



## NUTRITIONAL CHALLENGES - GS II AND III MAINS

Q. What do you mean by 'zero-food' children? Is India undergoing a phase of nutritional crisis with rising 'zero-food' children? Justify (15 marks, 250 words)

**News:** *Nutritional crisis: India has most 'zero-food' children at 6.7 million; third highest prevalence among 92 LMICs*

### What's in the news?

- India has ranked shamefully high in a study calculating the prevalence of children aged 6-23 months who have not eaten anything over a 24-hour period, across 92 low and middle-income countries (LMIC).
- In absolute numbers, the paper found India had the most 'zero-food' children at 6.7 million — almost half of all the zero-food children in the surveys.

### Zero-food Children:

- Zero-food children are the ones who did not consume any animal milk, formula or solid or semisolid food during the last 24 hours.
- At approximately six months of age, breastfeeding is no longer sufficient to provide the child with necessary nutrition.
- Introducing solid or semisolid foods along with breastfeeding is essential for fulfilling the nutritional needs of early childhood, playing a pivotal role in crucial aspects of child growth and development.

### Regional Variations:

- The prevalence of zero-food instances differed by region, with the highest rates seen in South Asia (15.7 percent) and West and Central Africa (10.5 percent).

### Challenges of Nutrition in India:

#### 1. Child Malnutrition Trends:

- Children below the age of five face persistent challenges related to malnutrition.
- According to NFHS-5 (2019-21), alarming figures reveal that 32% of children are underweight, 35% are stunted, and 19% are wasted.

#### 2. Slow Progress on Malnutrition Indicators:

- While India has made strides in reducing infant mortality, progress on other malnutrition indicators is less satisfactory.
- NFHS-5 data highlights a gap in addressing issues beyond infant mortality, posing a complex challenge.

#### 3. Climate Change and Food Insecurity:



- The escalating impacts of climate change, marked by extreme weather events, threaten India's food system and poverty alleviation efforts.
- Shocks from climate-related events can reverse gains in combating malnutrition.

#### 4. Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs):

- The burgeoning burden of non-communicable diseases, particularly among the middle class, is intricately linked to dietary habits and nutrition.
- Unhealthy diets contribute to the rise in cardiovascular diseases, creating a new dimension of nutritional challenges.

#### 5. Arbitrary Identification of Hunger:

- The arbitrary criteria for determining below poverty line status, varying across states, lead to an inaccurate classification of households.
- Decline in food consumption due to misclassification of above poverty line (APL) and below poverty line (BPL) exacerbates the challenge.

#### 6. Micronutrient Deficiency – Hidden Hunger:

- Severe micronutrient deficiency, termed “hidden hunger,” prevails in India.
- Contributing factors include inadequate diets, diseases, and failure to meet micronutrient needs during crucial stages like pregnancy and lactation.

#### 7. Vicious Cycle of Poverty and Undernutrition:

- Low purchasing power among the impoverished restricts access to sufficient and quality food.
- This initiates a detrimental cycle of poverty, undernutrition, diminished work capacity, reduced earnings, and sustained poverty.

#### 8. Infection-Driven Malnutrition:

- Infections like malaria and measles exacerbate nutritional deficits, precipitating acute malnutrition.
- Limited accessibility and affordability to health services further intensify the impact of infections on nutritional well-being.

#### 9. Socio-Cultural Factors:

- In many economically challenged households, women and preschool girls receive disproportionately less food than male members.
- Rapid succession of pregnancies in large families adversely affects maternal health, leading to nutritional implications for both mothers and newborns.

### Steps Taken by the Government to Improve Nutritional Security in India:

#### 1. Direct Targeted Interventions:



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- Government implements several schemes and programs like Anganwadi Services, Scheme for Adolescent Girls and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana under the Umbrella Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS) as direct targeted interventions.

## 2. National Nutrition Mission (POSHAN Abhiyan):

- National Nutrition Mission aims to prevent and reduce prevalence of stunting, underweight and anemia among children (0-6 years) and reduction in prevalence of low birth weight in the country by involving panchayati raj institutions/village organizations.

## 3. Anaemia Mukh Bharat (AMB) Strategy:

- Anaemia Mukh Bharat was launched in 2018 with the objective of reducing anaemia prevalence among children, adolescents and women in the reproductive age group.

## 4. Poshan Vatikas:

- It is a programme to support development of Poshan Vatikas at Anganwadi centres to meet dietary diversity gap leveraging traditional knowledge in nutritional practices has also been taken up.

## 5. Food Fortification:

- Encouraging the fortification of staple foods with essential nutrients. For example, in Karnataka, the government mandated the fortification of edible oils, wheat flour, and salt to improve the nutritional status of the population.

## 6. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):

- For example, the Akshaya Patra Foundation partners with the government in various states to provide nutritious mid-day meals to schoolchildren, addressing both hunger and malnutrition.

## Way Forward:

### 1. Improving Agricultural Productivity:

- By ensuring scientific usage of water by means of drip irrigation and precision farming, cultivate a healthy environment with mixed crops, crop rotation, and bio fertilizers and using modern techniques like poly houses, green houses, shade houses and others.

### 2. Universal Maternity Entitlements and Child Care Services:

- Enabling exclusive breastfeeding, appropriate infant and young child feeding as well as towards recognising women's unpaid work burdens.

### 3. Strengthening Public Systems:

- Enhancing the efficiency of the Public Distribution System, ICDS, and healthcare services is paramount.
- For Example - The computerization of PDS in Chhattisgarh exemplifies how technology can curb corruption and improve service delivery.



#### 4. Increased Budgetary Allocations:

- Adequate budgetary allocation can help to tackle the issue of nutritional security.
- Research suggests that \$1 spent on nutritional interventions in India could generate \$34.1 to \$38.6 in public economic returns, three times more than the global average.

#### 5. Nutrition Education and Awareness:

- Public awareness campaigns can educate people about the importance of a balanced diet, hygiene practices, and breastfeeding, etc.
- For Example - My plate for the day to prevent hidden hunger is a nutrition awareness poster released by National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad.
- Other awareness campaigns include Eat Right Campaign, Right To Food, etc.

#### 6. Strengthen Inter-Departmental Convergence:

- In this regard, the approach undertaken by Bangladesh can be replicated in India.
- For Example - The National Plan of Action for Nutrition of Bangladesh is based on a multi-sectoral convergence strategy involving health, education, fisheries and livestock, environment, social protection, disaster management etc to combat child malnutrition.

#### 7. Learn from International Experience:

- Thailand has been one of the most outstanding success stories of reducing child malnutrition in the period 1980-1988 during which child malnutrition (underweight) rate was effectively reduced from 50 percent to 25 percent.
- This was achieved through a mix of interventions including intensive growth monitoring and nutrition education, strong supplementary feeding provision, high rates of coverage ensured, Iron and Vitamin supplementation and salt iodization along with primary health care.