

FISH, FLOODS AND CASH CROPS FUELLING MALNUTRITION IN NTOROKO

PHOTOS BY JONAN TUSINGWIRE



Houses submerged in water after heavy flooding recently. Inset shows one of the temporary bridges where residents have to pay sh1000 to cross from one camp to another, making the exchange of food, services and nutrition information economically challenging

What children eat in their earliest years shapes survival, learning and future productivity. Yet for many families, nutrition is constrained by habits, misinformation and limited choices. As Uganda confronts persistent malnutrition, there is growing recognition that change requires informed communities and stronger policies. *New Vision*, in partnership with UNICEF and the Ministry of Health, is spotlighting the challenges and solutions shaping children's diets and their chances of a healthy start.

By Jonan Tusingwire

Despite its abundant fishing and agricultural activities, Ntoroko district, located in south-western Uganda and west of Mountain Rwenzori, records between 45 and 50 cases of child malnutrition monthly, according to Moses Rusoke, the District Nutrition Focal Person. The most affected areas include Kanara sub-county, Kanara town council and Nombe sub-county, communities largely inhabited by refugees and fishing households.

Rusoke explains that Ntoroko's population can be broadly divided into three livelihood zones: fishing communities along Lake Albert, lowland areas dominated by cattle keepers and mountainous areas where residents mainly engage in crop farming. Among these, fishing communities register the highest levels of stunting, followed by the mountainous areas.

"Many people assume that because these communities depend on fishing, children automatically get enough nutrition, but that is not the case. Most households rely heavily on fish for both food and income, neglecting other essential food groups, such as vitamins, needed for proper child development. Poverty, limited nutrition knowledge and poor access to services compound the problem," explained Rusoke.

MONEY VERSUS BALANCED MEALS

In the mountainous areas, agriculture is the main activity, yet nutrition challenges persist. Rusoke explains



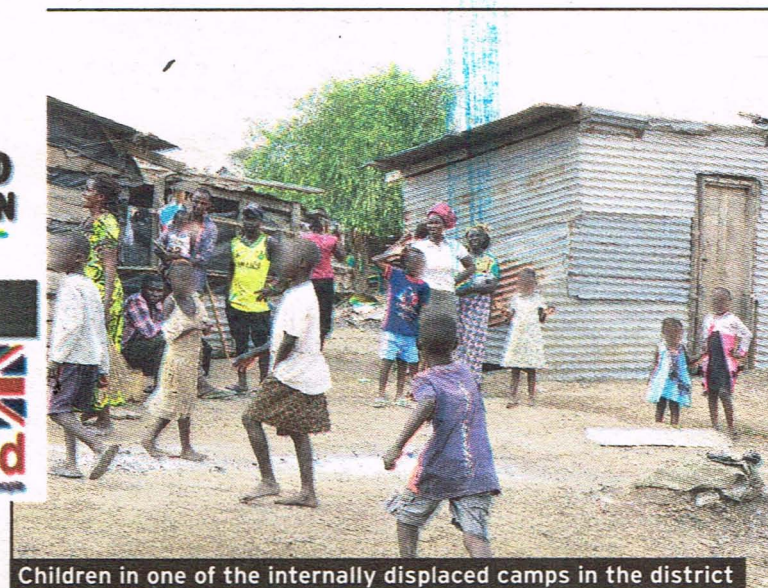
that many farmers prioritise cash crops, such as coffee and cocoa, over food crops. As a result, households fail to ensure the children's balanced diet.

In 2012, Karugutu sub-county council passed the Cocoa Growing Management Ordinance, requiring farmers to reserve at least two acres for food crops. The measure was intended to protect food security, but implementation has been weak. By 2015, Karugutu had more than 400 malnourished children, a situation partly linked to reduced food production. A visit to villages reveals land dominated by cocoa trees, with little space left for staples, such as cassava, beans and maize.

FLOODS, DISPLACEMENT AND HUNGER

For years, residents of Kanara sub-county relied on fishing and livestock keeping to feed their families and also earn a living. However, many of those livelihoods have been disrupted by heavy flooding thus displacing physical settlements.

The rising water levels on Lake



Children in one of the internally displaced camps in the district

District statistics show stunting at 40.65%, meaning nearly four in 10 children are not growing as expected.

Albert in September 2019 submerged parts of Kamuga, Butungama and Bweramule villages, displacing more than 11,000 people. According to Friday Mugisa, the local council III chairperson, families lost access to fishing grounds and grazing land for their livestock.

"People do not have food. Our people were fishing, but floods drove them out of the lake. Others were cattle keepers, now they are no longer grazing because of the floods," he says.

Even where waters have receded,

land shortages remain severe, leaving families with few options for food production. Every month, Kanara registers more than 20 cases of child malnutrition.

A MULTI-SECTORAL RESPONSE

To address the challenge of malnutrition, district leaders have embraced a multi-sectoral approach combining agriculture, community development and poverty alleviation programmes.

Rusoke says the district is working with the Parish Development Model

REACHING EVERY CHILD

Delivering nutrition services amidst remote terrain and high transport costs is a big challenge. Moses Rusoke, the District Nutrition Focal Person, explains that some communities can only be reached via water transport, with health workers paying between sh10,000 and sh20,000 for a one-way trip.

"Apart from transport costs on water, the district also faces challenges associated with long distances between communities. The vast geographical coverage means health workers often spend many hours travelling before reaching target communities, reducing the time available for service delivery. As a result, some families may go for extended periods without access to nutrition education, child growth monitoring and early detection of malnutrition cases," Rusoke adds.

(PDM) structures to encourage households to invest in nutrition.

"We are using the help of PDM focal persons to tell people to invest the money they receive into nutritional interventions in their homes and not only in income-generating activities," Rusoke says.

Families are being urged to use part of their PDM funds to establish kitchen gardens, rear small livestock and grow nutrient rich crops to help balance income generation with the need to provide nutritious food, improve food security and to curb malnutrition.

FROM CRISIS TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

Ntoroko's struggle with child malnutrition reflects a complex web of challenges: poverty, poor feeding practices, declining food production, displacement and weak service delivery. However, the district's response shows promise. By combining health services with agricultural support, community education and targeted interventions, leaders hope to reverse the trend.

The experiences of fishing households, mountain farmers and displaced families highlight a common truth: tackling malnutrition requires co-ordinated action across various sectors. Only then can Ntoroko's children grow healthy and strong, free from the bitter aftermaths of malnutrition.