

## How Malnutrition in Sri Lanka’s Estate Sector Can Be Tackled?

### INTRODUCTION

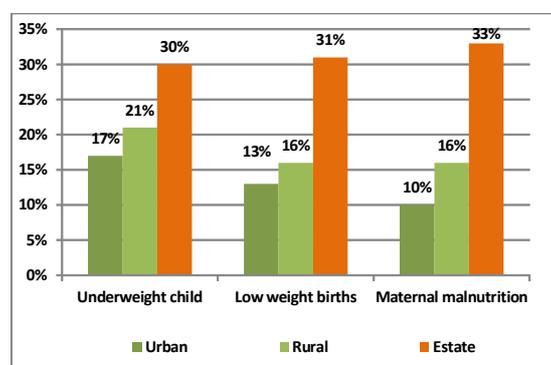
Malnutrition continues to be a serious health concern in Sri Lanka. Data reveals that certain population groups fare worse than others. For instance country’s Estate sector was worst affected in poor nutrition (see Figure 1). In deprived regions, there are deep rooted socio-economic factors affecting health. To combat malnutrition with appropriate interventions, policy makers need to have a better understanding of the causes of malnutrition in the severely affected estate sector.

### OBJECTIVES

This study looks beyond health and explores the socio-economic determinants of child and maternal malnutrition in the Estate sector. Study findings contribute to policies on priority areas needing to be addressed in breaking the vicious cycle of malnutrition in the estate sector, and in achieving overall goals of the country.

FIGURE 1

Nutritional Status of Mother and Child Lowest in Estate Sector



Source: Author’s calculations using DHS 2006/07 data

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the causes of Estate sector malnutrition are unique to the Estate sector – intake of imbalanced diet, household alcohol and tobacco consumption, household poor sanitary facilities etc. These factors coupled with the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition, women’s lack of capacity in terms of education and also household poor socio-economic status perpetuates the vicious cycle of malnutrition in the estate sector. In this context, it has to be emphasized that policies relating to the improvement of nutritional levels of Estate sector should be specially designed interventions with especial attention to community driven programmes.

**Sustainable nutritional interventions should be aimed at enhancing food security** at the household and community levels as well as at schools in the estate sector. Nutrition education programmes should be strengthened to inculcate better consumption habits - what foods to select; how to prepare

and feed children; and the hygienic and nutritional value of food.

**Programmes to raise awareness on healthy behaviours** – promote positive health practices and curb negative ones like alcoholism. Awareness programmes could be useful in improving awareness among estate sector people, and break the cycle of poverty and poor health.

**Actions need to be taken at each stage of the life cycle to combat the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition in the estate sector.** For better targeting, these programmes should be conducted by the government specially trained health workers at the Estates, with the support of estate sector management.

**Living conditions in estate areas should be enhanced by providing better housing and increasing access to safe drinking water, and sanitation facilities.**

A safe living environment must be encouraged by providing basic facilities, including safe drinking water, sanitary facilities, drainage and waste management.

**Special community driven programmes would have a major role to play in addressing the critical concern in the Estate sector.**

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The study uses the nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) conducted in 2006/07. All the estimates of this paper are based on

DHS 2006/07 unless otherwise mentioned. Anthropometric index weight-for-age (underweight) is considered according to the WHO Child

Growth Standards adopted in 2006, as a measure of underweight children.

### KEY FINDINGS

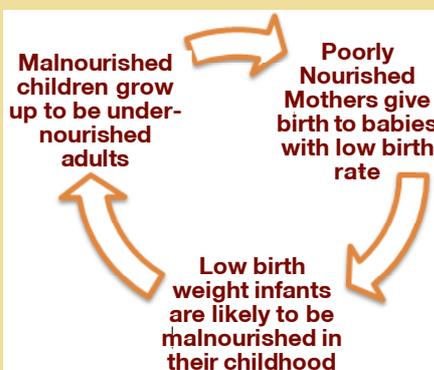
**A significant reason for child and maternal malnutrition in the estate sector was intake of the 'wrong' kind of food – consuming lack of protein rich food but more starchy and fatty food.** Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data reveals that under three year old children and mothers in the estate sector consumed fewer protein-rich foods (meat, fish and poultry eggs) and other nutritional food such as yellow vegetables and fruits and cereal when compared to their peers in the other two sectors. Reasons for intake of imbalanced diet include deeply embedded socio-economic factors in the estate sector such as poverty, cultural, and social factors – intolerant parents, alcoholism. These factors badly affect the utilization of available resources and how they are translated into resources for food security, child and maternal care.

**Estate sector alcoholism and tobacco use significantly increased the prevalence of malnourished women.** Alcohol and tobacco consumption was extensively higher among estate sector people. According to DHS data, 40 per cent of the estate sector families were regular users of alcohol; whereas in the other two sectors it affected around 17 per cent of families. Spending on alcohol and tobacco badly affect the household's food security, especially in the Estate sector where highest recorded poverty prevails. It is revealed that Estate sector people spend roughly two times more than the expenditures for alcohol and tobacco incurred by the average Sri Lankan.<sup>1</sup>

**Estate sector households with poor sanitary facilities – shared toilet facility, significantly increase the risk of childhood growth failures.** Sanitation facilities were poor in the estate sector households – 43 per cent of the households did not have access to a sanitary toilet or have a separate toilet facility per household. Alarming, 9 per cent of the households in the estate sector did not have a toilet at all.

Furthermore, as of the 2009 household survey, 64 per cent of the estate sector houses consisted of line rooms houses.<sup>2</sup> Out of those line houses, 66 per cent had one bed room. These poor living conditions are contributing factors to frequent illnesses and health issues among estate sector people.

**Further, the study revealed that intergenerational cycle of malnutrition is deeply embedded in the estate sector.**



Above discussed socio-economic factors also contribute to the continuation of intergenerational cycle of malnutrition in the estate sector.

**Evidence suggests that educated women hold the key, but almost half of the women in the estate sector have not had education beyond the primary level.**

Women have the greatest potential to make decisions that positively affect children's health, how household income is spent, the quantity and quality of food, and in health-seeking behaviour. The study findings reveal that the estate sector mother's lower level of education and knowledge has an indirect impact on their nutritional status, as well as on the nutrition of her children. Also, poor education makes it difficult for women to take full advantage of the awareness raising campaigns on family health and hygiene practices.

<sup>1</sup> Estimated using HIES 2009/10

<sup>2</sup> Estimated using HIES 2009/10

**Going beyond health and eliminating the deep-rooted socio-economic factors which are transmitted from generation to generation in the Estate sector community could break the vicious cycle of malnutrition in the Estate sector of Sri Lanka.**

This policy brief is based on the findings from a study carried out by IPS researcher Priyanka Jayawardana on "Socio-economic Determinants of Child and Maternal Malnutrition in the Estate Sector of Sri Lanka", with funding from the Think Tank Initiative.



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