



ADDRESSING NUTRITIONAL RISKS: SRI LANKA'S PERSISTENT PROBLEM OF MALNUTRITION

From the IPS flagship publication 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2018 Report'

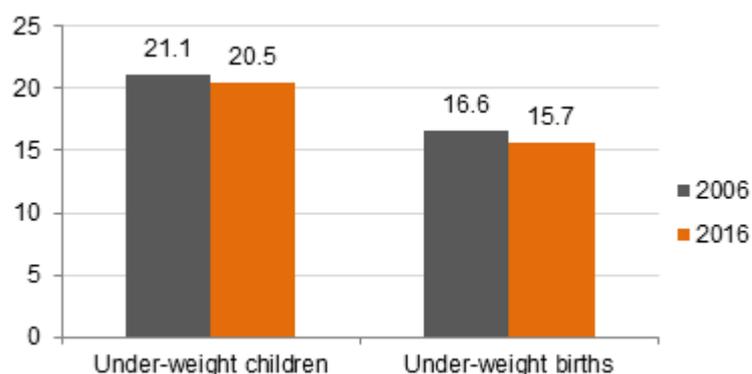


obstacle in improving the country's overall socio-economic indicators. Despite several measures taken by the successive governments to improve the nutritional status, including a National Nutrition Policy (NNP) initiated in 2010, there is no consistent improvement to be seen in the nutritional status of under 5 year old children during 2006-2016. Also, the prevalence of low birth weight has not reduced.

Further, the DHS 2016 survey reveals the existence of socio-economic variations as well as regional disparities in nutrition levels. The prevalence of malnutrition is more severe in terms of certain population groups, such as the estate sector. Similarly, there are district level variations where Nuwara-Eliya, Mullaitivu and Anuradhapura districts have recorded the higher prevalence of child malnutrition, while Ratnapura, Nuwara-Eliya and Matara districts have

Although Sri Lanka performs well in most health indicators, child nutrition is still a major problem. Despite countless initiatives to alleviate malnutrition, child nutritional levels have not improved much over the years. It remains a persistent

Figure 1:
Percentage of Underweight Children and Underweight Births



Source: Department of Census and Statistics. (2017). Demographic and health survey 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/social/SLDHS%202016%20Report%20Final%20Full%2010%20Oct%202017.pdf>

Average monthly wheat flour consumption, per household



recorded a higher prevalence of maternal malnutrition as well as low birth weight babies.

The nutritional status of individuals is interrelated to different stages of their life cycle and between generations. For instance, maternal malnutrition leads to low birth weight and its consequences of childhood growth retardation lead back to under-nourished adults. The intergenerational cycle of malnutrition is deeply embedded in the estate sector. Unless the cycle is broken at some stage, not only does it perpetuate the vicious cycle of malnutrition, but it also contributes to an enormous waste of human potential.

Causes of Malnutrition

The two immediate causes of child nutritional status are inadequate dietary intake and health status. Children can become malnourished either because they do not eat sufficient food in the appropriate form or quality. Poor dietary habits are a significant reason for

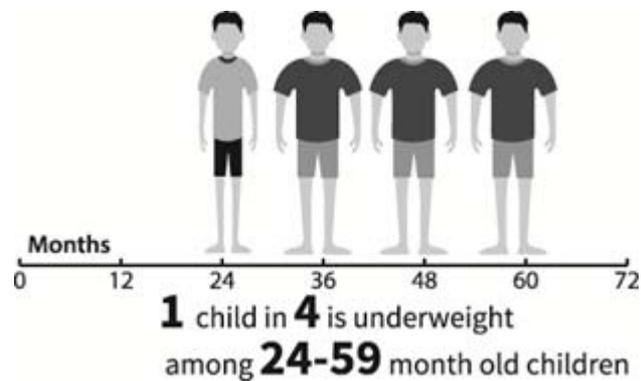
malnourishment in the estate sector.¹ Those in the estate sector continue their cultural dietary practices and consume more wheat flour.

Also, the estate sector households in particular are socio-economically poorer. As reported in the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, 64.6 per cent of estate sector households are among the poorest 40 per cent of households in the country. Also, the HIES 2016 reveals that the mean monthly per capita income for estate sector is remarkably low at around Rs. 8,566, when compared to the national average of Rs. 16,377. It shows that, while the estate sector is just coming out of poverty, low income levels may still hinder their food security.

Poor financial management may also escalate food insecurity. Although the estate sector lags behind economically, the expenditure on alcohol and tobacco in this sector is roughly double in comparison to the average expenditure on same in Sri Lanka. Estate sector households' average monthly expenditure for liquor and tobacco, as a percentage of their monthly food expenditure is over 11 per cent, negatively impacting the households' food security.

Child malnutrition is also linked with mother's education and knowledge. Women have the greatest potential to make decisions that positively affect children's health, how the household income is spent, the quantity and quality of food, and in health-seeking behavior. Poor education makes it difficult for women to take full advantage of awareness raising campaigns on family health and hygiene practices offered by the health services.

Poor sanitation facilities are another



contributory factor for the higher prevalence of malnourishment. The DHS 2016 reveals that 57 per cent of the estate sector households do not have access to a safe drinking water facility while 21 per cent do not have access to a sanitary toilet facility, which negatively affects health, wellbeing, and nutrition of this socio-economic group. In this context, policies relating to the improvement of household socio-economic status and safe environment among the less privileged also have a major role to play in their wellbeing.

Policy Recommendations to Address the Problem of Malnutrition

Despite the efforts of the government and other agencies to eliminate malnutrition, optimum results cannot be achieved unless all interventions are carried out according to a well-designed work plan in a coordinated manner.

Sustainable nutritional interventions should be aimed at enhancing food security, access to health care and services and access to safe water and sanitation at the household and community levels at school as well as in work places. To be more effective, policies must recognise and remove individual causes of malnutrition within

the community. For better targeting, it is important to identify food shortages, and diversities in diets that exist among the community. Communities must address the root causes of malnutrition, with the help of trained individuals, and develop long-term solutions to the nutrition problem. Also, effective nutrition education on healthy eating habits and physical activity can go a long way in reducing the risk of poor nutrition. Educational programmes on nutrition should be strengthened to focus on the importance of nutritious food - what foods to select, how to prepare and feed children in relation to frequency, density, utilisation, and the hygienic and nutrition value of food. The formation of women's groups, with backing of referral facilities, is important to empower women to make the right nutritional choices.

This Policy Insight is based on the comprehensive chapter on "Addressing Nutritional Risks: Sri Lanka's Persistent Problem of Malnutrition" in the 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2018 Report' - the flagship publication of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). The complete report can be purchased from the publications section of the IPS, located at 100/20, Independence Avenue, Colombo 7. For more information, contact the Publications Unit on 0112143107/0112143100.





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¹ Jayawardena, P. (2014). Can people in Sri Lanka's estate sector break away from poor nutrition?. *Health Economics Series, 1*. Retrieved from <http://www.ips.lk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Can-People-in-SL-Estate-Sector-Break-Away.pdf>