

Editorial [Volume 26 No. 7 (2026)]

Do We Have a Better Understanding of Nutrition Than We Did 10 Years Ago?

Over the past decade, our understanding of nutrition has advanced considerably. Yet the more we learn, the more we appreciate that nutrition is complex. It is no longer adequate to think of nutrition simply in terms of calories, individual nutrients, or the prevention of deficiency diseases. Nutrition sits at the intersection of food, health, biology, agriculture, culture, economics, environment and human behaviour.

One of the most important advances has been our recognition of the **double burden of malnutrition**. Many countries, particularly in Africa, continue to face undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies while simultaneously experiencing rising overweight, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases. These conditions were often considered separate challenges. We now understand that they can coexist within the same country, community, household and even individual.

We have also come to appreciate that **diet quality matters as much as quantity**. Greater attention is now given to dietary diversity and dietary patterns, including fruits and vegetables, legumes, whole grains and appropriate animal-source foods, rather than focusing exclusively on individual nutrients.

Our understanding of the **first 1,000 days** has also deepened. Nutrition before conception, during pregnancy, infancy and early childhood has profound implications for physical growth, cognitive development and lifelong health. Maternal nutrition is an essential part of this equation and cannot be treated as an afterthought.

At the same time, research on the **gut microbiome** is opening new dimensions in our understanding of the relationship between diet, metabolism, immunity and health. However, this rapidly developing field also reminds us to distinguish promising science from claims that have moved ahead of the evidence.

Perhaps most importantly for Africa, we increasingly recognize that **nutrition begins long before food reaches the plate**. What farmers produce, how food is processed, transported and marketed, its safety and affordability, and whether people can access it all influence dietary choices and nutritional outcomes. The food system, therefore, must be central to nutrition policy and practice.

We are also learning more about **personalized nutrition**, as genetics, age, sex, physical activity, metabolism and the microbiome influence how individuals respond to food. Yet this remains an emerging field, and caution is needed where commercial claims outpace scientific evidence.

Similarly, evidence concerning **ultra-processed foods** has grown substantially. High consumption of many such foods is increasingly associated with adverse health outcomes. Nevertheless, important questions remain about the mechanisms involved and the relative contributions of processing, ingredients, energy density, eating behaviour and overall dietary patterns.

Another significant development is our growing recognition of the relationship between **nutrition and climate change**. We can no longer consider healthy diets independently of environmental sustainability. The question is not only how to nourish a growing population, but whether we can do so while protecting the land, water, biodiversity and other natural resources on which food production depends.

Yet there is a striking paradox. **Our scientific understanding of nutrition has advanced faster than our ability to ensure that everyone can access a healthy diet.**

This is particularly evident in Africa. We cannot solve malnutrition simply by telling people what they should eat. Healthy choices depend on whether nutritious foods are available, affordable, safe and culturally acceptable. Poverty, food prices, agricultural production, markets, gender relations, education, infrastructure and public policy all shape what people eat.

This brings us to perhaps the most important lesson of the past decade: **nutrition science is not static**. Scientific recommendations evolve as better evidence becomes available. Advice once presented as absolute may be refined or revised. This should not undermine confidence in science. Rather, it demonstrates the strength of the scientific process: we learn, question, test and improve.

For Africa, therefore, the question we should be asking is not simply whether we understand nutrition better than we did ten years ago. We clearly do.

The more important question is: **What are we doing with what we know?**

Can we translate our expanding knowledge into food systems that make healthy, safe and nutritious diets affordable and accessible to all? Can we connect

agricultural policy more deliberately with nutrition policy? Can we ensure that women, children, smallholder farmers and vulnerable communities are not left behind? And can we move from generating knowledge to using that knowledge to transform lives?

The next decade should be less about accumulating knowledge for its own sake and more about **turning knowledge into action**.

Africa has the opportunity to build food systems that nourish people, sustain livelihoods and protect the environment. The science is increasingly available. What is required now is the political commitment, investment, partnerships and collective action to put that knowledge to work.

We know more about nutrition than we did ten years ago. The challenge before us is to make that knowledge count.

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