

Time to turn spotlight back on malnutrition

Given the scale of the problem, the Budgetary allocation for nutrition for children and women must be enhanced

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Child malnutrition is one of the most pressing public health issues currently in India. According to the Global Hunger Index (GHI) report 2021, India recorded the highest child wasting rate of any country at 17.3 per cent in 2020. Moreover, recent data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21) show that roughly 35 per cent of children under five are affected by stunting.

The UN Policy 2018 reports that nearly four out of 10 children in India do not meet their full human potential owing to chronic malnutrition. Besides, with one in every three children malnourished, malnutrition is also thought to be the predominant risk factor for deaths in children under five, accounting for 68.2 per cent of the total under-five deaths.

Food insecurity

Research carried out in various countries where child malnutrition is high shows that an important cause of this problem is household food insecurity (described as a situ-

ation that exists when all people in a household, at all times, do not have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life). This, in fact, is likely to be the case for India as well since the level of household food insecurity is alarmingly high.

Indeed, the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) report 2020 shows that while 27.8 per cent of India's population suffered from moderate or severe food insecurity in 2014-16, the proportion rose to 31.6 per cent in 2017-19. The number of food insecure people grew from 42.65 crore in 2014-16 to 48.86 crore in 2017-19. India accounted for 22 per cent of the global burden of food insecurity, the highest for any country, in 2017-19. Currently, India ranks 101st among 135 countries according to the GHI 2021.

It is definitely not the case that the government is unaware of the fact that widespread prevalence of household food insecurity is likely to be a leading cause of child malnutrition. Yet, we were surprised to see that in last year's Budget, there



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was a whopping 27 per cent decline in the funds allocated for nutrition of children and women. Specifically, from ₹3,700 crore in the fiscal year of 2020-21, the allocation towards the nutrition of children and women was cut to ₹2,700 crore in Budget 2021-22. While some economists defend this move by stating that the 2021-22 Budget was rejigged and thus a comparison between the Budgets of 2020-21 and 2021-22 was not meaningful, it was clear that actual government spending on nutrition schemes was

lower than the budgeted amount in 2020-21. With the 2022-23 Budget coming up, one can only hope that the government does not yet again cut backs drastically on allocation towards nutrition of children and women. In fact, an increase in the allocation (at least to former levels) would be most welcome.

Pandemic impact

The ongoing pandemic has wreaked havoc in the lives of billions of Indians, especially those belonging towards the lower end of the economic ladder. There has been a substantial growth of joblessness, and many have unfortunately been thrown into the clutches of poverty and destitution.

This, quite naturally, has made achievement of food security a distant dream for a huge proportion of households, suggesting that the risk of child malnutrition reaching epidemic proportions is more than ever. It is for this reason, an increase in budgetary allocation towards nutrition of children and women is most essential to say the least.

Expansion of existing nutrition programmes (e.g., POSHAN) and introduction of new ones are some-

thing that we would expect to see in the Budget. However, the government must not target such interventions exclusively towards the households that are conventionally thought to be "falling behind". For instance, many nutritional policies and hunger alleviation programmes in India (as also other developing countries) target households only in rural areas, households below the poverty line, those belonging to minority social groups, and so on.

The assumption is that these are the sub-populations that require assistance when it comes to ensuring food security and reducing child malnutrition. However, there is growing evidence that food insecurity and child malnutrition are alarmingly high among many households which are not in these categories.

In sum, thus, we hope that the government puts the spotlight back on the problem of child malnutrition and outlines concrete steps in the upcoming Budget.

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