

‘Malnutrition is a national shame’

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh released the first-ever citizens' report on child malnutrition in the national capital recently. "The problem of malnutrition is a national shame," the Prime Minister said. The statistics in the HUNGaMA (Hunger and Malnutrition) report say that every third malnourished child on the planet is an Indian.

The Prime Minister has announced multi-sectoral programmes for 200 districts that have high malnutrition levels. 100 worst districts are in the suspect BIMARU states. "The result of the survey is both worrying and encouraging," the Prime Minister said. The Prime Minister called for the civil society, entrepreneurs, business communities to bring malnutrition below acceptable levels.

Here's the full text of the Prime Minister's speech on the HUNGaMA report:

There are nearly 16 crore children in the country below the age of 6 years. In the years to come, these children will join our work-force as scientists, farmers, teachers, data operators, artisans, service providers. Several of them will become social workers like many of you in this hall. The health of our economy and society lies in the health of this generation. We cannot hope for a healthy future with a large number of malnourished children.

As I have said earlier and I repeat that the problem of malnutrition is a matter of national shame. Despite impressive growth in our GDP, the level of under-nutrition in the country is unacceptably high. We have also not succeeded in reducing this rate fast enough.

Ladies & gentlemen, The first step in addressing the challenge of malnutrition lies in understanding it clearly. And it is for this reason that studies like the HUNGaMA survey are so important. I would like to compliment the Citizen's Alliance against Malnutrition, Nandi Foundation, Mahindra & Mahindra and other partners and supporters of the Alliance for carrying out this very significant survey. I understand that the surveyors have reached more than 73,000 households in 112 districts across 9 states. To measure more than one lakh children and talk to 74,000 mothers is indeed an extraordinary accomplishment.

The results of this survey are both worrying and encouraging. The survey reports high levels of malnutrition, but it also indicates that one child in five has reached

an acceptable healthy weight during the last 7 years in 100 focus districts. This 20% decline in malnourishment in the last 7 years is better than the rate of decline reported in NFHS 3. However, what concerns me is that 42 per cent of our children are still underweight. This is an unacceptably high occurrence.

We have always believed that a mother's education level, economic status of the family, sanitation and hygiene, status of women in the family, breastfeeding and other good child rearing practices affect children's nutrition. The HUNGaMA survey has broadly validated these hypotheses.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Though the ICDS continues to be our most important tool to fight malnutrition, we can no longer rely solely on it. We need to focus on districts where malnutrition levels are high and where conditions causing malnutrition prevail. Policy makers and programme implementers need to clearly understand many linkages -- between education and health, sanitation and hygiene, drinking water and nutrition -- and then shape their responses accordingly.

These sectors can no longer work in isolation of each other. Health professionals cannot solely concentrate on curative care. Drinking water and sanitation providers cannot be oblivious to the positive externality of their actions. The school teacher needs to be aware of the nutritional needs of the adolescent girl. And above all, the Anganwadi workers should be aware of their contribution to nation building by focusing on the care of our young citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen, I chair a National Council on India's Nutrition Challenges, which met a year ago and decided four things:

- To launch a strengthened and restructured ICDS,
- To start a multi-sectoral programme for 200 high burden districts.
- To initiate a nationwide communication campaign against malnutrition.
- And to bring nutrition focus to key programmes of agricultural development, research and development in agriculture, PDS, mid-day-meals programme, drinking water and sanitation, health etc. The Ministries concerned are taking necessary action to implement these four decisions. We hope to see positive outcomes of these efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Let me end by once again congratulating all those who have contributed to this report. The HUNGaMA report is an excellent example of how people from diverse areas can and should come together for a noble cause. It is my sincere hope that the report will enhance our understanding of the challenge

of malnutrition and will help shape better policy responses to it (CNN-IBN 10-1-12).