

Reducing Malnutrition: Women's Health Holds The Key

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Improving maternal nutrition offers important opportunities to improve both the health and well-being of the mother herself, as well as of her children and in turn benefits the country. India's cohort of 26 million babies each year deserves better life conditions that those that await them at present

Disease and malnutrition have close links; in many ways, malnutrition is the largest single contributor to disease in the world, according to the UN's Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN). In some instances, ill health or disease could be a direct consequence of malnutrition, while in others, a key contributor.

Impact of Malnutrition

Malnutrition at an early age leads to reduced physical and mental development during childhood. Stunting, for example, affects more than 147 million pre-schoolers in developing countries (UNSCN 5). Worldwide, under-nutrition is responsible for 45 per cent of child deaths, directly or through diseases made more severe because of it. Even mildly under-weight children face twice the risk of death as compared to well nourished children. Among micronutrients, Vitamin A deficiency compromises the immune system and leads to the death of approx. 1 million children each year. Globally, severe iron deficiency is the cause of more than 60,000 deaths per year of women during pregnancy. Similarly, maternal folate deficiency leads to 250,000 severe birth defects and iodine deficiency in pregnancy causes

mental impairment of almost 18 million infants per year and a lowering of '0-15 IQ points in school children. (India Health Report: Nutrition, 2015).

Iron deficiency weakens the maternal body, impairs intrauterine growth and increases the risk of both maternal and foetal morbidity and mortality (World Health Organization 2000a). Malnutrition also has widespread economic ramifications. Problems related to anaemia, for example, including cognitive impairment in children and low productivity in adults, cost US\$5 billion a year in South Asia alone. (Ross & Horton, 1998)

"Women's deprivation in terms of nutrition and health care rebounds on society in the form of ill-health of their offspring — males and females alike."⁹

—Siddiq Osmani and Amartya Sen

Links between Health and Nutrition

The intergenerational cycle of growth failure, first described in 1992 explains how growth failure is transmitted across generations through the mother, thereby highlighting the importance of addressing women's health and well being to bring about a significant change in the situation of malnutrition. Undernourished girls

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are likely to reach adolescence in disadvantaged physical conditions, and this may in turn, have severe implications for their overall health, in particular when they experience early pregnancies. Stunted and/or anaemic adolescent mothers are more likely to have complications during childbirth and the postpartum period, as well as to give birth to premature and low-weight babies. Closely-spaced pregnancies and repeated childbearing, along with heavy physical work, poor diets, discrimination and inadequate health care, may severely undermine the nutritional status of many women, with consequences for both them and for the health and nutrition of the next generation (World Health Organization 1997, 2000a; United Nations Population Fund 1997, 2000).

Criticality: The First 1000 Days

Child nutrition in the 1000 days between a woman's pregnancy and her child's second birthday sets the foundation for all the days that follow. Right nutrition during this window has a profound and lasting impact on the child's ability to grow, learn and thrive, thereby contributing immensely to the country's health and well being too. Nutrition during pregnancy and in the first years of a child's life provides the essential building blocks for brain development, healthy growth and a strong immune system. In fact, a growing body of scientific evidence shows that the foundations of a person's lifelong health, including

Right Nutrition in the 1,000 day window helps:

- Build a child's brain and fuel their growth.
- Improve a child's school-readiness and educational achievement.
- Reduce disparities in health, education, and earning potential.
- Reduce a person's risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease later in life.
- Save more than one million lives each year.
- Boost a country's GDP by as much as 12 per cent.
- Break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Source: <http://thousanddays.org/the-issue/why-1000-days/>

their predisposition to obesity and certain chronic diseases, are largely set during this 1,000 day window.

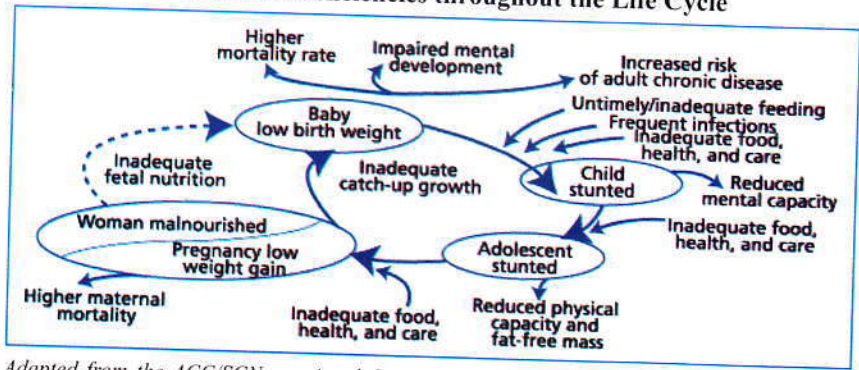
India: Situation and Response

Despite its commitment to reduce malnutrition levels and its sustained economic growth, India lags behind on all key nutrition indicators. The Rapid Survey in Children shows that 38.7 per cent children under the age of 5 are stunted, 19.8 per cent are wasted and 42.5 per cent are under weight. Stunting is a measure of chronic under nutrition, wasting indicates acute under-nutrition and under-weight is a composite of these two conditions. Until 2006, the rate of decline in these figures was rather slow. However, progress accelerated since NFHS-3, with the average annual rate of stunting declining by 2.3 per cent per year from 2006-14 compared with 1.2 per cent per year between 1992-2006. (RSoc, 2014)

Many efforts are underway to address malnutrition in the country.

The Government has been at the fore front with a number of Departments/ Ministries implementing a range of schemes and programmes that have direct and indirect bearing on nutrition. Notably, the ICDS, a flagship programme of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, works towards improving the nutrition and health status of children and expectant mothers through a package of services- supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check ups, referral services etc. through a cadre of frontline workers at the Anganwadi Centres. Ministry of Food & Civil Supplies manages the mega Public Distribution System (PDS) providing affordable food to households while the Ministry of Rural Development implements the MGNREGS with the aim to enhance household level incomes and thereby enable better access to food. The Mid-day Meal Scheme being implemented under the Ministry of Human Resource Development is the world's largest school feeding programme. Ministry of Tribal Affairs manages a range of initiatives for addressing multiple needs of tribal populations including hunger and nutrition. A large number of initiatives are also being undertaken by the private sector, civil society organisations and other development partners including the UN agencies.

Nutrition deficiencies throughout the Life Cycle



Adapted from the ACC/SCN-appointed Commission on the Nutrition Challenges of the 21st Century.

State Level Innovation: A Case Study from Uttarakhand

In three districts of Uttarakhand, women's federations are supplying Mandua (Finger Millet), and other traditional cereals and pulses in



the form of Take Home Rations for ICDS. They do grading, sorting and packaging for which federation pays them Rs.1 per packet. One member packs about 150 – 200 packets in 4-5 hours everyday. With a profit margin of over 10 per cent, ICDS rations are making an important contribution in improving the viability and sustainability of federations while at the same time, ensuring clean and nutritious supply to ICDS. Federations are paying farmers Rs.10 to Rs. 15 per kg for Mandua, against Rs.5 to Rs.8 per kg earlier. With this opportunity, farmers are now much more interested in growing traditional crops, and there has been a big increase in demand for millet seeds. Finally, the work of processing and packaging creates paid employment for federation members. In 2014-15, a formal MoU was signed between ICDS and the women's federations and a business of INR 25.30 million was done with the profit of INR 2.3 million. From April 2014 to December 2014, federations directly benefitted nearly 7,500 pregnant/ lactating women and 22,430 children. This initiative is being implemented under the Integrated Livelihood Support Programme of the Government of Uttarakhand.¹



Conclusion

This recently released India Health Report on Nutrition communicates 6 critical messages:

- Stunting, wasting and under-weight rates of India's children has declined, especially during the last decade, but still exceed levels observed in countries at similar income levels.
- The rate of improvement in nutritional status has not kept pace with India's significant gains in economic prosperity and agricultural productivity during recent decades. Stunting rates may decline with economic progress but economic growth cannot, by itself, reduce under nutrition and may contribute to over-weight and obesity.
- Nutritional status and progress on reducing stunting vary markedly across India's states indicating that state specific approaches are necessary to achieve further gains in reducing stunting.
- The underlying reasons for India's high rates of stunting and variability in progress are complex and inter-twined. Some of the drivers such as complementary feeding, women's status and health, sanitation and social/ caste inequality are the major challenges.
- India will ignore the problem of under nutrition and its impact on child development at its peril and risk large economic, health and social consequences for future generations.
- India's under-nutrition problem is a serious threat to child development. Accelerating action at the state level is essential to change the course of the future for India's children.

With high prevalence of low maternal height, low body mass index and anaemia, India's women are at great peril of having small babies and

remaining mal-nourished themselves. For the past decade or more, health service delivery has concentrated on improving maternal and child survival. Where this has been successful, there is an urgent need to revisit the neglected area of maternal nutrition, especially for improving weight gain prior to and during pregnancy as a way of improving birth weight (RWNS 6). A lifecycle approach which focuses on improving nutrition throughout women's lives is needed. Data on women's nutritional status can be a powerful tool for informing communities and governments about the nature, extent, and consequences of female malnutrition, but data needs to be collected regularly, analyzed, and disseminated. Improving maternal nutrition offers important opportunities to improve both the health and well-being of the mother herself, as well as of her children and in turn benefits the country. India's cohort of 26 million babies each year deserves better life conditions that those that await them at present.

Readings

- UNSCN's World Nutrition Situation 5th and 6th reports.
- India Health Report: Nutrition, 2015. http://www.transformnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/12/INDIA-HEALTH-REPORT-NUTRITION_2015_for-Web.pdf
- Rapid Survey in Children (RSoc, 2014)
- Women and Health Learning Package: Nutrition and Women's Health www.the-network.tuflh.org
- Nutrition of Women and Adolescent Girls: Why It Matters. Elizabeth I. Ransom and Leslie K. Elder <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2003NutritionofWomenandAdolescentGirlsWhyItMatters.aspx>
- Jay Ross and Sue Horton, "Economic Consequences of Iron Deficiency" (1998)

References

- 1 The project is financed by a loan from the International Fund for Agricultural Development. □

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