

CURRENT NUTRITIONAL STATUS IN CHILDREN IN YEAR 2011

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Malnutrition remains a serious problem for Sri Lankan children and Sri Lanka generally. Overall, the nutritional status of children under 5 years in Sri Lanka has not improved in the past ten years. In 2009, 19.2 percent of children were stunted, 21.6 percent underweight and 11.7 percent were wasted nationwide, compared with 18.4 percent stunting, 22.8 percent underweight and 15.5 percent wasting in 2006.

Vitamin A deficiency is linked to access to vitamin--rich food for children, poor breastfeeding practices, and high prevalence of childhood diseases such as acute respiratory infections, diarrhea and measles. According to the 2006 national survey, 29 percent of children under 5 were Vitamin A deficient and 74.6 percent were given vitamin A megadose. Children of mothers with at least primary schooling are at least 16 percent more likely to receive vitamin A than those without schooling.

Sri Lanka has also reported high levels of anaemia – 25.2 percent among children.

As with other health indicators, child malnutrition sharply declines with increases in the level of the mother's education, in particular between primary and secondary level schooling. Thus it is clear that educating women is a critical factor in reducing malnutrition over time. Education is important and links need to be sought with the education sector for school-based interventions (e.g. school feeding programs or micro-nutrient initiatives). Effective nutrition programs are likely to have a significant impact in estate areas given the higher prevalence of malnutrition amongst the poorer quintiles.

Thereafter, due to a number of reasons the growth rate and weight gain of children become inadequate giving rise to undernutrition. The factors responsible for growth faltering are related to inappropriate breastfeeding and inadequate complementary feeding practices as well as inadequate household food insecurity. Inadequate energy in the diet is a major factor for under nutrition in this age group. This is largely due to insufficient knowledge as to how best to make use of available food resources to prepare a nutritionally adequate meal for the child. Inadequate food intake by mothers during lactation is an important factor.

There appears to be insufficient nutritional knowledge on infant and young child feeding; as to how best to make use of available food resources to prepare a nutritionally adequate meal for the family in particularly for the child

It was reported in 2010, almost all the children were breastfed of whom 92.3 percent were breast fed within one hour and 98.7 percent within one day after birth. Percentage of children between 6-8 months who were given solid or semi solid foods in addition to breast milk was 91.6 percent. Of the children aged 0-23 months, 34.2 percent were bottle fed with or without breastfeeds. Over 90 percent of the children aged 6-59 months were given grains/roots/tubers and dairy products, while 60 to 80 percent were given a wide range of food items including fruits and vegetables, meat fish/ poultry and organ meats. Proportions of children who received eggs (31.0 percent) or food cooked with oil or fat were low (45.2 percent). The percentage of children with minimum dietary diversity (4 or more food groups) was 72.9 with value being lower in the estate sector (46.6 percent).

The 2009 National Nutrition and food security survey (NFSS) indicates that only 36.4 percent of households in the poorest quintile reported having had adequate food supply for every day in the past 12 months compared to 91.4 percent of the richest quintile. In Sri Lanka, even the children of the relatively rich suffer from high rates of malnutrition which goes up to 11.9%. This supports the perception that while inadequate food access (and by extension low incomes and low and variable productivity of food crops for household consumption) is critical, poor infant and child feeding practices (e.g. too early or too late introduction of complementary feeding and inappropriate complementary food) and poor public health also play a significant role.

It is important to identify the wide range of issues relevant to the problems of under nutrition, hence, there is a need to develop a cohesive multi-sectoral programme with a special focus on food security. Such plans and programmes need to be developed, implemented and monitored at sub national levels to reduce the malnutrition in Sri Lanka.