

Improving health and nutrition through agriculture



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Agriculture has the potential to reduce malnutrition and ill health for millions of poor people

Bernard Pollack/ Nourishing the Planet

Policymakers and practitioners must bring together agriculture, nutrition and health in order to unleash the potential of agriculture to reduce malnutrition and ill health for the millions of poor people living in developing countries, according to participants at the International Conference on Leveraging Agriculture for Improving Nutrition and Health. "Agriculture, nutrition, and health programs should be designed so that they reinforce each other, to unleash this untapped potential," says Rajul Pandya-Lorch, head of the International Food Policy Research Institute's 2020 Vision Initiative and lead organiser of the conference. "This can only happen if practitioners, researchers, and policymakers from all three sectors join forces to coordinate their efforts and find better solutions."

"Agriculture is much more than just producing food and other products," adds Shenggen Fan, IFPRI director general. "It is linked to people's well-being in many ways, and it has the potential to do much more to improve their nutrition and reduce their health risks." But to accomplish this nutrition must be incorporated as a goal when developing more productive crops and livestock and reducing their susceptibility to disease.

In developing countries, livestock disease presents a threat both to the food security and health of poor communities. At the conference, the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) highlighted the need to think through the impacts of increasing numbers of domestic livestock and intensive production methods on control of animal epidemics. "Wealthy countries are effectively dealing with livestock diseases, but in Africa and Asia, the capacity of veterinary services to track and control outbreaks is lagging dangerously behind livestock intensification," says John McDermott, ILRI deputy director general for research. "This lack of capacity is dangerous because many poor people in the world still rely on farm animals to feed their families, while rising demand for meat, milk and eggs among urban consumers in the developing world is fuelling a rapid intensification of livestock production," McDermott adds.