A new study commissioned by Rwanda Development Organisation (RDO) to analyse the relationship between migrations and stunting trends in Rwanda was released on Wednesday during a Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on the impact of National Resources in ensuring sustainable food and nutrition security in Rwanda.

The Executive Secretary of RDO, Eugene Rwibasira launching the report said they undertook the study to analyse the relationship between migration and stunting trends so as to come up with relevant solutions.

During the dialogue, different stakeholders including government institutions, civil society organisations and the media participated in the discussions on food security in Rwanda.

Participants commended RDO for the fight against malnutrition and stunting in Rwanda while calling for coordinated efforts of all stakeholders.

The report which focused on the country's Eastern and Western Provinces was intended to analyse the situation of internal migration, identifying the stunting trends and comparing both Rwanda's regions as well as identify relationships or issues if any to propose adequate solutions.

Stunting which is the impaired growth and development that children experience as a result of malnutrition, repeated infection, and inadequate psychosocial stimulation was found to be most prevalent in households which are food insecure or with high poverty levels and big family size/dependents.

Such households facing livelihood challenges were the most recorded cases moving from one province or district to another. The study found that the most commonly cited reasons for internal migration was family or employment. Reviews made indicated that land remains important for several reasons of internal migration from other provinces particularly Western province to the Eastern Province.

Source: CFSVA 2018

Recent migrations to the Eastern Province has been due to insecure or insufficient access to land which is considered a significant factor in the impoverishment of thousands of rural people, and is therefore a 'structural' cause of migration.

Districts of the Eastern Province were found to be most preferred destination by internal immigrants after the Capital Kigali while Nyagatare District in the Eastern Province is only second to Gasabo District in the country. The Western Province is the second last destination to attract the most recent immigrants, after the Northern Province.

The report indicates that constant movement of the population also affects the economy and service delivery. For instance, although the Eastern Province is the food basket of the country, it still has cases of stunting and it is believed that these cases are as a result of immigrants.

According to Fred Mufuruke, Governor of the Eastern Province, there are a number of issues related to high immigration in his province like the rapid increase in population over time. This mobility attributed to seeking employment with low levels of education and lack of land for agriculture and shelter makes it hard for the planning and places high demand on public services.

There are other factors that put more stress on livelihoods because of high internal migrations, as Jean Claude Murenzi, Mayor of Kayonza District indicated that due to high mobility there are tendencies of polygamy. Men normally leave behind their families, in their districts of origin who later joins them. Their children do not attend school due to continuous movements from one place to another looking for employment opportunities. All this contributes to high rates of illegal marriages, family conflicts, and divorces; drunkardness which leads to unprotected sex and early pregnancies; school dropouts and rise in crime.

Murenzi adds that most immigrants come with different cultures and beliefs, where some of them do not drink milk which contributes to malnutrition.

As many stressing issues identified among migrant families largely contributed to high poverty levels and malnutrition, it was a basis for persistent stunting in Eastern province despite being a very productive region in terms of food production and agriculture in general.

For the districts with high stunting cases might serve as an explanation for the movements to the better performing regions.

The Western Province which neighbours the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with access to Lake Kivu may be endowed with many opportunities but some

tendencies lead to high levels of stunting. Some people work or do business in DRC during the day, others do fishing. And as a result fail to have enough time to take care of their children, to ensure balanced diet which contribute to issues of stunting.

The study found that female immigrants increased compared to their male counterparts, signifying a high number of female headed households to the provinces of destination. At the same time, migrants are said to be without property, something that affects public service delivery.

However, in the same period the reduction in stunting was slower among children in the poor households, dropping from 54% to 47% during 2010-2015, a reduction of 0.7% a yearly. Child malnutrition rates are generally higher in rural areas, especially for stunting which stands at 40 percent in rural areas compared to 27 percent in urban.

The study makes recommendations in light of the complexity of the issues of stunting and migration based on the focused provinces of the Eastern and Western. It calls for addressing malnutrition through a multi-sectoral approach as well as multi-stakeholders intervention.

The report underscores the food security, nutrition and early childhood development as prioritized to be foundational issues in the National Strategy for Transformation and Prosperity (2017-2024).

A list of recommendations were laid down like fast tracking and strengthening the “Isibo initiative” to efficiently and effectively monitor socio-economic programs. Rolling out “Abarinzi b’ibyagegezweho Club” in all villages and cells (selecting people of integrity and opinion leaders) was another lesson to learn from the Mbale Cell Model experience in Karangazi Sector.

Strong health systems was another recipe the study commends, calling for building health posts to promote access to health facilities, training all Health Centres staffs in Districts and Community Health Workers to ensure there is proper identification, follow up and reporting of health related indicators specifically on stunting.

Social behaviour change communication (SBCC) towards malnutrition was urged by the report that also calls for sensitization on consumption of milk and its benefits as wells as streamlining the distribution of milk to schools and ECD Centres and installation of milk coolers in all distribution centres to ensure safe storage.

The report emphasized the need to strengthen the coordination mechanisms on the implementation of the “District Plan to eliminate Malnutrition (DPEM). This experience was noted to present best practices, as can be observed in Kirehe District that achieved significant reductions in child stunting between 2010 and 2015 (from 51% to 29%), due to strong political will and accountability at all administrative levels.