

India suffers epidemic of stunted kids

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NEW DELHI — Malnutrition rates among Indian children are among the world's highest and cause stunted growth in about half of children under five years, researchers quoting their study in the Lancet medical journal said on Tuesday.

These children account for one-third of the global population of stunted children, Dr. Robert Black, the lead author of a series of papers published in the Lancet this year, said in New Delhi on Tuesday.

"Undernourished children are more likely to become short adults and to give birth to smaller babies," Dr. Black, who is from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said.

"Stunting in the first two years leads to irreversible damage into adult life," he said.

There is much debate in India over the country's level of poverty, with many critics saying that indexes such as malnutrition remained far too high for a trillion-dollar economy that has been booming in recent years.

Undernourished children also face developmental problems that will deter them socially and economically as they grow older, the researchers said.

They said proper breastfeeding for the first two years of a child's life and adequate vitamin supplements in food could help in reversing the problem.

Indian government officials said they were worried by the impact.

"We need to do more as a country because of the long-term consequences of undernourishment and we are not doing enough now," M.K. Bhan, secretary of the department of biotechnology in India said.

In India, distribution of subsidized food for poor people through the government has miserably failed, officials say, with nearly one-third or even half of the food meant for poorest of the poor siphoned off by corrupt officials.

"We need to give food security to people," Mr. Bhan said.

Researchers said women, especially pregnant women, were not getting enough nourishment.

"One-third of all boys and girls are undernourished because the mother is undernourished," added Purnima Menon of the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Food warning for Indian children

By Damian Grammaticas
BBC News, Delhi

More than 1.5m children in India are at risk of becoming malnourished because of rising global food prices, the UN children's charity, Unicef, says.

It warns that food inflation could be devastating for vulnerable women and children right across South Asia.

The region already has the largest number of malnourished children in the world and levels could get even worse.

Even before the current crisis almost half of all Indian children showed signs of stunted growth, Unicef says.

'Huge numbers'

"It is a perfect storm, we have increasing malnutrition in an area that already has the majority of malnutrition in the world," Daniel Toole, Unicef's regional director for South Asia, said in the Indian capital, Delhi, on Tuesday.

"We have huge numbers of people living in poverty and a doubling of food prices. Those factors combined mean that we're going to just create tremendous vulnerability."

According to Unicef's latest State of the World's Children's report, India has the worst indicators of child malnutrition in South Asia: 48% of under fives in India are stunted, compared to 43% in Bangladesh and 37% in Pakistan.

Meanwhile 30% of babies in India are born underweight, compared to 22% in Bangladesh and 19% in Pakistan. Unicef calculates that 40% of all underweight babies in the world are Indian.

Put all that in hard numbers and the figures are stark. Fifty million Indian under fives are affected by malnutrition. Rising food prices, Unicef says mean 1.5 to 1.8 million more children in India alone could end up malnourished.

Cutting down on meals

And already Unicef says more expensive food is having an impact.

"People are changing the way they eat," says Mr Toole.

"Households that have three meals a day are going back to two. Or if they have two they are going back to one. That has a dramatic impact on child nutrition because children need to be fed frequently."

Elsewhere it's not the number of meals, but the quality of the food they're eating that is changing, he says.

"Meat is very expensive and they have dropped that. So they are losing their protein source. So that will have an impact on health and nutrition too."

In Bangladesh and Nepal people are using less oil, an important source of calories.

Three hundred million Indians live on less than \$1 a day, according to the UN.

Poor families who cannot afford rising food prices are having to save money where they can, and that also means spending less on healthcare and education.

"We are starting to see that families are pulling girls out of school as they need to send them to work," Mr Toole said.

"So our concern is we will start to see more incidences of child labour, and less frequenting of school, which has a long-term developmental impact on children and societies as a whole."

Food prices, he believes, will remain high for at least the next two years, and in that time it is children who will bear the brunt.

Strategic stocks

So what needs to be done to tackle this crisis?

First the priority must be to feed the hungry across South Asia, Unicef says.

In Afghanistan that means additional food aid. In India, Bangladesh and Nepal it means expanding school feeding programmes and midday meal schemes as well as more cash payments to the most vulnerable.

Then countries will have to build up their strategic stocks of food.

Bangladesh has already bought 400,000 metric tonnes of rice from India to do this, but wants to triple that amount. It's obviously expecting the numbers of poor and hungry to grow.

But to tackle the root of the problem there needs to be a significant investment in agriculture, especially small-scale farming, in seeds, fertilisers, and infrastructure. Countries need to change, says Unicef.

It says India has focused on industrialisation and outsourcing of services, while just 2.2% of the national budget is invested in agriculture.

In Nepal it says there has been an almost complete neglect of irrigation systems. The crisis may force governments to face up to years of under-investment.

And if action isn't taken, Unicef is warning there could be social unrest in South Asia.

"This is already a region of vast disparities," Mr Toole warns.

"My gut says at some point people will say enough is enough. If they can't feed themselves and

their children it could be too much."

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