

# Nutrition Dialogue with Faith Leaders

Area Program: AP Sorsogon

Location: Bulan, Sorsogon

Participants: 12

Date: August 28, 2025

## 1. Nutrition Challenges Identified:

The discussion identified numerous challenges contributing to malnutrition and hunger:

### • Poverty and Financial Constraints

- When money runs out, families often resort to cheaper, less nutritious options like noodles.
- In areas like Brgy Laguna and Brgy San Vicente, parents involved in gambling or drinking neglect family food, leading children as young as 10 to work in "lawlawan" (fish processing) to earn money for food.
- Daily earnings of Php 400-500 are insufficient to provide three meals a day, especially with high food costs and expenses like expensive clean water (Php 30-40). This budget constraint often pushes families towards instant foods like hotdogs and eggs.

### • Parental Attitudes and Behavior

- Katamaran (Laziness): Some parents are perceived as lazy, neglecting opportunities to plant vegetables even when they have land. They may prioritize socializing over gardening.
- Vices: Parents with vices such as drinking, gambling, or excessive gossiping are seen as neglecting their children's nutritional needs and supervision. They might prioritize their vices over their children's food.
- Lack of Awareness and Knowledge: Many parents lack knowledge about proper nutrition, balanced diets, or the specific needs of children at different ages. They may believe that any vegetable is healthy without understanding the need for a balanced plate including protein, carbohydrates, and fiber.
- Busy Schedules and Convenience: Parents often prepare quick, instant meals like fried eggs, noodles, hotdogs, or pre-cooked chicken due to busy work schedules or a lack of cooking skills/interest, without considering nutritional value.
- Lack of Supervision: Parents may fail to monitor what their children eat, especially outside the home.

### • Children's Eating Habits and Preferences

- Picky Eaters: The "new generation" of children are often picky eaters who prefer instant foods, "chichirya" (junk food), street food, burgers, and fast food. Their taste buds are accustomed to these unhealthy flavors, making them reject nutritious foods.
- Environmental Influence: Children are heavily influenced by their surroundings, where unhealthy food options are highly accessible, even in schools.

### • Systemic and Social Issues

- Teenage Pregnancy: This is identified as a major factor, as young mothers are often physically unprepared for pregnancy, leading to malnourished children. Government policies like the Reproductive Health Bill and sex education (promoting condoms), combined with social media and pornography, are blamed for the rise in teenage pregnancies.
- Family Problems: Social problems like parental separation or other family dysfunctions can significantly impact children's nutrition.
- Ineffective Government Programs: Concerns were raised that financial aid programs (e.g., 4Ps) might be insufficient or mismanaged, with funds not always reaching the intended beneficiaries. There's also a perception that some government support fosters dependence rather than promoting self-sufficiency.
- Lack of Health-Seeking Behavior: Many parents only take their children for check-ups when they are visibly sick, neglecting regular "well-baby" check-ups to identify deficiencies or conditions like edema ("manas"). Access to health centers, especially in remote areas, is a challenge.
- Food Quality Concerns: The use of chemicals and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in food production (e.g., chickens growing rapidly in 25-45 days) is linked to early maturation in children, with girls as young as 8 years old experiencing menstruation.
- Food Waste: There's an oversupply of fish like "lawlaw" which is often thrown away due to a lack of storage, processing facilities, and buyers, representing a significant waste of potential food resources.

- **Challenges in Feeding Programs (Churches/Schools)**
  - Picky Eaters: Children's preferences make it difficult to ensure they consume the nutritious food provided.
  - Lack of Technical Knowledge: Churches conducting feeding programs may lack the expertise of nutritionists or doctors to design truly impactful, long-term programs, monitor children's progress (e.g., weight tracking), or ensure meals are nutritionally complete.
  - Sustainability: Feeding programs provide temporary relief, but children often revert to poor eating habits once the program ends, suggesting a need for more sustainable interventions.

## 2. Actions Urgently Needed and How They Should Be Taken Forward:

- **Education and Awareness Programs:**
  - Information Dissemination: There is an urgent need for widespread information dissemination to families and parents regarding proper nutrition.
  - Parental Education: Parents should be educated on preparing nutritious and balanced meals (including protein, carbohydrates, and fiber), proper budgeting for food, and the importance of healthy eating from an early age. They need to be taught how to be innovative in incorporating vegetables into children's meals.
  - Moral Recovery Program (MRP): The MRP should be integrated into schools and barangays to teach self-care, values, and responsible choices, particularly addressing issues like teenage pregnancy by advocating for "abstain sex" for marriage.
  - Child Training: Training children from a young age (even infancy) to consume healthy foods and avoid sweets is crucial.
- **Government and Local Government Unit (LGU) Actions:**
  - Support for Backyard Gardening: LGUs should actively support and encourage backyard gardening initiatives, especially in communities and even in small spaces using pots. The Department of Agriculture already provides free seedlings, and this should be leveraged.
  - Sustainable Livelihood Programs: The government needs to provide livelihood programs for low-income families, not just financial aid (like 4Ps), to empower them economically and enable them to provide for their families sustainably.
  - Effective Program Monitoring: Ensure that existing government programs, such as 4Ps, are fairly and responsibly implemented, with funds reaching the intended beneficiaries and used for their designated purpose.
  - Policy on Unhealthy Food: Implement policies to remove or regulate vendors selling unhealthy foods within school premises and public areas.
  - Addressing Food Waste (Lawlaw): The government (LGU) must address the oversupply of fish like "lawlaw" by establishing storage facilities, processing plants (e.g., a sardine factory), and efficient distribution mechanisms to prevent waste and utilize this resource for food security.
  - Coordinated Messaging on Reproductive Health: The government (DOH) and Moral Recovery advocates should engage in dialogue to reconcile their messaging on sex education (safe sex vs. abstinence before marriage) to avoid confusion and provide a unified, responsible approach.
- **Church Actions:**
  - Partnerships: Churches should partner with barangays and health centers for their feeding programs and other initiatives. This includes coordinating to share data (e.g., children's weight) and access technical expertise from nutritionists and doctors.
  - Monitoring and Follow-up: Implement robust monitoring systems for feeding programs, including tracking children's weight and development, and conducting follow-up with parents to ensure sustained positive impact beyond the program duration.
  - Parental Engagement: During feeding programs, engage parents by teaching them how to cook nutritious, affordable, and replicable meals for their homes.
  - Utilize Internal Expertise: Churches should leverage professionals within their congregation (e.g., nutritionists, doctors, lawyers) to enhance the effectiveness of their programs. If internal expertise is limited, seek assistance from Barangay Nutrition Scholars (BNS) of the RHU.
  - Promote Self-Stewardship: Integrate the Word of God and principles of stewardship into teachings, emphasizing the care of one's physical body and health, responsible consumption, and avoiding overeating.

- **Family and Parental Actions:**

- Intentional Parenting: Parents must be intentional and strategic in providing healthy food for their children from a young age.
- Financial Discipline: Improve financial management and budgeting skills to prioritize nutritious food.
- Active Supervision: Actively supervise and monitor their children's food intake, both at home and when eating out.
- Proactive Health-Seeking: Develop a health-seeking behavior by regularly taking children for "well-baby" check-ups, not just when they are sick.

### 3. Areas of Convergence and Divergence:

- **Areas of Convergence (Collaboration):**

- Education and Awareness: There is a consensus that churches, barangays, and LGUs should collaborate on information dissemination and educational programs for families on nutrition.
- Feeding Programs: Churches and health centers can collaborate on feeding programs, with health centers providing technical expertise, data (e.g., children's weights), and potentially micronutrient supplementation, while churches provide the logistical support.
- Moral Recovery Program (MRP): The MRP serves as an existing area of convergence, bringing together churches, schools, and LGUs to address holistic well-being, including health and responsible choices.
- Family Life Development Programs: These programs can serve as platforms for multi-sectoral discussions on hunger, malnutrition, and food security.
- Food Waste Management: There's potential for churches and LGUs to collaborate on addressing the oversupply of fish (like "lawlaw") through processing, storage, and distribution to prevent waste and utilize it for food security or livelihood.

- **Areas of Divergence (Conflict/Different Approaches):**

- Messaging on Reproductive Health and Sex Education: A significant point of divergence is the conflicting messaging between the DOH and faith-based organizations regarding sex education. The faith leaders believe that the government is promoting "safe sex" by distributing condoms. For them, this is "provoking" youth and encouraging premarital sex (resulting to teenage pregnancy). Faith leaders advocate for "abstinence" and the sanctity of marriage.

### 4. Overall Findings:

- Malnutrition and hunger are multifaceted problems stemming from a complex interplay of economic hardship, parental neglect (due to vices or lack of knowledge/time), children's evolving preferences for unhealthy foods, and systemic failures in governance and social support.
- A multi-sectoral, collaborative approach involving government bodies, local communities, schools, and faith-based organizations is essential to effectively address these challenges.
- Education and awareness are paramount for both parents and children to foster healthy eating habits, balanced nutrition, and a proactive approach to health.
- While financial aid is necessary, sustainable livelihood programs and responsible management of government assistance are crucial to empower families economically and prevent long-term dependency.
- Churches have a vital role, but their feeding programs could be made more impactful by integrating technical expertise, robust monitoring, and engaging parents to ensure long-term nutritional improvements.
- Bridging the gap in messaging on sensitive topics like reproductive health between government and faith leaders is crucial to avoid public confusion and ensure a cohesive approach to youth development.
- There are untapped resources and opportunities (like the oversupply of "lawlaw" fish) that, with proper planning and collaboration, could significantly contribute to food security and economic empowerment.