

World Food Day 2011

Arguing that food security is no guarantee for nutrition security, a Nigerian Public Health Nutritionist is advocating for the World Food Day to be renamed to help promote healthy eating, which is still a major public health challenge confronting many people despite advances in food production.

Dr. Oyediran Emmanuel Oyewole, a certified Dietitian and lecturer in the Department of Health Promotion and Education at the University of Ibadan, says good food does not necessarily mean good nutrition or nutrition at all.

Malnutrition - a result of an inappropriate nutrients intake (under or over) - is estimated to affect more than one billion people in the world. The World Health Organization estimates that one in three people worldwide suffer from an imbalanced diet. This is despite growing investment by governments towards widening access to food, but food alone is not enough if it is not nutritionally adequate.

"There is a strong link between nutrition and agriculture," says Oyewole. "The latter is the source of food that is central to human existence. Therefore, the field of nutrition acts as a bridge, linking agriculture to medicine. It provides information on what farmers should plant in relation to what people should eat to remain healthy."

Citing the burden of diseases ravaging the world due to malnutrition, Oyewole believes that as food is produced there is need for information on which food, in what form and quantity is good for consumption by a particular age group. He said nutrition provides this information and also creates market for agricultural products. For instance, when good nutrition information is made available on any agricultural food products, the demand for such products automatically soars. This is a window of opportunity for farmers who often worry about a glut in the markets.

How then does declaring a world nutrition day make a difference?

"Presently, the global annual food production is enough to meet the food requirements of the world population but the gory picture of level of malnutrition (over and under nutrition) is evidenced for everyone to see," said Oyewole, adding that, "What declaring a world nutrition/world food and nutrition day will do includes the fact that it will sensitize the stakeholders to know that having food does not translate to good nutritional status, which is the ultimate goal of the food we consume. It will make the stakeholders realize this gap that nutrition is ready to fill."

Oyewole said while he saw nothing wrong with the current World Food Day, in promoting food issues but that food alone in the journey towards good health is comparable to walking on one leg because current World Food Day focuses mainly on food production but undermines the best approaches to its utilization.

"Information on healthy eating, which embraces what, how, why and when foods should be eaten to maximize the benefits in the food is not usually a component of World Food Day," he said. "In addition to this, it added to the delusion that people have in distinguishing

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between food and nutrition. Food is a concrete entity but nutrition is an abstract entity."

According to Oyewole, while many people globally were not eating healthily because of several factors such as lack of food, access to nutrition information will assist in making the best use of the available food, including right food combination approaches.

While food security was a top priority for national governments, the same could not be said for nutrition.

"Presently, many national and international agencies are more concerned with food security at the expense of nutrition security," Oyewole lamented, remarking that some find it difficult distinguishing food security from nutrition security.

"Nutrition goes beyond food production but considers environmental factors, access to basic health care services e.g. immunization and care e.g. exclusive breast-feeding, complementary feeding, etc. In terms of level of investment, much investment is given to food security and that of nutrition security is diffused."

Some of Oyewole's solutions on promoting nutrition security include training and deploying more nutritionists to be involved in national planning relating to agriculture, health, education and environmental issues, developing programmes linking agriculture and nutrition in the school curriculum and ensuring that all components of food production are nutrition oriented.

"The whole world should declare a Nutrition Day or at least modify the present World Food Day to become World Food and Nutrition Day," said Oyewole who first lobbied FAO to change annual 16th of October to world food and nutrition day in 2009.

In response to the unacceptable hunger and malnutrition situation, an all Africa Conference held in 2004 in Uganda proposed an Africa Food and Nutrition Security Day (AFNSD) to be commemorated annually on 30 October. This proposal was endorsed and the AFNSD was launched in Malawi in October 2010. The AFNSD is to provide a stakeholder platform and leadership at all levels, and to facilitate discussions to reduce poverty, hunger food and nutrition insecurity.

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