related to food and nutrition security and nutrition in Rwanda.

**Drawing on EC’s external advisory services in nutrition and social transfers**

Since 2011, this dual expertise provided through EC headquarters has offered technical guidance on MINAGRI’s contribution to the *National Multisector Strategy to Eliminate Malnutrition*. Advice also focused on setting up and operationalizing Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring Systems, identifying appropriate nutrition related indicators for budget support, and developing indicative cost estimates for alternative approaches to support the reduction of stunting.

This makes the EU a lead contributor to the nutrition sector in Rwanda with a particular focus on making agriculture work better for nutrition. This is critical for sustained progress in nutrition in future.

*Photo by: One Acre Fund www.oneacrefund.org*