

HOM SPEECH

Conference on Maternal and Child Nutrition: Effective Delivery through Evidence and Innovation

23 NOVEMBER 2015

Good evening Honourable Minister of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine, Dr Rajitha Senaratne, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests.

I am honoured to be here tonight in the company of such committed health and nutrition professionals.

I am pleased that a number of Australians are participating in this event, including one of the conference Chairs, Professor Michael Dibley of the University of Sydney's School of Public Health.

Australia is pleased to be able to support this important initiative, together with our partners:

- the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine,
- UNICEF
- the University of Colombo
- the University of Sydney
- and the South Asia Infant Feeding Research Network.

I do not need to remind all of you here tonight about the importance of investing in nutrition.

Access to good nutrition is one of the key pre-conditions for good health.

And good health helps people create and take advantage of pathways out of poverty.

Children's nutrition is especially important, as the right start in life is a healthy start – and that is the only start from which children can fully realize their promise and potential.

Australia places great importance on the promotion and protection of children's rights. The enjoyment of basic rights such as education, health and wellbeing are all linked in fundamental ways to adequate nutrition.

Australia also recognises that effective investment in health (including nutrition) promotes sustainable economic growth, poverty reduction, and regional security.

This is reflected in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Health for Development Strategy 2015-2020, which guides health investments through our aid program.

The strategy focuses on areas that are crucial to improving health outcomes – including nutrition.

In particular, our aid program invests in nutrition in order to improve maternal and child health and to prevent and manage non-communicable diseases.

Australia's priority focus is on improving nutrition during a child's first 1,000 days, to lay the foundation for healthy and productive lives.

Better nourished infants have better motor and cognitive development and do substantially better in school, leading to greater productivity and higher incomes in adulthood.

As well as early death, the consequences of under-nutrition include disadvantages such as childhood illness, short stature, and lower cognitive development.

These are in turn associated with low education attainment, low economic productivity, poor pregnancy outcomes, and greater susceptibility to chronic diseases in later life.

At the national level, these disadvantages lead to a reduced GDP and a large public health bill.

So it is true to say that investments in good nutrition today are investments in the countries of tomorrow.

Governments and international partners need to work together to make these investments, with governments then allocating long-term funds to effectively implement plans and commitments made in consultation with donors.

Poor nutrition disproportionately affects women and girls in many countries, often as a result of gender inequality.

Tackling gender inequality is another key priority of the Australian aid program – and a personal passion of mine.

Evidence shows that it is women who spend extra income on the health, education and well-being of their families.

So gender equality measures are central to Australia's nutrition investments.

Some of our key nutrition priorities include:

- Nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life and during a girl's adolescence, because nutritional deficits during these periods can last a lifetime.
- Prevention of over-nutrition, drawing on Australia's experience.
- Nutrition approaches built into Australia's health and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), agriculture, education, and social protection investments.
- Embedding nutrition in healthy lifestyle promotion and economic policy at national and regional levels.

We have already seen Australia's support to nutrition programs achieve strong results across our own region, the Indo-Pacific.

For example, in the Pacific Islands, Australia is funding:

- development and delivery of nutrition training programs to increase the number of health workers with nutrition skills and specialisation;
- health services providing support to women to exclusively breastfeed; and

- improvements to identifying and managing childhood malnutrition in hospitals and health services.

In Indonesia, Australia is providing funding to reduce the number of maternal and newborn deaths and stunting.

This has seen a 50 percent drop in maternal deaths in the Nusa Tenggara Timur province in 2014 compared to 2009.

Future Australian Government programming will include a grant to the Micronutrient Initiative to reduce iron deficiency anaemia in pregnant women.

In Timor-Leste, Australia is focusing on promoting good nutrition and improving agricultural practices to ensure an annual supply of locally-available nutritious food.

We are also planning to pilot new technology in Timor-Leste to enhance nutrition work, including by using mobile phones to deliver nutrition messages.

And I am pleased to note that Heather Grieve, Senior Nutrition Specialist from our Embassy in Timor Leste, is speaking at this conference tomorrow.

Australia is also supporting initiatives here in South Asia – the region which has some of the highest rates and largest numbers of malnutrition in the world.

We have funded the University of Sydney to work with counterpart universities in Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan on improving infant and young child

feeding practices to prevent child undernutrition in South Asia.

For five years we have also funded the South Asia Food and Security Network (SAFANSI), a World Bank administered multi-donor trust fund.

Complementing SAFANSI, we have funded the SUNITA trust fund in Nepal to provide technical support to effectively address gaps in nutrition interventions.

And of course we are also doing our part right here in Sri Lanka to help reduce under-nutrition.

Sri Lanka has recognised that under-nutrition is a national priority. And that proper nutrition is a powerful good.

Australia is proud to partner with the Sri Lankan government and UNICEF to tackle this issue.

We are concentrating on the most vulnerable – women and children – and providing support at the critical period where it can make the most difference.

Australia is supporting the Sri Lankan Government's focus on pre-pregnancy through to a child's second birthday.

This is because pregnancy through to childbirth and lactation and infancy through to early childhood represent the most nutritionally vulnerable stages of the life cycle.

Australia is proud to be working with UNICEF and the Sri Lankan government on this project.

Australia has had a long and valuable relationship with UNICEF, both in Sri Lanka and around the world.

Australia has provided approximately \$150 million in core funding to UNICEF over the past five years, demonstrating our continued commitment to this partnership.

And we are pleased to be working with UNICEF and our other partners to support this conference.

I was particularly pleased to see that the theme of this conference is Effective Delivery through Evidence and Innovation.

Innovation is fast becoming the watch word of Australia's aid program.

It is a passion of our Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who wants innovation to drive the way we deliver aid.

And we are spending \$140 million over four years trialling and testing development innovations.

This includes finding more creative and clever ways to achieve better results.

As well as thinking differently, and being more entrepreneurial in our approach.

We believe that innovation holds the key to progress and success across the world.

Innovation can help deliver development solutions that are cheaper, faster and more effective.

Indeed, Australia has established a new Development Innovation Hub –the InnovationXchange – to catalyse and support innovation across our aid program.

We are also spending around \$30 million a year from our aid program on health and medical research.

We did this with the express purpose of making health spending in our region more innovative.

We want to promote medical breakthroughs in our region.

And this conference is an opportunity for you to do the same.

It is a time for you to share experiences, look at the evidence and generate new and innovative ways to reduce the impact of poor nutrition.

Returning to my opening remarks, as you all know much better than me, reducing the impact of poor nutrition saves lives.

All of you here tonight deserve acknowledgement for the work you are doing to help improve nutrition in your countries.

I wish you all the best at this conference and in your ongoing work.

In closing I would like to share with you a quote from UNICEF's Executive Director, Anthony Lake, which resonates with me as I am sure it does with everyone in the room.

..."imagine the faces and bright futures of our own children – then support those the world has forgotten. Help dedicated groups and governments care for those children as if they were our own."

Thank you for your part in this critical endeavour.