

# Sobering Lessons on Nutrition

The HUNGaMA (Hunger and Malnutrition) survey findings, released by Naandi Foundation on January 10, 2012, drew wide attention to one of the most pressing and persistent of India's problems — undernutrition. The survey measured the nutritional status of over one lakh children less than five years of age and interviewed about 74,000 mothers in nine states and 112 districts.

The Right to Food Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act are altering the landscape for human development slowly, but surely. The National Rural Health Mission is helping improve health systems and services for maternal and child health. And of course, India's economy has continued to grow.

So, in 2012, where do we stand on nutrition? Until the recently released HUNGaMA survey, there was really no way to tell. The report provides a somewhat optimistic picture. Trends in the 100 high burden districts covered both in District Level Health Survey (DLHS) in 2002/2004 and HUNGaMA in 2011, show an annual rate of reduction of 2.9% in underweight, a rate that is extremely encouraging. Anganwadi centers are now almost universal and fair price shop outlets are also widespread.

Several findings of the HUNGaMA survey are sobering. However, notwithstanding the positive trends in underweight reduction, the overall burden of undernutrition in the 100 high burden survey districts is staggeringly high: 59% of children are stunted (low height-for-age, an indicator of chronic deprivation) and 42% are underweight. Even in the 12 better performing districts surveyed, stunting rates ranged between 40% and 50%.

Also worrisome is the finding that the rate of reduction in underweight in the 6 "best-off" districts from the "best-off" states was not as rapid as in the 100 focus districts from the worst-off states. This suggests that strategies for undernutrition reduction in those districts that are somewhat better-off also need careful attention.

The HUNGaMA survey findings reiterate the need for multifaceted approaches to tackle undernutrition. For example, soap was available in 100% of the households surveyed but its usage was quite limited (approximately 10%), suggesting the need for effective campaigns on hand washing. Half the mothers said they could not afford to see a trained doctor when their child was sick, indicating the need to address health system level supply side factors as well as to address household

poverty that affects healthcare seeking and other determinants of undernutrition. Prevalence of undernutrition is substantially higher among children with low birth weight (<2.5 kg at birth), indicating that strengthening women's pre-pregnancy health and antenatal care services are critical.

Launching the HUNGaMA report, the Prime Minister called undernutrition a “national shame”. Encouragingly, he acknowledges and calls for multi-sectoral action to accelerate undernutrition reductions. We welcome this call for multifaceted action; such actions and the accompanying regular data collection to monitor trends are well-supported by experiences of other countries that have successfully reduced undernutrition.

HUNGaMa attempts to fill the data vacuum, but it is able to do so only partially. Undernutrition is still a problem even in those districts not included in the survey and the stories of mothers and children in those districts also deserve telling. India urgently needs a nutrition surveillance system to track progress in a dynamic context, to inform planning and action.

The nation also needs programme/policy relevant research and knowledge management efforts to generate evidence on ongoing and upcoming government initiatives — what works, where, how and why — so as to inform policy and programmatic action.

India now needs another kind of hungama as well — the kind that generates excitement and energy to proactively craft a better future for our children regardless of where they live, what their sex, caste or socioeconomic status is. The leadership at the Centre and state levels has never been more willing than now to invest in nutrition. Sixteen crore children are waiting for such a hungama (ET 11-2-12).