

THE  
FIRST ANNUAL NATIONAL PHC CONFERENCE  
JUNE 3 - 7, 1985  
CAESAR BEACH, LIBERIA

NUTRITION AS A LINK BETWEEN THE AGRICULTURE AND HEALTH SECTORS

In the world of international development, increasing attention is being given to the role of nutrition in agriculture and rural development programs and projects. Going a step further, more and more it is also recognized that nutrition is in a unique position to promote and achieve a natural link between the key development sectors of agriculture and health.

First, on the one hand, is the agriculture sector which is now most often characterized by strategies to increase food production, with the emphasis on cash crops, in order to increase income and thereby provide access to a higher quality of life. Such strategies have tended to presume that an increase in food production and income will result in reduced malnutrition or improved food consumption by low income groups. Worldwide experience has shown this presumption to be false. Rather, food consumption is influenced by certain critical factors, such as intrafamily/intrahousehold food distribution, cultural preferences, food preparation methods, family size, and seasonality, among others. In light of these findings, numerous efforts are underway to examine the agriculture sector's strategies, programs and projects from the food consumption/nutrition point of view in order to identify and integrate appropriate, complementary nutrition interventions. One main aim is to influence the selection of food crops according to the nutritional needs and food preferences of the agriculture project's beneficiaries so as to achieve nutritional improvement which, in turn, will also enhance their quality of life.

Secondly, on the other hand, is the health sector, wherein a comprehensive, multisectoral PHC approach is now widely promoted to achieve and maintain good health. In order to prevent or improve poor nutrition so as to enjoy good health and many of its benefits, access to sufficient, nutritious food is essential. Improved food availability for undernourished children and mothers is particularly important. Household and community level food production activities are one kind of nutrition intervention which provide access to adequate, nutritious food on a sustained basis thereby promoting health. This kind of activity illustrates the valuable role nutrition can play in linking the agriculture and health sectors.

All too often the two sectors have designed vertical approaches to address their sector's particular needs. More often than not, the basic problems were not resolved since attention was usually focused on one part of the problem while, often times, the rest of the pro-

blem still remained, to be addressed by other sectors. Recognition of the failings of the vertical approach to most development issues has led to the general realization that, in the long run, an integrated, multisectoral approach probably provides the most effective solution to a problem.

As a bridge between the agriculture and health sectors in order to achieve a more effective, integrated approach, nutrition interventions which involve household and community level food production can play an important role not only in the selection and production of appropriate, nutritious food crops, and not only to increase food availability, but also they serve as a valuable education tool to show the link between increased food production and consumption for good health.

Even when the connection between nutrition and health is explained through nutrition and health education programs, children often do not get better fed and their health doesn't markedly improve. Often times this is because mothers cannot obtain the nutritious foods which are advocated. Nearly always the mothers need practical help in growing or preparing food, and not just the knowledge of what foods are especially valuable for their children. In the process of learning by doing, there will be greater retention and more effective utilization of the nutrition education information. As well, the connection between increased food production and consumption for improved nutrition and health will be clearer.

In short, household and community level food production is one example of a nutrition intervention which promotes self-provision of food and self-help. Furthermore, it serves as an effective bridge for action between the agriculture and health sectors, it draws attention to the food needs of mothers and children and, most importantly, it fosters a self-reliant, participatory approach which is essential to the success of programs and projects in both the agriculture and health sectors.

Maura Mack  
Office of Nutrition  
A.I.D., Washington, D.C.  
June 5, 1985