

THOUSAND DAYS OF NUTRITION, AND A BILLION DREAMS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Poverty & Hunger and related issues

How far India goes in realising its billion plus dreams over the next decade or two will be determined by how well it nourishes the physical well-being and mental potential of its people, particularly its children. If one has to pick the single gravest threat that blocks the promise of this young nation at the foundational level, it has to be arguably malnutrition.

Malnourished children tend to fall short of their real potential — physically as well as mentally. That is because malnutrition leaves their bodies weaker and more susceptible to illnesses. In 2017, a staggering 68% of 1.04 million deaths of children under five years in India was attributable to malnutrition, reckoned [a Lancet study](#) in 2019.

Children who survive malnutrition do not do as well as they could. Without necessary nutrients, their brains do not develop to the fullest. No wonder then, they end up performing poorly at school than they otherwise would. Malnutrition places a burden heavy enough for India, to make it a top national priority. About half of all children under five years in the country were found to be stunted (too short) or wasted (too thin) for their height, estimated the [Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey](#), carried out by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare with support of UNICEF three years ago.

The country has been making progress on nutrition for the last two decades, but it was after the Prime Minister launched the [Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition \(POSHAN\) Abhiyaan](#) in 2018, that a holistic approach to tackle malnutrition started gathering momentum. Under it, the government strengthened the delivery of essential nutrition interventions so that more children have the right start in life for optimum growth, health, development and a prosperous future.

As the flagship programme (POSHAN Abhiyaan) completes 1,000 days this week, it is time to renew our commitment to nutrition for two reasons. First, because it conveys the deeply symbolic value of the first 1,000 days from conception of a child till the child turns two years old, marking the most crucial period for nutrition interventions in a lifecycle, which once missed could result in irreversible damage to the child's physical and mental well-being. Second, focus on nutrition is critical as COVID-19 threatens to derail the gains India has made in nutrition in more than one way.

Ground Zero | [How dearth of data killed a healthy diet](#)

For one, COVID-19 is pushing millions into poverty, reducing incomes of many more and disproportionately affecting the economically disadvantaged, who are also most vulnerable to malnutrition and food insecurities. Second, pandemic-prompted lockdowns disrupted essential services — such as supplementary feeding under *anganwadi* centres, mid-day meals, immunisation, and micro-nutrient supplementation which can exacerbate malnutrition.

It is in this challenging backdrop, leaders from academia, civil society, development partners, community advocates and the private sector have come together as part of 'commitment to action' to seek and support the government in a six-pronged action that can save and build on the advances India has made in nutrition. These clear action points include commitments around sustained leadership, dedicated finances, multi-sectoral approach and increased uninterrupted

coverage of a vulnerable population under programmes enhancing nutrition.

Also read | [3 years on, a mere 30% of Poshan Abhiyaan funds used](#)

One reason POSHAN Abhiyaan succeeded in galvanising action so fast was because it was led by the Prime Minister himself. That example must be sustained so that leadership of food and nutrition security rests with the Prime Minister at the national level, a Chief Minister at the State level, a district magistrate at the district and panchayat at the village level. This was already imperative for POSHAN Abhiyaan to succeed, but it has now become critical as COVID-19 compounds an already complex challenge.

In terms of policies, vision, strategies, India already has some of the world's biggest early childhood public intervention schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme, the mid-day meal programme, and Public Distribution System. India needs to ensure coverage of every single child and mother, along with 12 months of Poshan Maah (Nutrition Month), 52 weeks of breastfeeding weeks and 365 days of take-home ration.

Also read | [Need to step up efforts to meet nutrition targets, says NITI Aayog report](#)

To ensure this, the country needs to retain its financial commitments for the nutrition schemes it already runs and earmark additional funds to preserve nutritional security in vulnerable communities, particularly women and children in slum areas, migrants, the population in tribal areas and districts with malnutrition rates.

Pandemic spurred challenges have also negatively hit other proven underlying drivers of malnutrition. For instance, economic insecurities often force girls into early marriage, early motherhood, discontinue their schooling, and reduce institutional deliveries, cut access to micronutrient supplements, and nutritious food which largely tend to be perishable, all of which may worsen malnutrition. Accelerating efforts to address these will be needed to stop the regression into the deeper recesses of malnutrition.

Poshan Maah | [Proper nutrition vital to build prosperous nation, says PM Modi](#)

However, to truly grasp the depth and breadth of the COVID-19-caused nutrition crisis, the country must track nutrition indices through data systems. Evidence generated through data will also serve well to track the positive impact of POSHAN Abhiyaan, and course correct on the long journey to a well-nourished India. It takes time for nutrition interventions to yield dividends, but once those accrue, they can bring transformative generational shifts. Filling in the nutrition gaps will guarantee a level-playing field for all children and strengthen the foundations for the making of a future super-power.

Arjan De Wagt is Chief, Nutrition, UNICEF India

This article is available only to our subscribers.

Already have an account ? [Sign in](#)

Start your 14 days free trial. [Sign Up](#)

Dear reader,

We have been keeping you up-to-date with information on the developments in India and the world that have a bearing on our health and wellbeing, our lives and livelihoods, during these

difficult times. To enable wide dissemination of news that is in public interest, we have increased the number of articles that can be read free, and extended free trial periods. However, we have a request for those who can afford to subscribe: please do. As we fight disinformation and misinformation, and keep apace with the happenings, we need to commit greater resources to news gathering operations. We promise to deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

Dear subscriber,

Thank you!

Your support for our journalism is invaluable. It's a support for truth and fairness in journalism. It has helped us keep apace with events and happenings.

The Hindu has always stood for journalism that is in the public interest. At this difficult time, it becomes even more important that we have access to information that has a bearing on our health and well-being, our lives, and livelihoods. As a subscriber, you are not only a beneficiary of our work but also its enabler.

We also reiterate here the promise that our team of reporters, copy editors, fact-checkers, designers, and photographers will deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

Suresh Nambath

Please enter a valid email address.

You can support quality journalism by turning off ad blocker or purchase a subscription for unlimited access to The Hindu.

[Sign up for a 30 day free trial.](#)

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com