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OPINION

Collaboration is key to ending hunger and childhood malnutrition in SA

LISANNE DU PLESSIS

"THE actions we take today will directly impact the future. We must produce more with less. Let's work towards a future that is more inclusive and more equitable."

This quote by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Director-General, QU Dongyu, at the 2024 World Food Forum ushers in this year's World Food Day theme: "Hand in Hand for Better Foods and a Better Future".

This theme forms part of FAO's 80th birthday celebrations but is also a commitment to do better. To this end, the FAO established a strategic framework, called the "Four Betters", which stands for Better Production, Better Nutrition, a Better Environment, and a Better Life. It serves as a reminder that collaboration is essential to ending hunger and malnutrition, that sustainable agriculture ensures better food for all, and that global challenges need collective solutions that span across borders and sectors.

World Food Day, observed on October 16, shines a light on our enduring responsibility to grow, share, and protect the food that sustains us. It's a moment to honour our shared duty to care for the land, water, farmers, and the systems that feed us all.

This is also a key focus during National Nutrition Week, held annually from October 9–15. This year's theme, "Food for Health, Health for All", highlights the need for equitable access to healthy and affordable food

for all South Africans.

Even though the observance of National Nutrition Week and World Food Day and the inspiring themes for 2025 resonate with various sectors of society, the state of nutrition around the world is dismal. Malnutrition, in one or more of its forms, now affects every country across the globe. The severity of food insecurity in some countries is overwhelming. Around 673 million people globally face hunger while rising obesity and widespread food waste reveal a deeply imbalanced food system where excess and scarcity often exist side by side.

Children are most affected and suffer the immediate and future consequences of the malnutrition crisis. The South African Early Childhood Review of 2024 states that young children in our country are more likely to live in poverty, suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition, and die before their fifth birthday than they were before the Covid-19 pandemic. The review further reports a 33% rise in child malnutrition between 2020 and 2023, particularly severe acute malnutrition, with 15 000 children requiring hospitalisation in 2022/23 alone.

A child's development depends on daily attention to nutrition and nurture. It cannot be postponed or replaced. The window for growth, especially during the first 1 000 days of life (conception until a child's second birthday), is brief and neglecting it means losing part of the child's potential. But the world revolves around

adult priorities and actions. Daily news of worldwide chaos, mainly due to conflict and corruption, distracts from focusing on the important issue of children's needs.

The evidence for actions to address child malnutrition are known and well documented. In a 2021 study published in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, Emily Keats and her co-authors provide the most up-to-date summary of what works to address childhood malnutrition. A comprehensive package of care for women and children should incorporate antenatal supplementation with multiple micronutrients to reduce the risk of low birth weight, provide additional food support in areas facing food insecurity, and utilise community-based strategies. Key interventions, both within and beyond the health sector, that offer significant health and nutritional advantages include the child support grant, malaria prevention, preconception health services, and the promotion of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices.

In another 2021 article published in *The Lancet*, Rebecca Heidkamp and her fellow researchers elaborate on how this can be done. They stress the importance of targeting the first 1000 days of life and scaling up proven and emerging strategies. The most notable success stories are seen where maternal and child nutrition, education and health care have been improved.

In South Africa, programmes,

policies and guidelines exist to address maternal and child wellness. Numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also working to address early childhood nutrition and development. Unfortunately, a lack of political will, the absence of an enabling environment and scalability of interventions hinder efforts to improve child health and nutrition in the country.

Rigid government planning structures, especially at national and some provincial levels, limit the recognition of nutrition as a multi-sectoral issue. Departments often focus on their own mandates, with minimal resources allocated to nutrition. The absence of strong political leadership has kept nutrition low on the agenda, despite longstanding calls for a national co-ordinating body.

For proven initiatives to be successful, co-ordinated, multisectoral action and a supportive political environment are required, but this is exactly where our country fails its children.

The themes for this year's National Nutrition Week and World Food Day aligns very well with what is needed to improve childhood malnutrition. If different sectors work hand-in-hand with urgency and focus, we can turn the tide on childhood malnutrition.

Du Plessis is an associate professor in the Division of Human Nutrition in the Department of Global Health in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Stellenbosch University.