

Opinion

Better nutrition for better lives

By Dr Bjorn Lomborg
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NUTRITIONAL interventions have recently been highlighted as one of the best ways to do good in Ghana, because of life-long benefits from providing infants with more nutritious food.

This was the conclusion of Ghana Priorities, a cooperation between the National Development Planning Commission and the award-winning think-tank, Copenhagen Consensus, that engaged with policymakers, researchers, stakeholders and youth groups, to find out what they saw as the most pressing

issues facing Ghana.

These discussions led to 400 different ideas, from which 79 policies were agreed upon as the most important and sent for further analysis.

Ideally, Ghana should implement all the smart solutions it can. But no country has infinite resources, all countries must spend its limited resources where they can do the most good first. That is why the project has worked with local and international economists to find out how much good each cedi spent can deliver across all these solutions.

But which are the best policies for Ghana's future? When choosing among many worthy opportunities, prioritisation is necessary. An eminent panel met in Accra for

three days to debate just that.

Panel

The panel consists of Minister of Finance, Mr Ken Ofori-Atta; Minister of Planning, Prof. George Gyan-Baffour; former Finance Minister, Prof. Kwesi Botchwey; Prof. Augustin Fosu from the University of Ghana; Prof. Ernest Aryeetey, Secretary-General of the African Research Universities Alliance; Prof. Eugenia Amporfu from KNUST, and the Nobel Laureate economist, Prof. Finn Kydland.

They read all the research and discussed directly with all the researchers to probe their estimates of costs and benefits. With all this information, the panel then ranked the interventions to show what policymakers should do first.

Several of the top interventions focused on investments in nutrition. The panel's ranking was based on the research conducted by Richmond Aryeetey from the University of Ghana, Paul Kwame Nkegbe and Haruna Issahaku from the University for Development Studies, and Brad Wong from Copenhagen Consensus, who analysed ways to reduce childhood malnutrition.

They showed that investing in child nutrition was one of the most cost-effective endeavours Ghana could pursue. How is that possible?

Malnutrition

Malnutrition in the first years of life has life-long consequences. Lack of nutrition hinders brain development that leads to lower performance in school and hence lower productivity in adult life. In the longest study that followed thousands of well-fed and poorly fed infants in Guatemala for many decades, it was found that children who avoided malnutrition did much better.

Looking at stunting — being too short for one's age — is one of the best long-term indicators of malnutrition, and the average child that avoided stunting in Guatemala saw their average life-time incomes

at GHe178 million. Each cedi spent on complementary feeding promotion will generate long-term social benefits worth GHe36.

Initiatives

The researchers also showed two other nutrition initiatives that were very promising. Early adoption and continued exclusive breastfeeding could effectively save the lives of more than 700 children. Similarly, the nutritional supplements given to pregnant women could be enhanced.

Adding multiple micronutrients and calcium could avoid thousands of deaths and produce GHe15 of social benefits for every cedi spent.

In short, the potential of investing in nutrition in the earliest years of life are high, because they yield life-long returns in heightened productivity.

What is then standing in the way of these life-altering interventions? Life-long productivity benefits do not compete well for attention with other policies that fix problems right away.

Yet, we regularly invest in long-term projects such as education where the benefits only accrue decades from now.

The eminent panel simply points out that we should start thinking about smart nutrition investments in the same way: not only are they cheap, but they can help benefit all of Ghana tremendously in the long run.

This is why the eminent panel ranks nutrition so highly among all the different solutions Ghana could focus on. It is now up to policymakers to take advantage of this opportunity and lay the foundation for an even brighter future for coming generations.

The writers are the President of the Copenhagen Consensus & the former Regional Director of the Ghana Health Service (GHS), respectively



• Some food items at the market

rise by 60 per cent.

It is likely that Ghana could achieve similar success focusing on reducing malnutrition. By ensuring proper nutrition to infants, their brains will develop better, meaning they will learn more in school. Ultimately, this will translate to more productivity and a better life as adults.

Specifically, one-on-one nutritional counselling given to 20 per cent of all new mothers will help reduce stunting in children by 9 per cent.

This will make the infants stronger and save lives right away but also significantly boost the economy through long-term improved productivity.

At a cost of GHe4.9 million, the benefits are much higher

International Human Rights Day: Time for sober reflection

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rights lens?

Lastly, how is Ghana implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in line with human rights values?

This day provides an opportunity

to reaffirm our commitment to these values. Against this background, the commission calls on the Ghanaian society to embrace the values of human rights even more in this critical moments, where a global pandemic has aggravated human

rights violations across nations.

While the commission acknowledges some progress chalked up as a country on the human rights front over the years, it admonishes government, organs of state, businesses, civil society, individuals,

organisations and other non-state actors to reflect on the day and their contribution towards upholding human rights principles.

But more crucially, on how to build back better as a society by ensuring that human rights are

central to recovery efforts of COVID-19.

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