

The dialogue convened with Heads of Home-Based Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers in Bushoki sector was a highly productive and engaging event, focused on strengthening child health, nutrition, and hygiene practices through the Positive Deviance Hearth (PDH) project. The participants, comprising 38 ECD leaders, came together with a shared commitment to improving the well-being of children under five years old in their communities.

The event began with an open and warm atmosphere, encouraging open dialogue and active participation. The introduction framed the discussion within the broader challenges faced by the community, including poverty, limited access to nutritious food, and seasonal fluctuations impacting food availability. Participants expressed their concerns about widespread malnutrition and the need for sustainable solutions that involve nutrition education, hygiene, and sanitation as key pillars to prevent child undernutrition.

Discussions were guided by key themes including the six pillars of ECD—health, nutrition, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), parenting education, child protection, and inclusion. Participants were actively engaged through group work, open discussions, and a question-and-answer session that allowed for the sharing of experiences and identification of challenges hindering the promotion of child health. The emphasis on hygiene as a preventive measure against malnutrition resonated deeply with the group, as many highlighted local practices that needed reinforcement or behavioral change.

A significant portion of the dialogue focused on practical strategies to support the functionality of home-based ECD centers. Participants appreciated the distribution of ECD materials, including cooking and hygiene supplies, which were seen as vital resources to improve the daily operations of these centers. The sharing of knowledge on how to integrate nutrition with other sectors such as health and sanitation further enriched the dialogue, fostering a holistic understanding of child development.

One key outcome of the meeting was the recognition of behavior change as a persistent challenge. Participants acknowledged that while knowledge and resources are crucial, changing community habits and attitudes requires continuous effort and support. They proposed ongoing training and community sensitization campaigns as critical steps to sustain progress and ensure that children benefit from improved care and nutrition.

From my perspective, the dialogue was both inspiring and hopeful. It was clear that the participants were deeply invested in the health and future of their children and were eager to collaborate and learn. The respectful and inclusive environment fostered trust and openness, which enhanced the quality of discussions. While challenges such as resource limitations remain, the collective determination to overcome these barriers was palpable.

Overall, the event highlighted the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration and community empowerment in addressing malnutrition. It reaffirmed that strengthening ECD centers and supporting caregivers with knowledge and resources can lead to meaningful improvements in child nutrition and well-being. The dialogue not only served as an avenue to exchange ideas but also as a motivational platform encouraging stakeholders to continue their efforts with renewed vigor.

In conclusion, this stakeholder dialogue was a valuable step towards advancing the goals of the PDH project and contributing to the broader nutrition agenda in Rwanda. It showcased the power of community-driven solutions and the critical role of education, hygiene, and multi-sector integration in tackling malnutrition among young children. The positive energy and shared vision among participants promise continued progress and stronger partnerships in the future.