

What does nutrition education do?

Nutrition education promotes lifelong healthy eating habits by developing “nutrition-literate” citizens who make the right choices and can adapt in a changing world. Nutrition education helps people to select, prepare and preserve foods of high nutritional value, feed babies and young children appropriately, shop wisely, experiment with the new and discuss their experiences with their families and others in the community.

Why is nutrition education needed?

Many countries are facing the multiple burden of malnutrition:

Undernutrition brings hunger, chronic undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies.

Overnutrition brings overweight/ obesity and diet-related chronic diseases.



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Nutrition education is vital:

- to ensure that a better and more diversified food supply translates into adequate diets for all groups;
- to integrate producers' and consumers' concerns along the food chain;
- to inform decision-making at every level, from individual food choices to the development of food security policies and programmes.

To be adequately nourished, people need:

- access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food;
- understanding of what constitutes a good diet for health;
- the skills and motivation to make adequate food and dietary choices.



Health, nutrition and education are essential pillars of an active and thriving nation. Nutrition education links them together.

“Knowledge of food and appropriate dietary practices is a prerequisite for improving access to and consumption of nutritionally adequate diets, which is fundamental for achieving nutritional well-being.”
(quote from FSN Forum discussion, 2007)

Nutrition education is often neglected in policy and programme development and implementation

- Lack of awareness about nutrition education among the general public and professionals in the agriculture and health sectors;
- Absence of nutrition education in school and academic curricula;
- Nutrition education is often neglected as an element in project formulation;
- Lack of information, resources and learning materials for nutrition education;
- Lack of a model for effective nutrition education that focuses on pragmatic, social learning based more on actions and attitudes than on information;
- General lack of a process model of materials development involving a two-way flow of communication between learners and teachers in the development of nutrition education materials;
- Lack of a systematic (comparative) analysis of different national and institutional frameworks for nutrition education, and emphasizing holistic approaches and the policies, structures and interventions that work, compared with those that do not.

This brief was produced by the Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition Policies and Strategies (FSN Forum), based on the Forum's discussion “Nutrition education - essential but often neglected”. The summary and proceedings of this discussion are available on the FSN Forum's home page: <http://km.fao.org/fsn/>. FSN Forum Briefs are participatory knowledge products developed by Forum members. They should not be considered as policy briefs or final state-of-the-art technical briefs.

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Challenges facing nutrition education

1. Lack of interest, therefore little or negligible funding from governments and donors:
 - Development of nutrition education is not considered scientific research, and is undervalued by health and nutrition professionals and policy-makers.
 - Professionals in the agriculture sector assume that "people know what to eat, they just don't have the food".
 - Health sector professionals focus on supplementation and fortification strategies, and overlook the promotion and adequate utilization of locally produced and available foods.
 - Nutrition education does not serve particular interest groups, generate money or promise quick solutions.
2. Insufficient and inappropriate communications:
 - The language used in nutrition education is often very technical, and the advice provided is sometimes perceived as impractical or too difficult to implement.
 - Insufficient use is made of the mass media for nutrition messages.
 - Developing countries lack funds to disseminate nutrition information.
 - Most nutritionists lack experience in developing, implementing and testing communication materials.
3. Other challenges:
 - More research and hard evidence are needed to demonstrate how effective nutrition education can be.
 - The links between poor health and food intake are often overlooked.

Examples of successful projects

1. An FAO project in Zambia:
 - integrated food and nutrition topics into the national school curriculum;
 - developed food and nutrition education materials for use nationally;
 - built the nutrition education and interactive experiential learning capacities of Ministry of Education staff and teachers;
 - improved the nutrition awareness, knowledge and behaviour of teachers, children and parents.
2. An FAO project on Integrated Horticulture and Nutrition Development in Bangladesh:
 - used a food-based strategy combined with extensive nutrition education;
 - linked horticulture development to national nutrition programmes as a way of increasing variety.
3. A school-based nutrition project in Panama improved nutrition status by:
 - addressing both agricultural production and nutrition;
 - drawing on a multidisciplinary team from the education, health, agriculture and other ministries.
4. In Dominica, Grenada, St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines, nutritionists were trained in the development of food-based dietary guidelines and communication strategies.

Raising nutrition education's profile:

suggestions from the FSN Forum discussion

- Integrate nutrition objectives into agricultural and food policies and programmes.
- Use the FSN Forum for networking and sharing of resources, research results, educational tools, etc.
- Use the Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) for lobbying about the importance of nutrition education.
- Apply an interdisciplinary approach and strengthen national coordination.
- Include nutrition education in all levels of education, from primary to university.
- Research and prepare a report on the **state of the art in nutrition education**.

What makes nutrition education effective?

As well as providing information, effective nutrition education programmes and activities:

- incorporate methods for behaviour change;
- communicate in ways that motivate;
- emphasize improvement not perfection;
- speak to people in a language they understand;
- create supportive nutrition-friendly environments;
- include participation of individuals and the community;
- use different settings to reach people at different stages of life;
- advocate for nutrition-friendly public policies;
- strengthen local knowledge and emphasize the value of local food and eating patterns.

Further Reading

- Summary and proceedings of the discussion **Nutrition education - essential but often neglected**, 2007, available on the FSN Forum home page: <http://km.fao.org/fsn/>.
- **World Bank**. 2007. *From agriculture to nutrition - pathways, synergies and outcomes*. Washington, DC.
- **Webb, P. & Block, S.** 2004. *Nutrition information versus formal schooling as inputs to child nutrition*. *Econ. Dev. Cult. Change*, 52(4): 801-820.
- **FAO**. 2005. *Nutrition education in primary schools - a planning guide for curriculum development*. Rome.
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