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Conference Explores Opportunities to Enhance Agriculture's Role in Tackling Malnutrition and Improving Human Wellbeing

Lilongwe—Nearly 150 policymakers, researchers, program implementers, and representatives from farmers' organizations, civil society, donor agencies, and the private sector are gathering here from September 26-27 to examine how agriculture can play a better role in improving the nutrition and health of all Malawians. The conference, “Unleashing Agriculture’s Potential for Improved Nutrition and Health in Malawi,” brings together experts from all three sectors to discuss how agriculture can be strategically leveraged to reduce malnutrition and enhance human wellbeing. The event is organized by the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development (MoAIWD) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) with support from Irish Aid and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Strengthening the links between agriculture, nutrition, and health has important consequences for people’s lives, especially in Malawi, where more than 80 percent of the population is subsistence farmers. For these poor rural farming households, what they grow is what they eat. Diversifying agriculture would lead to more diverse—and nutritious—diets, which would in turn result in better health. Breeding and growing crops with higher levels of micronutrients, such as vitamin A and iron, a process known as biofortification, could also reduce death and disease, particularly among women and children.

“Food and nutrition security are already essential components of the Ministry’s Agriculture Sector Wide Approach, which also focuses on diversifying food production,” said Mrs. Erica Maganga, Secretary for Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development, MoAIWD. “To further exploit the links between agriculture, nutrition, and health and achieve greater impact, our ministry has joined forces with the Ministry of Health, as well as the Department of Nutrition and HIV and AIDS, to design policies and programs that are mutually reinforcing.”

Toward this end, the conference will explore opportunities to incorporate nutrition interventions into smallholder agriculture and rural livelihoods programs, intensify biofortification efforts, and increase the yields of nutrient-rich, as well as staple crops eaten by poor people.

“Agriculture is much more than just producing food and other products and increasing crop and livestock productivity,” said Ms. Rajul Pandya-Lorch, head of IFPRI’s 2020 Vision Initiative and lead organizer of a pioneering international conference on this theme that was held in India earlier this year. “Agriculture is linked to people’s wellbeing in many critical ways and has great potential to improve their nutrition and reduce health risks.”

To unleash this untapped potential, conference participants will share lessons from international and local experiences, identify opportunities to catalyze action and enhance synergies among agriculture, nutrition, and health, and provide evidence to inform future policies, programs, and investments.

“Agriculture, nutrition, and health programs should be designed so that they reinforce each other,” said Dr. Klaus Droppelmann, senior program coordinator of IFPRI’s office in Malawi. “This can only happen if practitioners, researchers, and policymakers from all three sectors join forces to coordinate their efforts and find better solutions.”

The conference outcomes will strengthen and reinforce ongoing efforts related to the Framework for Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN), which was launched in Malawi in July 2011 under the theme “United to End Stunting.” The SUN framework—implemented worldwide—was developed to reduce malnutrition (of which stunting is one indication), improve people’s health, and help countries

to achieve the first Millennium Development Goal of cutting poverty and hunger in half by 2015. This conference will help support SUN goals and activities by finding new and better ways of integrating nutrition along the entire agri-food value chain.

“Malawi needs to advance a new paradigm for agricultural development so that agricultural growth not only leads to increased productivity and food production, but also results in improved nutrition and health,” said Secretary Erica Maganga. “This conference provides an important road map to guide future agricultural investments, policies, and programs that will enable us to achieve these goals and ultimately improve the lives and livelihoods of all people in our country.”