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Action on ground needed to tackle malnutrition: Experts on India's poor showing at Global Hunger Index

A look at the last round of NFHS in 2015-2016 corroborates this as it shows that the country's showing on parameters of 'wasted' and 'severely wasted' children had worsened. NEW DELHI: The recently released Global Hunger Index (GHI), which ranked India on the 94th spot among 107 countries, underlines that India's commitment to eliminating hunger and malnutrition leaves much to be desired. A look at the last round of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in 2015-2016 corroborates this as it shows that the country's showing on parameters of 'wasted' and 'severely wasted' children had worsened compared to the previous survey in 2005-06. NFHS-4 was conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, as designated by the Ministry of Health and Family. As compared to NFHS-3, the percentage of wasted children under five years of age had increased from 19.8% to 21% in NFHS-4 (See GFX-1). The percentage of children under five who were 'severely wasted' increased from 6.4% in NFHS-3 to 7.5% in NFHS-4.

This was corroborated in the GHI report which said that among the 11 countries where the public health significance of child wasting rate was considered 'high' or 'very high', India was in the latter category at 17.3 per cent. This paints a dismal picture of India's commitment to eliminating hunger and malnutrition as a part of achieving its sustainable development goals (SDGs), said activists working on food security. Deepa Bajaj, chief executive of the NGO Child Survival India, said budgetary allocation was an essential component of pushing the SDG agenda. The government has allocated Rs 35,600 crore for nutrition-related programmes in 2020-21 but action on the ground is needed, she said.

"It is essential for policymakers to realise that 'hunger' can be handled even by providing carbohydrate rich staple diets, but 'nutrition' needs proper balance of macro- and micro-nutrients in the diet and a multi-sectoral approach targeting women empowerment and education, tackling poverty and providing sanitation for all," said Bajaj. Sachin Kumar Jain, a representative of Right to Food Campaign, said the SDGs remain restricted to academic discourse with states not adopting target-based approach in

planning.

“India’s malnutrition management campaign is just focused on technical aspects and not on ensuring the rightful access of women and children to food and nutrition,” said Jain. States where the percentage of under-five children who were stunted – an indicator of malnutrition – was significantly higher than the national average were Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Meghalaya (See GFX-2). Bihar, Jharkhand, MP and UP also fared poorer than the already critical national average (35.8%) of children under-five who are underweight.

The state-specific indicators on all forms of malnutrition like stunting, wasting and underweight influence the aggregated data at national level, observed Arvind Singh, advisor, health and nutrition, at the NGO Matri Sudha. “Governments in high-burden states like Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, MP and Maharashtra must collaborate on various common parameters to address the issue.” Malnutrition can be controlled not only by intake of food but also by ensuring that infections like diarrhoea are prevented or treated at an early stage, pointed out Dr Abhay Bang, social activist and founder-director of Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health.

Tribal areas & malnutrition States with significant tribal population like MP, Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh fared poorly in terms of stunting, wasting, severely wasting and children being underweight. With 40.6% of the Scheduled Tribe population living below the poverty line as compared to 20.5% of the non-tribal population, as documented by the 2011 Census data, malnutrition is worse among tribal children. Data shows 42% tribal children were underweight while under-five mortality rate among the ST population was 57.2 per 1,000 live births. “Food diversity which tribal people had when they had access to forests has now been jeopardised. Plus, not enough money is being spent on tribal health,” said Bhang, who led the expert committee which brought out a report on tribal health 2018.