

Book Reviews

Stuart Gillespie and Lawrence J. Haddad. *The Double Burden of Malnutrition in Asia: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003. Paperback. Indian Rs 280.00. 235 pages.

The culturally, politically, and economically diversified regions in Asia are also different in terms of nutrition level. When under-nutrition is overcome by over-nutrition, it leads to the incidence of diet-related diseases such as coronary heart disease, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, and stroke, etc. Some parts in Asia are under-nourished and some are over-nourished, while a large number of countries are facing both these problems simultaneously. There are also instances of both under- and over-nourished people within the same household. This is what the authors call the double burden of malnutrition in Asia.

This book deals with the magnitude, causes, consequences, and solutions to the problem of malnutrition. It is an excellent, comprehensive, and authoritative overview of the issues related to the direct and indirect policy interventions; capacity development, and resource allocation; and it is useful for the future course of action aimed at defeating the menace of malnutrition in the very diverse continent of Asia.

The greatest number of malnourished population in the world is residing in Asia. In many poverty-stricken Asian countries, inadequate dietary intake and disease, low status of women, high population densities, unfavourable child-caring practices, poor access to healthcare, poor care during pregnancy, and high rates of low birth weight are some of the major causes of malnutrition. The authors have argued in favour of public action for combatting malnutrition as it is an excellent investment for improving intellectual capacity, productivity, lifetime private earnings; and also for reducing private and public healthcare expenditures in the long term. They are of the view that 'nutrition-fuelled growth' would not only reduce income inequality but will also play an effective and crucial role in reducing poverty. Another advantage highlighted is the empowerment of communities to have more and more decentralised forms of government. Since most of the nutrition programmes are community-based, as improved nutrition levels empower people; the process through which malnutrition is reduced will empower communities.

The book has explored a vast body of literature and personal experiences in search of the way to make *the vicious cycle of malnutrition into a virtuous one*. The authors have considered six main forms of malnourishment: low birth weight; early childhood growth failure; anaemia; vitamin A deficiency; iodine deficiency

disorders; and overweight/obesity. In the first chapter, besides introducing the topic, the authors reflect on these six symptoms of malnutrition in Asia, in terms of their rate of prevalence and the possible reasons behind it.

In Chapter Two, the authors have explained the importance of direct nutrition interventions that are intended to impact the main, immediate cause of malnutrition. This chapter draws lessons from the review of extensive literature to find out efficient direct interventions targeting major micronutrient deficiencies. They are of the view that numerous options exist for community-based action but no single action or mix of interventions can be prescribed in isolation without the participatory process of problem assessment, causal and capacity analysis, and programme design. Actions can be initiated at the immediate level or at the core level. Moreover, the success of any programme is not only the achievement of targets but also the good process through which it is conducted. In other words, outcomes achieved today are unlikely to be sustained unless an appropriate process has been launched.

In the third chapter, the authors emphasise the importance of capacity building for any nutrition intervention. They reflect on the roles of the key actors, analysing their strengths and gaps. The focus is not only on human capacity but also on institutional capacity, as malnutrition is the product of social, economic, and political processes and their interactions with each other. Behind these interactions are a range of formal and informal institutions that are therefore critical for understanding malnutrition and for formulating strategies to reduce it.

In Chapter Four, it is expressed that indirect policy actions, if designed and applied in an appropriate manner, can support nutrition interventions either directly or indirectly, increasing the impact of existing interventions. Some of the policies aimed at poverty reduction, women's development, agriculture, microfinance and other income-generating programmes, housing, and infrastructure and environment are examined from the outlook of basic determinants of malnutrition, i.e., household food security, care, and the health environment. Some suggestions are also made for policy changes to increase their impact on reducing malnutrition.

Since nutrition mediations are commenced with the interaction of many social, economic, cultural, political, and institutional factors, therefore the focus in Chapter Five is on the macro-level trends and policies; for instance, globalisation (of financial markets, trade, information, and communications), urbanisation, democracy, legislation, decentralisation of governance, aging of population, rise in HIV/AIDS cases that can possibly affect the milieu for any nutrition action. The objective behind this analysis is to understand the contextual dynamics behind any nutrition action. It is argued that some of the changes at the macro level facilitate while others halt the process of nutritional improvement.

In Chapter Six, the financing of nutrition programmes is discussed. There exist inconsistent patterns of public expenditure on nutrition programmes among the Asian countries. It is argued that in some Asian countries very limited public

resources are allocated for nutrition, and in a few cases such funding does not exist at all. Moreover, some of the programmes are not efficient or well-designed to achieve their goals. For instance, leakages to the non-poor are quite common in case of food subsidy programmes. It is suggested that there is a need to revise national accounts in Asian countries, and funds for nutrition should be properly allocated where necessary. In order to allocate funds properly, it is required to have benefit-cost and cost-effectiveness estimates. Besides recommendations to reallocate existing resources to fill the resource gap, external means to finance the nutrition projects are also discussed in this chapter.

In concluding the discussion, the authors suggest ways to address the problem in the future. They have rightly stressed the need to focus on local or community-based activities. Before starting any project, what is necessary is to first understand the nature of the problem; the availability of administrative and physical infrastructure; its outreach; and the scope of various elements of local capacity. These factors would then smoothen the process of nutrition activities at the local level.

The book recommends some strategies to take care of the problem of under-nutrition at the lower level. These include HIV prevention; availability of safe drinking-water; greater access to primary and secondary education especially for girls; and agricultural price policies that do not discriminate against micronutrient rich foods. At higher levels, flexible safety net programmes can be introduced. In addition, to tackle over-nutrition (primarily the problem of middle-income countries in Asia), food price policy must be examined, and substantial efforts are needed to activate meaningful health insurance and enforcement of strict laws for food-processing standards.

According to UN statistics, more than 500 million people in Asia are chronically hungry, which means they are not getting enough nutrients in their food. Given this scenario, this book is a useful contribution from the policy perspective. The authors have made much effort to collect facts and details about the region. There is a guideline for policy-makers to take appropriate actions in future. Otherwise, the Asian countries might not be able to realise the tremendous economic potential which they possess.

Afia Malik

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics,
Islamabad.