

EDITORIAL

Food Insecurity And Indian Children*Vijay N Kamale*

Food insecurity, defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways,”¹ is a public health problem. More than 850 million people all over the world live everyday being food insecure. One in seven people live with a problem that can be fixed. The US Department of Agriculture estimates that 16.4% of households with children <6 years of age experienced food insecurity in 2017, with higher rates among households headed by single, African American, or Hispanic parents.² In India, no such data is available although Indian central and state governments are striving hard to decrease food insecurity amongst population. It is well known that food insecurity among young children is associated with poor overall health, hospitalizations, developmental risk, and behavioural problems. In developed countries, associations between food insecurity and young children’s weight status have been inconsistent, with reports of underweight, overweight, and no relation with weight. However in India, variability in children’s early nutritional status can have lifelong consequences extending into the subsequent generation. Stunting (length/height-for-age >2 SDs below the median) increases the risk for low school achievement, cognitive deficits, and chronic disease in adulthood.³

Recent findings also stress upon importance of considering nonnutritional factors, including caregiver stress and history of adversity, depression, and anxiety, which often co-occur with food insecurity. Screening questions (Hunger Vital Sign) rather than anthropometric criteria should be used to identify food insecurity, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Using such screening questions can help health professionals

refer caregivers to nutrition assistance programs and other supports that can help families cope with economic hardships and their associated stressors.⁴ We, Pediatric association of India are of opinion that while assessing malnutrition study of nonnutritional factors also is essential to provide optimal care.

“Food insecurity exists when all people, at all times, do not have physical and economic access to the sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Poverty usually is coexistent with food insecurity and is the main cause of hunger and malnutrition. Poverty exists when there is lack of income, productive malnutrition, illiteracy, homelessness, inadequate housing, unsafe environment, social discrimination, and many more factors “Malnutrition not only denies people their right to health; it also has serious economic implications. Malnourished children are less able to concentrate in school, and malnourished adults are less able to work effectively – thus undermining productivity and economic growth.” Although urbanization is increasing, the poor are still mainly in the rural areas.

Indians diets are based around a staple grain, such as rice or wheat, served with vegetables and yogurt. Ninety-three percent of daily intake of food in India consists of vegetable products and only⁵ percent consists of animal products. Whether this is cause of undernutrition and food security needs to be studied.

As Mahatma Gandhi said "We must be the change we wish to see." In other words, we have to know what needs to be changed before changes need to be made. Policy changes are common in India, without evidence that first policy has made any

impact. In other words, policy should be reinforced to see the expected change. For example, if one of the new policies required all children to have primary education, a special task force would be important to make sure all children are getting their education with the proper facilities. It is true that domestic policies have helped more than they have hurt over the seventy years India has been a country especially in relation to food and nutritional security. However, there is scope of improvement through developments in domestic policies. The Indian constitution has given the people of India, right for food, and the proper implementation of this right will provide them in the future with means necessary to help themselves and their families become nutritionally stable. The democracy of India is slowly maturing into a prosperous country. The matter of domestic policies is very critical in improving the number of Indians who are food insecure and live in poverty.

References:

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