

## Africa's silent killer - malnutrition

Written by Thato Tinte

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The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that, in sub-Saharan Africa, one in eight children die before the age of five due to malnutrition. THATO TINTE looks at these alarming figures and the efforts global business is making to combat malnutrition.

Anthony Lake, UNICEF executive director describes malnutrition as a “global problem which must be a global priority for governments, international partners and business alike”. What can members of the safety, health, environmental and quality (SHEQ) management field do to lend a hand in fighting malnutrition on our continent?

At the 37th annual South African Production and Inventory Control Society (SAPICS) conference for supply chain professionals earlier this year, one of the main topics of discussion was the food loss and malnutrition concerns in sub-Saharan Africa.

At the conference, Herman Haupt, country GM for CHEP sub-Saharan Africa facilitated a discussion on food wastage in Africa and how heavily this impacts on malnutrition.

He stated that up to 40 percent of all food produced on the African continent is wasted before it even reaches the consumer; an act he described as “a disgrace” considering that “Africa is recognised as the most undernourished continent in the world”.

“What are the options and what can we, as supply chain professionals do to provide solutions,” exclaimed Haupt.

Although hunger and malnutrition go hand in hand, malnutrition, in theory, is the lack of nutrients needed for proper health and development; whether from a lack of food or an overconsumption of foods lacking in nutrition. When experienced over time, hunger consequently leads to malnutrition.

Malnutrition from nutritional deficiencies has been linked to many health problems, which, if severe enough, can inhibit physical and intellectual development. In adults, it can lead to

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increased infections, heart-diseases, cancer and anaemia; in children, stunting and poor neuro-motor development.

Malnourished children are unable to cry; they develop smaller-sized heads, grow up mentally underdeveloped and are without coordination and vigour. It's reported that, a third of the children in developing countries have these conditions.



In a continent battling with diseases such as HIV/Aids and tuberculosis, food and nutrition become essential for the health and well-being of those affected; further intensifying the need for global intervention.

The World Food Programme encourages corporates to work together to end hunger and global malnutrition by contributing resources and expertise within corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives.

Within the supply chain management process, Haupt identified the following solutions to help the supply chain industry alleviate food wastage: increasing production yield; improving harvest processing through proper timing and storage; using suitable packaging to reduce product damages while in transit; forecasting accurately to reduce excessive buying wastage; and closely monitoring product sell-by dates.

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Research by McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) in 2012 reported that close to 600-million hectares of uncultivated land in Africa is arable. This is said to be 60 percent of the global total – a clear indicator of how significant agriculture is in helping to reduce poverty and the continent's high levels of malnutrition.

The research revealed that, in countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya, agricultural growth was shown to reduce poverty twice as fast as any other sector. Smallholder farming leads to food production. It creates jobs, which further reduces poverty and, ultimately, feeds the hungry. This is a snowballing chain of opportunity that may be Africa's solution to reducing malnutrition.

One of the many problems, however, is that several African countries still have outdated farming techniques and agricultural technologies, which result in lowered productivity. Reports state that, as much as 80 percent of Africa's agriculture is still dependent on rain and not irrigation. This is concerning, considering the global climate change and increase in drought.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) reports that, by 2030, the effects of climate change will push a further one million children into malnutrition.

The global community needs to step up its support to mitigate climate change. From the SHEQ management industry, reducing carbon emissions and boosting energy-efficient technologies becomes essential.

The World Bank reports that removing some of the barriers in Africa's food trade could help tremendously in avoiding food shortages. It highlights the "web of rules, fees and high costs" in regional food trade as the problem contributing to food shortages in Africa.

Makhtar Diop, World Bank vice president, for Africa, adds that borders are also to blame and often get in the way of food reaching needy communities. Furthermore, he says roadblocks and bribes at border posts add to the cost of getting food to markets.

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“Removing cross-border restrictions could help avoid food crises; more so if farmers were allowed to trade easily with each other,” he says. He also notes that reducing transport costs, increasing investment in Africa’s agriculture and offering incentives will encourage transporters to invest in modern trucks.

The MGI research provides additional steps on how businesses can help increase agricultural productivity in Africa. These include: investing in Africa’s infrastructure; assisting with the improvement of roads; and helping farmers get better access to markets by providing storage facilities that help to retain the quality of produce.

Land grabs are another important issue in Africa. MGI states that Africa is the epicentre of global land deals and that foreign investors use the continent’s scarce resources to supply food to other countries. MGI proposes that African governments work together with the African Union (AU) to develop frameworks that will manage foreign investment in agriculture.

The social costs of malnutrition are huge and cannot be avoided. The World Bank warns that malnutrition costs poor countries from three to 11 percent of yearly gross domestic product (GDP).

Failure to reduce the rate of malnutrition breeds a society of poor, stunted, sickly and mentally underdeveloped children. How will these children lead our countries in future if they are unable to grow healthily or function optimally in life?

We all need to invest our efforts of fighting malnutrition to build a society that will help grow our economies; and maybe one day, our dream of Africa being able to feed itself will come true.