

Nutrition - Critical for Human Capital Development

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Nutrition is a fundamental driver for human capital development. No individual can develop well without adequate supply of nutrients and other substances in food. Adequate nutrition is crucial for human development particularly in the first 1000 days window during pregnancy and the first 2 years of life. This period coincides with the time when cells, tissues and organs are rapidly developing. Nutrients are needed to ensure proper development of organs especially the brain, which is almost fully developed by the 2nd birthday (1000 days of life). A lot of nutrients play significant role to ensure proper brain development e.g. iodine, iron, protein, folic acid, vitamin B12, Vitamin D, magnesium, carbohydrate (glucose) and fat (some fatty acids). Synaptic connections in the brain develop from conception through the 2nd year of life. If nutrient supply to the brain is inadequate, there will be gaps leading to insults and poor brain development. The defect is permanent. This explains why some individuals will never do well in school, drop to learn a skill and still will not conceptualize because the area of the brain that controls cognition and learning suffered insult during brain development. Brain is the power house of an individual. It co-ordinates cognition, mental and physical development. Only individuals with well developed brains can attain their full potentials for human capital development. Good nutrition early in life is essential for children to attain their developmental potentials. It is important that mothers are in a state of

good nutrition early in pregnancy and even before conception. This is because many women do not access nutrition – promoting services until 5 or 6 months of pregnancy when much harm has been done to the foetus to adversely affect development. Deficiencies of some micronutrients like folic acid, iron and iodine affect the foetus shortly after conception. By the time the pregnancy is detected, permanent damage has been done to the foetus. Pregnant women should eat adequate diet all through pregnancy to ensure proper development of the foetus. At birth early initiation of breast feeding within the first 30 minutes should be practiced. Babies should be exclusively breastfed for six months to ensure they get all the needed nutrients for growth and development. At six months adequate complementary food should be introduced with continued breastfeeding. Breast feeding should continue up to 2 years and beyond 2 years if the mother so desire. Malnutrition during the first 1000 days of life is a serious threat to human capital development. It has adverse effect on physical and mental development to limit human potentials. Malnutrition results to poor pregnancy outcome like low birth weight babies, neural tube defect babies, babies with poorly developed brain. It could also lead to stunting, underweight and wasting in children. Efforts should be galvanized to address all forms of malnutrition through the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals using both nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive interventions and programmers. Adequate nutrition is the key to human capital development.