

Relations between poor health and food insecurity in developing countries:

Health perspective: How does agriculture influence human health?

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Abstract

Nutrition is an input to and foundation for health and development. Better health and nutrition is a prime entry point to ending poverty. However, if changes in income occur without substantial improvement on the quality of people's diets the health and nutrition situation will deteriorate further.

Despite some progress in the last decades, nutritional deficiencies are still responsible for massive mortality and morbidity, especially in pregnant women and young children. But this is just one side of the problem. Developing countries have started to face a double burden of both under- and over nutrition in their populations, as at the same time, some 100 million adults and 20 million children are estimated to be overweight. Both under- and over-nutrition problems and diet-related chronic diseases together account for more than half of the world's diseases and hundreds of millions of dollar of public expenditure.

In the last 4 decades the relative availability of staple foods (cereals, pulses, and starchy roots) decreased almost everywhere. Staple foods were essentially replaced by vegetable oils and sugar in low and lower-middle income countries. The relative availability of F&V was only slightly increased in most countries and it is still well below the recommendations in both the developed and the developing countries. Food availability changes in the last 4 decades are therefore consistent with the deterioration of human diets and the nutrition transition

The interaction between health and agriculture operates in two directions (agriculture affects health; health affects agriculture). The process of agricultural production, and its outputs, can contribute to poor health, depending on the system of production and consumption. Basic questions need to be answered: What are the agricultural policies that are creating incentives for unhealthy diets - and how are they operating? Is agriculture an appropriate sector to look for effective policy solutions to poor diets? What might these policy solutions look like and how could they benefit agriculture as well as diets and health?

Agricultural policies clearly impact on the quantity, quality and price of food, which play important roles in diet change in developing countries. The greatest challenge is now the double-burden of nutrition diseases. Agricultural policy should thus take into consideration the whole spectrum of nutrition diseases contributing to the strengthening of "one agenda" that will gradually break the cycles of both poverty and hunger in a sustainable way.