



SRI LANKA THE ACCEND PROJECT: ADVANCING NUTRITION IN RURAL SRI LANKA



A project beneficiary in Matale District in Sri Lanka.
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Malnutrition in Sri Lanka

Around 80% of the 21.4 million population live in rural areas¹. Despite substantial social and economic progress and the transitioning of the country from lower- to upper middle-income country in 2019, considerable social, economic and geographical inequalities persist. Rates of child stunting remain largely unchanged (about 17%) since 2006 – with prevalence significantly higher among the rural poor – and child wasting rates are alarmingly high (about 15%)². An estimated 53% of the population are unable to afford a healthy diet, while the feeding of 38% young children (6-23 months) has been assessed as inadequate for good nutrition. Agriculture value chains are generally dominated by a seasonal workforce without a secure annual income, while significant gender-based wage inequalities persist in the sector. Around a third of all women are anaemic, yet at the same time almost half of all married women are overweight or obese, and there is growing concern over the threat of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease. A rapidly changing food system that has increased exposure to cheap and convenient beverages and foods high in salt, sugar, and trans fats and poor in essential nutrients, presents a major challenge.

COVID-19 and Nutrition

Poor health and malnutrition, including overweight and NCDs, are strongly linked to more severe COVID-19 outcomes while disruption of the economy as well as food, health and

education systems have further undermined food security and nutrition in Sri Lanka. Although the full extent of impact is not yet known, it is clear that the negative effects on people's livelihoods and resulting loss of income have made it even more difficult for people to afford healthy and nutritious diets. Despite Government efforts to address needs³, there is a very real possibility that various forms of malnutrition will now worsen, especially for women of reproductive age, adolescent girls and children under five years of age due to their specific requirements.

The ACCEND⁴ Project

The project is part of a broader programme supporting integrated rural development in the three most vulnerable districts of the Central and Uva provinces. It seeks to improve the health and nutrition of 300 000 people and prioritises women and children, the poorest of the poor and the differently abled. The focus is on raising awareness, supporting communities to learn from their own experience and developing local capacities by ensuring ownership through local health and nutrition committees. In addition to improving services for water, sanitation and hygiene, a core component of the project has been the promotion of nutrition home gardens⁵ together with cooking and meal preparation classes to improve the quality of local diets.

1 Sources for this section are the World Population Prospects <https://population.un.org/wpp>, the UNICEF/WHO/World Bank 2021 Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates; and the FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2021) *Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2020*.

2 Wasting occurs when the weight of children is too low for their height. Wasting can be a result of rapid weight loss in young children caused by illness, inadequate food intake or feeding practices, or poor hygiene and sanitation, preventing dietary intake to meet their nutritional needs.

3 For example through top ups to the *Samurdhii* allowance as well the targeted provision of supplementary food of those most at risk.

4 *Assisting Communities in Creating Environmental and Nutritional Development* (ACCEND, 2017-2022) is part of a broader programme supporting integrated rural development, implemented jointly by ADRA and OXFAM in collaboration with the Government of Sri Lanka.

5 A total of 1 500 nutrition home gardens as well as 30 school gardens and 30 community nutrition gardens among communities living in tea estates to address lack of land ownership in that context.



Nutrition Home Gardens in the ACCEND Project

The ACCEND project defines a nutrition home garden as a well-developed micro-farming system around the family house that maximizes available natural resources, while incorporating organic farming techniques to produce a variety of safe and nutritious foods to supply the non-staple dietary needs of a family. For families with limited land, cultivation methods such as sacks and pots have been introduced. The focus of the nutrition home garden is “FOOD FIRST” by ensuring enough quantities of fruits and vegetables to contribute towards healthy eating choices.

Tangible Results in the Lives of Women and Children

Poor maternal and child diets are the result of a complex web of factors including availability, affordability and caregiver knowledge, practices and behaviours. An ACCEND study in 2021 confirmed that affordability of a healthy diet, including highly nutritious foods such as fruits and vegetables remains a critical determinant of diet quality and nutrition outcomes. Crucially, the study also helped communities to better understand the contribution of nutrition home gardens to enhance the quality of diets among women and children. The use of an indicator to measure the quality of diet (dietary diversity) showed that the proportion of women and children eating more than four food groups a day had increased from around one third to two thirds of households by 2020. The study also provided important insights into how participating families have been able to withstand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic⁶ while contributing to local availability of healthy foods through sales of surplus production. Such insights are being used to reinforce national efforts to scale up nutrition home gardens as a key component of the Government's broader package of programmes seeking to mitigate the negative consequences of national lockdowns.

Realising Human Potential

Nutrition is a crucial dimension of human development since early childhood undernutrition is associated with poor psychological functioning in late adolescence and predicts

poorer cognitive and educational outcomes as well as increased risk of NCDs later in life. The gender transformative approach adopted by the project – for instance through the inclusion of men as well as women in nutrition awareness and cookery training and the empowerment of women to adopt safe and less costly organic farming methods – has demonstrated the importance of tackling gender inequalities across all activities⁷. The active engagement of women in health and nutrition committees has also been harnessed to support voluntary savings based on economic gains from food expenditure having been reduced and sales from surplus production.

Women, adolescent girls and children – why quality of diet matters

Nutritional needs vary across the life cycle, hence dietary intake requirements differ in terms of quantity and diversity. This has implications for cost and affordability, as well as risk of malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. Within a household, the cost of a nutrient adequate diet is not the same for everyone, as members are generally at different stages of life. Pregnant women, young children and adolescent girls require healthy diets due to an increased need for specific nutrients. These can be found in for example fruits and vegetables which can be more expensive than other foods.

Tackling Climate and Environmental Challenges

Sri Lanka is highly affected by the negative impacts of changes in rainfall patterns on agricultural production, while challenges connected to climate, biodiversity loss and nutrition are closely related to vulnerabilities among the rural poor. In addition, communities in the ACCEND project are associated with an increased risk of chronic kidney disease (of unknown cause), which tends to be associated with the agricultural sector⁸. An important dimension of the project has therefore been to promote climate smart, agro-ecological, organic farming methods. These include homemade compost and natural pesticides to ensure food safety and seed saving, techniques such as raised beds to avoid water-logging, and mulching to protect seedlings from the sun.

6 Women from households engaged in the project reported that fruits (75% of women) and vegetables (35% of women) were not easily available in local markets as a result of COVID-19 related disruptions to employment and travel, while only 27% and 10% of women reported having problems with availability from their own production with respect to fruits and vegetables respectively.

7 While Sri Lanka has made significant strides in addressing gender inequality, many women and girls continue to face discrimination and violence. For this reason the project has also been supporting the establishment of special desks in the hospitals to support gender-based violence victims.

8 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5442867/>