

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the
Institute of Development Studies

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Lifting the Curse: Overcoming Persistent Undernutrition in India

India contains a third of the developing world's undernourished children. Despite this the country's rapid economic growth suggests that it should be capable of tackling the problem. This Research Summary shows how *IDS Bulletin* Volume 40, Number 4, proposes a number of ways in which the state and civil society in India can strengthen the governance of nutrition in terms of capability, responsiveness and accountability.

Editors, Lawrence Haddad, Director at the Institute of Development Studies and Sushila Zeitlyn, former Social Development Adviser at DFID, present a broad selection of articles within the Bulletin which outline an overall message that nutrition governance in India is failing on many levels. In his introduction Haddad asks how can India can move away from the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde scenario of being an economic powerhouse and nutrition weakling? Each subsequent article in this Bulletin, predominantly written by Indian or India-based authors, focuses on this question. Haddad provides an overview of the articles highlighting specific authors' findings, arguments and contributions to the debate. He shows how the articles conclude that it is a toxic mix of incentives which prioritise the delivery of social inputs over outputs and practices that exclude large groups of individuals, including women and girls, from access to quality nutrition services. The delivery of nutrition services, involving behaviour change and coordination across sectors, suffers

more than most from this misalignment of incentives, resulting in a mismatch of services and needs.

The Bulletin reviews child nutrition in India: what is going up and what is going down, and for whom and where? It then moves on to examine existing interventions. Focusing largely on the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), a nationwide early childhood programme, it reviews how the service could be fundamentally changed to accelerate undernutrition reduction. In this area the authors indicate some signs of optimism. The articles also clearly highlight the constraints to making progress in reducing undernutrition including the weak ability of civil society to demand improved services, weak incentives for ICDS to improve nutrition outcomes, and few consequences of poor ICDS performance. Articles argue that additional resources must be accompanied by a complementary effort to strengthen governance, at all levels. This will improve the capability to deliver services, the responsiveness of the state

to the needs of all its citizens and accountability to those whom the interventions are intended to benefit. Several authors document increasing welfare disparities within states, often along caste lines which, it is argued, exacerbate India's poor nutrition performance.

Why isn't growth doing more?

Five articles consider this question, including Michael Walton, who argues that much of this sclerosis is due to the clash of two fundamental drivers: the nature of the social contract between the state and agents of social service delivery and the complex and demanding character of nutrition related public goods. Later Sukhdeo Thorat and Nidhi Sadana confirm the negative correlations of low caste and nutrition and health. They show how child mortality, morbidity and nutrition are all worse for these groups by 50–100 per cent compared with the more favoured castes.

“ How can India can move away from the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde scenario of being an economic powerhouse and nutrition weakling? ”

“ International advocacy for undernutrition will only grow if elites in rich and poor countries alike can connect with the issue ”

How to strengthen existing interventions?

The articles by Rajani R.Ved and by Naresh C. Saxena and Nisha Srivastava focus on the design of ICDS. They identify flaws including an insufficient focus on children under two and an overemphasis on food as a determinant of nutrition status to the exclusion of care behaviours, sanitation and health. Many of the other articles argue that the poor average performance of ICDS to date reflects weak supply side incentives but also the weak demand-side accountability of service delivery. Saroj K. Adhikari and Caryn Bredenkamp later describe some of the data and analyses needed to improve the supply side of ICDS in real time and to assess its impacts. They note that significant amounts of data are already collected on ICDS functioning, but they often focus on inputs, not outcomes such as appropriate infant care and feeding behaviours.

Addressing the governance gap

MS Swaminathan outlines a domestic leadership agenda for action on undernutrition. The author notes the leadership demonstrated by India in so many areas and urges new leadership to make child undernutrition history. Jaydeep Biswas and Jaya Singh Verma go on to deliver a compelling agenda for action outlining changes needed to strengthen governance in addressing undernutrition. Finally, drawing on historical experiences from the UK and contemporary experience from the HIV/AIDS field, Jenny Amery and Anne Philpott point out that international advocacy for undernutrition will only grow if elites in rich and poor countries alike can connect with the issue, much in the same way they connected with HIV/AIDS.

Key messages from the Bulletin

- India is the world's Jekyll and Hyde: an economic powerhouse and a nutrition weakling. At current rates of progress, the MDG1 target for nutrition will only be reached in 2043 with severe consequences for human wellbeing and economic growth
- more resources and leadership from the top will help, but the missing link is improved governance of nutrition at the community, local, state, national and international levels.
- a number of recommendations emerge on where and how to strengthen governance, such as to open up space for public debate on social policy alternatives to ICDS, improve cross-Departmental working to coordinate multiple nutrition inputs and outcome monitoring and allow the Comptroller and Auditor General Reports to set operational standards and audit performance in nutrition
- to strengthen the ICDS, the Government of India should make community monitoring of ICDS in partnership with local government the norm, focus on tracking ICDS outputs and outcomes, not only inputs, engage women from excluded SC/ST communities in actively participating in the running and using of ICDS services and use a more transparent rationale for the distribution of new health and ICDS centres in order to serve communities that are most in need and where nutrition indicators are the worst.
- a new type of research programme around nutrition governance is needed. It would use disciplines that are sensitive to power, voice and accountability with quantitative and qualitative methods to identify and learn whether operational innovations in institutional and governance arrangements can improve the capacity, responsiveness and accountability of the state and civil society to generate improved nutrition outcomes.

Credits

Lawrence Haddad and Sushila Zeitlyn, (eds) 'Lifting the Curse: Overcoming Persistent Undernutrition in India, Research Summary of IDS Bulletin 40.4, July 2009

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The full abstract and table of contents of this *IDS Bulletin* are available to view at: www.ids.ac.uk/go/idspublication/lifting-the-curse-overcoming-persistent-undernutrition-in-india

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