

# Remarks delivered at the Global Nutrition Event, World Bank-IMF Spring Meetings

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Washington, DC  
April 16, 2016

Good afternoon, everyone!

I wish to thank Bill Gates for his thought-provoking speech. Bill, you and your wife, Melinda, are extraordinary human beings: you care deeply about people. And as you always remind us “every life has equal value”. Your compassion, humility and commitment to improving the lives of others are inspiring for every one of us – even as we tackle one of the greatest challenges facing our world today: malnutrition.

I also wish to thank Keith Hansen and his team at the World Bank, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Children Investment Foundation, Research for Development and 1,000 days, for all your hard work – and for the insightful analysis of the resources needed to tackle malnutrition globally. Let me take this opportunity to reaffirm the full commitment of the African Development Bank Group to working in partnership with you and other partners to eradicate malnutrition in Africa.

The case for decisive action on malnutrition in Africa is compelling.

Africa accounts for 20 of the 24 countries with stunting rates of over 40%. Furthermore, 22 of the 34 countries that collectively account for 90% of the world’s stunting are in Africa. About 58 million children in Africa under the age of 5 years are too short for their age (stunted); about 14 million weigh too little for their height (wasted) and 10 million are overweight. These are very disturbing numbers. And they are numbers we must change.

We must now change how we look at the problem of malnutrition. The greatest contributor to economic growth is not physical infrastructure, but brainpower: what I refer to as “gray matter infrastructure”. While it is obvious that a road or port can add to improved trade and economic growth, it is often not recognized that stunting shrinks the size of the brain and therefore compromises current and future economic growth of nations. Stunted children today leads to stunted economies tomorrow. It is that simple.

UNICEF has estimated the annual cost of under nutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa at US \$25 billion. Africa and Asia lose 11% of their GDP every year due to poor nutrition. The evidence is clear: boosting nutrition boosts the economy.

Therefore, we must redefine the debate around nutrition from one seen as a social development issue to one that shapes the path of economic growth and development. We must now invest in developing the gray matter infrastructure of Africa, by investing in better nutrition for its children, who are the future of the continent.

Access to food, in the right quantity and quality, is a basic human right. There is absolutely no justification that Africa, which has over 65% of all the arable land left in the world, is unable to feed itself, spending US \$35 billion per year on food imports – an amount projected to rise to US \$110 billion by 2030 if the current trends continue. Africa can feed itself – and Africa must feed itself. That is why at the African Development Bank, we have set “Feeding Africa” as one of our High 5 priorities. Working with governments and partners, our goal is to help Africa to achieve food self-sufficiency within 10 years.

No child should ever go hungry – and no child should ever lose future economic opportunities or die early because of lack of nutritious food. We must do all possible for the children, from conception to their second birthday – the first 1,000 days – and beyond! And we must support better nutrition for their mothers – for a healthy mother, who is economically empowered, will nourish her children. To help towards this, the African Development Bank is launching the Affirmative Finance Action for Women (AFAWA) to leverage US \$3 billion specifically for women in Africa.

We must hear their voices! I am reminded of what Bill Gates said on August 1, 2014 on the “importance of giving all children the nutrition they need for a healthy start in life. Their future depends on it. So does Africa’s”. I agree with Bill. And to achieve this, I believe there must be Nutrition Accountability in Africa.

Africa needs a Nutrition Accountability Index. That is why the African Development Bank and the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Security, in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have called for the establishment of a high-level body: African Leaders for Nutrition, to champion accountability and the elimination of malnutrition in all its forms across the continent. At the Annual General Meeting of the African Development Bank in Lusaka next month, the African Leaders for Nutrition will set out a call to action for governments, philanthropic organizations, and Africa’s key public and private sector leaders to find innovative and effective financing approaches and schemes to end malnutrition.

Let us, together, end the scourge of malnutrition. It is well within our reach to do so, and the evidence is overwhelming that we must act – and act now.

Thank you very much.