

## The Scourge of Hunger and Malnutrition

*Policies ensuring food security and nutrition support require a renewed focus and sense of urgency.*

It is a national shame that, even several decades after independence, the country has not been able to free itself from the problem of hunger and malnutrition that endangers the life and health of the population, especially that of children, women, and vulnerable groups. The global hunger index (GHI) published this year has used four indicators—namely undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting, and child mortality—in order to assess the performance of countries in terms of reducing the problem of hunger. This index places India as one among the countries that experience “serious” levels of hunger.

Achieving the goal of Zero Hunger by 2030, which is one of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, would not only require innovative and sustained government strategies, especially with regard to interventional programmes and policies, but also a firm resolve to deliver the desired results. The GHI measures and maps hunger across countries in order to ensure that this goal is realised. In India, notwithstanding the enactment of the National Food Security Act, 2013 and the build-up of foodgrain stocks over the years, the report reveals that debilitating hunger continues to persist, imperilling the basic right to adequate and sufficient food. This, at a time when some of the neighbouring South Asian countries have fared much better.

The report states that India’s GHI indicator values, because of its large population, have an outsized impact on the indicator values for the region. According to it, in India, only 9.6% of all children between the ages of six and 23 months are fed a minimum acceptable diet. Further, the child wasting rate or the share of children under the age of five who have low weight for height, an indicator of acute undernutrition, is at 20.8%, the highest of any country included in the report for which data was available. The child stunting rate or the share of children under the age of five who have low height for their age, which indicates chronic undernutrition, is also very high at 37.9%. But, the GHI has been critiqued owing to the fact that comparison of rankings from one year to another cannot be done with respect to GHI scores and indicator values. Besides revisions of data and methodology, different countries have been included every year in the report.

However, there is no escaping the fact that the persistence of high levels of malnutrition continues to endanger lives of children in India and this is further reinforced by the findings of another report, *State of the World’s Children*, by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). This report assessed the state of health of children, specifically malnutrition, anaemia, and obesity among other health problems, to find that diets lacking adequate nutrition

were the leading cause of death across the world. In India, even though the median mortality rate of children below the age of five per 1,000 deaths is 37, in terms of absolute numbers, it reported the most number of deaths (8,82,000) in 2018, of which 62% constituted neonatal deaths. Thus, malnutrition caused 69% of deaths among children below the age of five, and every second child in the age group was affected by some form of malnutrition. The report finds that 35% of the children suffered from stunting, 17% from wasting, and 33% from underweight. Only 42% of children between the ages of six and 23 months were fed at an adequate frequency, while only 21% received an adequately diverse diet. Moreover, every second woman was found to be anaemic, while 40.5% of children were also found to be suffering from the same condition. The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (2016–18) released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare also revealed that 34.7% of children under five were stunted, 17.3% were wasted, and 33.4% were underweight.

The reasons for poor nutrition are on account of multiple factors, which show significant interstate and intrastate disparities. These include the prevalence of poverty, inadequate availability of foodgrains and pulses, the absence of vital nutrients in the diet, ineffective public distribution mechanisms and unequal distribution, the relative status of women within the household, lack of access to clean water and poor sanitation, as well as genetic and environmental causes. While there has been a lack of concerted political will on the part of successive governments and the existing systems and policies have been unable to effectively deliver results, the current predicament has been due to the combination of both these factors.

The existing policies include the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, a conditional cash transfer scheme for pregnant and lactating mothers, and the Poshan Abhiyan and the National Nutrition Mission, envisioned to make India free from malnutrition by 2022 by ensuring drastic reduction in stunting and undernutrition. However, given the rate of progress in the reduction of malnutrition levels, it remains doubtful whether this target can be met, according to a recent research paper. Is it not an irony, then, that India has been unable to eradicate hunger and severe acute malnutrition despite it being one of the fastest wealth creators in the world in recent times as per the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report? The governments, therefore, must accord the highest priority to guarantee sufficient food and nutrition to the population by making adequate investments for the provisioning of nutritional interventions to ensure survival and human development to its rightful potential.