



The U.S. Launch of The Lancet's Series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition

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Edited Transcript-

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I have a confession to make. I am not a nutritionist, I'm not a scientist and I'm not a researcher. In fact, I'm an ex-trade union organizer and I think one component of what's been alluded to in this great challenge that faces us globally, is where are the people who are most effective? Now, I think one of our most important experiences I can testify to is the involvement of people most effective when taking their lives and their destiny into their hands. I think every parent, no matter what their status and whatever their lifestyle, whatever their wealth or their poverty, wants the best for their children.

So, I live in Johannesburg. I'm one of those that crossed the Atlantic to come to this launch, which is a very important part of what we believe is our reality. Because our reality is that we have an AIDS pandemic sweeping our region. In South Africa, my own country, we have more than 5.5 million people suffering from HIV/AIDS. The Medical Research Council of South Africa estimates that close to 1,000 people die every day. And if one looks at the consequence of this, over a million children today have either lost one or both of their parents, with 80 percent of new infections being women in the most vulnerable group, the 18 to 24-year-olds. And that one in three women today attending the public clinics are HIV positive. That is our reality and many of these people come from the poorest communities, in the rural areas, in our informal settlements, where even in the rural areas, subsistence agriculture, which has been sustaining many generations, is declining.

So everyone knows today that even if we had to have everyone on anti-retroviral therapy, proper nutrition is a prerequisite. In fact, there is growing evidence that in the absence of proper nutrition, more and more people on treatment are abandoning that treatment, because of the side effects. So, the question that confounds us today is, what do we have to do? It's no coincidence that GAIN was in fact launched as a partnership of the public, private and community sectors by Bill Gates and Kofi Annan in 2002 at the UN Special Session on Children to fight malnutrition that affects close to 2 billion people in our world. Over the last four years, we have implemented mass fortification programs addressing micronutrient deficiencies in over 20 countries, many of which almost overlay the countries that have been identified in the report and which, when at scale, will reach close to 650 million people.



Focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe.

We have also over the last four years worked very successfully with the business community in order to harness their technological, their managerial, and their distribution capacities and capabilities in order to develop new products that meet the needs of the poor at the base of the pyramid. And it is, as alluded in the report, it is precisely this innovation and amazing potential that we need to unlock in order to combat malnutrition. We are now working with over 400 business leaders at a global, national and local level to use market-based innovation to develop products in our fight against poverty. In fact, today we are proud to announce an exciting new initiative in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, where a new grant of \$38 million will enable GAIN to work with the private sector on innovative business models for our new program on infant and young child nutrition for the lifespan of 6-24 months. We again concur with the report that the first six months of a child's life should be exclusively focused on breastfeeding and we have constantly reiterated this.

We are working, as the report suggests, to broaden the donor base that is contributing towards the nutrition agenda in both public and private sectors, working with organizations like USAID, with the World Bank Group, with UNICEF, the WHO, and with an increasing greater range of private sector players to build the business case of investments in products that address malnutrition.

So one of the most important constituencies I can see identified out of the report certainly has to be harnessing the role of women and mothers in particular. In GAIN, we are committed to working with and empowering women's groups to strengthen the fight against malnutrition. I've seen this make a difference, even in my own country, where thanks to flour fortification with folic acid, vitamin A, zinc, we've already achieved a 30 percent reduction in uterine birth defects and a 65 percent decrease in prenatal mortality rates from uterine tube defects. So already a focus on evidence-based delivery and that's what, in a sense GAIN as an alliance, working with its partners, is moving towards. In terms and support, again, of the report calling for greater coordination.

At the same time, we have to make the point that we have to build linkages. Again, something the report alludes to, between the nutrition issues and global issues around AIDS, water, education, women's rights, global warming, global trade, and agriculture, just to name a few. We need to position nutrition on all of these visible agendas.

Efficient nutrition programs would help most countries meet the MDG targets, for instance, and here I think we are quite keen to focus on policy-makers and decision-makers. How do we intervene in the processes of budgeting, using parliaments, using pressure groups, using advocacy groups?



Finally, a new architecture, as the report suggested, is necessary for the nutrition sector. It is a very fractious community and I think my view has been that and the discussion within GAIN has been that we've got to involve more than the nutrition community in raising the profile of nutrition on the global radar screen. We need to make sure that in whatever we create, we also have to ensure participation of the private sector and here it will be difficult to create public agencies or institutions and then go out and seek the support of important constituencies, whether these are women's groups or whether these are the private sector. We need to bring in business and any other sector into the discussion at the earliest stages of creation of the new architecture in order to integrate their views and secure their full commitment.

Very important in all of this is the role of media and *The Lancet* series has certainly raised the media profile of nutrition. So what we need to do is take this amazing piece of work and translate it into practical, measurable results that can impact on the lives of people across the world. I am tremendously encouraged by the response we are beginning to see to the report. Finally, our action, or lack of action, can mean the difference between life or death for millions of people in our global village. Because if you look at the reality of my own country, which is relatively well-developed, we have a situation where one in 10 people today suffers from HIV, compared to a country like the U.S., where it's one in 250. As a developing country emerging from centuries of racial oppression with limited resources, we have to confront this problem.

So all I can say, arising from this report, GAIN is committed to working with the partners involved -- mentioned in the report in order to achieve the vision that we all have set: a vision of a world free of undernutrition. Thank you.