



Woodrow Wilson
International
Center
for Scholars

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

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Edited Transcript-

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The discussion here is on nutrition, a subject near and dear to my heart since I'm a gastroenterologist. The Gates Foundation, as you know, has devoted its resources to addressing health inequities and in this area, we really have many things that we can do but we've focused on just three principal areas. They are infectious diseases, maternal and newborn child and reproductive health and nutrition. And the key to nutrition is that nutrition really binds all of our programs together. Because if one thinks about infectious diseases, one has to understand: susceptibility to infection is directly related to nutritional status.

Mortality from infectious diseases is directly related to nutritional status. If one thinks about maternal, newborn, child and reproductive health, if one thinks about the Millennium Development Goals Four and Five, they are not achievable unless we address the issue of nutrition. Some 30 percent plus of the child deaths can be attributed, at least in part or in whole, to problems with undernutrition, so we couldn't even begin to challenge the biggest problems in attaining the Millennium Development Goals without addressing the issue of nutrition.

So where are we? How difficult is the problem? What is it going to take to address the problem? Well one of the remarkable success stories in this area is really the story of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, which Jay Naidoo just described. This program, which at its sort of fullest capacity will be providing access to fortified foods to 650 million children and others who are undernourished and the overall investment to make this possible is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100 million. This is a small amount of money. Now this isn't to say \$100 million is going to solve the whole problem, but when you think about the billions that are going into the global alliance for vaccines and immunizations, or the billions that are going into the global fund to fight AIDS, TB, and malaria, you realize that the opportunity in nutrition is a wonderful one, because with a small amount of money we can have a huge impact. And in fact, all the money going into addressing MDG Four and Five is probably not going to be productive unless we address this problem of nutrition.



So we in the Gates Foundation have given a great deal of thought to a nutrition strategy. Our group has spent over a year thinking directly about where we can have an impact on nutrition and how we can have an impact on nutrition. And they have created a very ambitious strategy, which focuses on research into new knowledge in nutrition and to key areas that deal with micronutrients and complementary feeding. Now, all components of this are important but one that I would like to highlight is the importance of new knowledge.

In fact, as much as we know about food, we know very little about the basis, the science, of food. We know how food is absorbed but -- Actually, in presenting this strategy, Bill Gates, who likes to ask difficult and probing questions, said, "Now tell me, what is a micronutrient? What defines what is a micronutrient? How is it that zinc acts?" Now, you know with my background in etymology and molecular biology, I could say, "Well, you know there are some enzymes that require zinc. There are some proteins in which zinc is a very important component. Zinc plays a very important role in the transcriptional regulation of some genes." But that was a very far cry from an answer to why we need zinc. In a sense, the nutrition community has been a little bit of a fractious community. The reason why is, the less you know, the more your opinions count.

So in point of fact, we need new knowledge in nutrition and we have to invest in this because that will allow the other investments we make in nutrition to be wisely and strategically placed. But having said that, the two other key pillars, micronutrients from what we know them and fortification with micronutrients, and complementary feeding are interventions that we know, strategically placed, can have a huge impact on human life. So our program is a relatively modest one to begin with, but it's over a half a billion dollars over the next five years and we think this is critical to making a difference in this field. But by no means is this going to be enough, by no means are we going to be able to feed all the people in the world with this money.

What we have to do is be strategic, place the money where it can make the most difference and really, enjoin others to be partners with us. The players who have been there for a long time: the World Bank, USAID, UNICEF, bilateral players from all over the world and private industry because we need all the partners with us as we address this problem of undernutrition to save the lives of children and mothers. So I'll stop here. Thank you very much and thank all of you for making this program possible.