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Short Communication

Empowering Schools and Families: A Holistic Approach to Improving Adolescent Nutrition in Uganda

Natukunda Angella*

Vice president, Department of Public health, Allied Nutritionists Association Uganda, Uganda

Correspondence to: Natukunda Angella, Vice president, Department of Public health, Allied Nutritionists Association Uganda, Uganda, Email: natukundaangellah@gmail.com

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Abstract

Adolescence is a critical stage of growth that requires adequate nutrition to support rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional development. In Uganda like other developing countries, adolescents face a growing burden of malnutrition caused by poor dietary habits, limited nutrition knowledge, and inadequate access to balanced meals. This opinion paper highlights the need for a holistic approach that integrates school-based and family-centered interventions to improve adolescent nutrition. Evidence from a study conducted in Kanungu District revealed that 37.1% of adolescents were malnourished, with socioeconomic status, parental education, and dietary diversity emerging as key determinants of nutritional outcomes. Schools play a vital role in shaping dietary behaviors through structured feeding programs and nutrition education, yet many lack consistent and nutrient-rich meals. Meanwhile, parents influence household food availability, meal frequency, and food choices but often lack knowledge of adolescent dietary needs. Strengthening both school and parental capacity through education, kitchen gardening, and community nutrition initiatives can promote sustainable improvements. A multi-sectoral approach involving the health, education, and agriculture sectors is essential to ensure policy alignment, resource mobilization, and community engagement. By empowering schools and families to jointly support adolescent nutrition, Uganda can reduce malnutrition, improve academic performance, and enhance the overall health and productivity of its future generation.

Keywords: Adolescent nutrition; School feeding; Parental education; Public health nutrition, Nutrition policy; Community engagement; Multi-sectoral approach

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical stage of growth requiring adequate nutrition to support physical, cognitive, and emotional development [1]. In Uganda, adolescents face multiple forms of malnutrition due to poor dietary habits, low nutrition knowledge, and limited access to balanced meals [2,3]. Despite being viewed as a healthy stage, adolescence remains

vulnerable to both under nutrition and overweight [4]. The government's school feeding initiatives face challenges of inadequate funding and inconsistent implementation [5].

In my opinion, the most effective way to address adolescent malnutrition is through a holistic approach that strengthens both school-based nutrition programs and parental education [6].

Understanding the magnitude of the problem

A study in Kanungu District revealed that 37.1% of secondary school adolescents were malnourished, reflecting both undernutrition and poor dietary quality [2,3]. Similarly, recent evidence from eastern Uganda found that 45% of adolescents had low dietary diversity due to household income and feeding patterns [7]. Adolescents' nutritional status is closely linked to parental education and household size [8].

The role of schools

Schools provide a unique platform for promoting healthy behaviors and balanced meals [9]. However, many Ugandan schools—particularly rural ones—lack consistent and nutrient-dense meals [5,10]. Systematic reviews show that school feeding programs significantly improve attendance and micronutrient intake [6,11]. Integrating nutrition into the curriculum and training teachers as nutrition champions could further enhance adolescents' dietary habits [4].

The role of families and communities

Families determine household dietary diversity and food frequency. Socioeconomic stability and parental employment correlate with better adolescent nutrition outcomes [2]. Yet, many parents lack knowledge of adolescent dietary requirements [12]. Community-based programs emphasizing nutrition literacy, kitchen gardening, and cooking demonstrations can transform household feeding practices [13]. Evidence from Wakiso District highlights that nutrition care quality directly influences adolescent dietary practices [8].

An integrated, multi-sectoral approach

Addressing adolescent malnutrition requires collaboration across health, education, and agriculture sectors [4,10]. Policies should promote affordable diverse foods, nutrition clubs, and school gardens [5]. Integrating adolescent nutrition into national programs ensures sustainable results [9,14].

Conclusion

Improving adolescent nutrition in Uganda requires bridging school, family, and community interventions. School feeding alone is insufficient; empowering parents and integrating nutrition into education are vital [11,13]. Investing in adolescent nutrition today ensures a healthier, more productive Uganda tomorrow.

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