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Addressing U.S., global child malnutrition a top priority for advocates

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In 2008, the community dedicated to ending hunger globally was rocked when the prestigious medical journal The Lancet published its first series on maternal and childhood nutrition, showing that more than a third of child deaths and 11 percent of the rate of disease worldwide was the result of mothers and children being malnourished.

"It gave the community its marching orders," said Yesenia Garcia of 1,000 Days.

From the information gathered by the journal emerged an image of the vital importance and lasting impact good nutrition has on a child's earliest development.

Rather than trying to reach young, hungry children, "it demonstrated that it's more effective to prevent stunting" -- underdevelopment in malnourished children -- "before age 2, or it's irreversible," said Mary Hennigan, senior technical adviser in nutrition for Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency.

Beyond stunting, malnutrition slows children's mental growth, making them 20 percent less able to read and handicapping them so that as adults they earn on average 20 percent less than their counterparts who had a healthy diet as children.

Armed with this information, the 1,000 Days campaign was launched. It's a coalition of groups dedicated to promoting good nutrition from the minute a woman becomes aware of her pregnancy to her child's second birthday -- roughly the first 1,000 days of the child's life.

Now five years later, The Lancet has published a follow-up study on maternal and child nutrition, which found that, among other things, malnutrition causes nearly 45 percent of all deaths in children under 5. The latest Lancet series inspired Bread for the World, a Christian anti-hunger lobby organization, to make nutrition the theme of its annual convention this year.

For four days, representatives of dozens of organizations devoted to eradicating poverty and its effects, like 1,000 Days, Save the Children and Food Resource Bank, gathered in the nation's capital to discuss effective strategies and to lobby policymakers.

The importance of government action in addition to charity work was highlighted by speakers from the U.S. Agency for International Development, Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the presidential adviser from the Republic of Tanzania, a country that has made great progress in reducing childhood deaths related to malnutrition because of its president's initiatives.

Frontline workers from all over the world discussed their challenges, such as making the issue of hunger matter to those personally unaffected by it and the struggles to meet goals during times of political or social unrest.

Hennigan, of CRS, has seen firsthand the effects of malnutrition, especially in Burkina Faso, an African country that ranks as one of the world most impoverished.

"A malnourished baby is very listless, it's just very sad," she said. The program she is working on reaches about 30,000 children there under the age 2 and their mothers; these mother-child pairs and their communities are educated about the importance of hygiene, prenatal care, and childbirth in a health facility, as well as the need for changes in their diet, like exclusive breast-feeding of an infant till he or she is 6 months of age and then afterward introducing nutritious, complementary foods.

"The difference between healthy and malnourished children is amazing," Hennigan said. It has been three years since the program's implementation and things have changed dramatically for the children and their parents.

"Fathers have told me, 'Normally I don't want to be around my malnourished children, but how can I not be around this (healthy) adorable baby?' Mothers tell us, 'When we don't have a sick baby, we're not as worried -- we plant better, we do more.'"

While the most widespread and devastating effects of child malnutrition can be witnessed abroad, the United States is not immune either: 1 percent of children suffer from chronic malnutrition, according to John Hopkins' Children Center. While there are many organizations in place that battle hunger and malnutrition in this country, funds for a key federal program that helps to address that need -- the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps -- are in danger of being cut by Congress.

The Agriculture Reform, Food, and Jobs Act of 2013 -- or the Farm Bill, a piece of legislation that comes to Congress every five years to set policies for agriculture and nutrition -- proposes to cut SNAP funding by billions of dollars; the Senate version, which passed June 11, cuts SNAP by about $4 billion, while the House version would cut the program by about $20 billion.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, CRS, Catholic Charities USA and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference May 9 wrote to congressional leaders to protest the cuts: "With continued high unemployment and a struggling economy, the need for adequate funding levels in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) ... and other programs that help hungry people are essential. Congress should ... oppose attempts to weaken or restructure these programs that would result in reduced benefits to hungry people."

The bishops and other faith leaders are part of the Circle of Protection, a coalition of Christian charities and religious leaders who are fighting for a "circle of protection" around the poor and vulnerable that keeps funding in place for programs benefiting them as members of Congress craft and debate a budget resolution and spending bills for the next fiscal year. Many of those hurt by the potential budget cuts will be families.

"SNAP is a very effective program," said Kathy Saile, USCCB director of domestic social development.

"We don't need 'CHRINOS' -- Christians in name only," she said in a speech at Bread for the World national gathering. People with a "moral vision" are what is needed to help the world eliminate extreme poverty by 2030, which, as The Economist has predicted, could happen.

"That's why I do this work -- our faith gets deepened by it," said Brian Backe, director of domestic programs at CRS. "It boils down to the deepest sense of love for our neighbors." He said the example of Pope Francis especially has inspired him. "I keep a picture of him washing the feet of a woman. He's a servant leader."

One woman in a Q-and-A session at the gathering expressed disappointment at authorities who neglect or even harm those suffering from poverty. But she also said that no matter how discouraging it was, she wouldn't let hunger and malnutrition win -- "not in my lifetime."

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