

42 per cent of Indian children are malnourished

Mannohan calls new report's findings a 'national shame'

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NEW DELHI: A new study based on a survey of the height and weight of more than one lakh children across six States has found that as many as 42 per cent of under-fives are severely or moderately underweight and that 59 per cent of them suffer from moderate to severe stunting, meaning their height is much lower than the median height-for-age of the reference population.

The findings - contained in the Hunger and Malnutrition (HUNGA) report by the Naandi Foundation - Minister Mannohan Singh as a "national shame" at a release function here on Tuesday. Despite impressive growth in India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in recent years, the level of under-nutrition is unacceptably high, he said.

With the government already under attack for drafting a weak food security Bill, the latest anthropometric confirmation of the link between poverty, food insecurity and nutrition is likely to increase pressure on the UPA to be more generous with the poor.

The report also found that of the stunted children, about half are severely stunted and about half of all children are underweight or stunted by the time they are two years. However, the number of underweight children has decreased from 53 to 42 per cent in the past seven years - the last study on the subject was done in 2004.

Dr. Singh said, "This 20 per cent decline in malnourishment in the last seven years is better than the rate of decline reported in the National Family Health Survey-III. However, what concerns me is that 42 per cent of our

children are still underweight. This is an unacceptably high occurrence."

Conducted across 112 rural districts, the survey found "positive change for child nutrition in India is happening, including in the 100 Focus Districts."

The 100 Focus Districts are located across Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh - states which perform the worst on child nutrition.

The survey notes that the prevalence of malnutrition is significantly higher among children from low-income families. It found that children from Muslim or SC/ST households generally had worse nutrition indicators. Birth weight is an important risk-factor for child malnutrition, says the report. The prevalence of underweight in children born with a weight below 2.5 kg is 50

per cent, while that among children born with a weight above 2.5 kg is 34 per cent.

The survey found that awareness among mothers about nutrition is low - "92 per cent mothers had never heard the word malnutrition."

Highlighting the negligence shown towards girl children even in their early childhood, the report says the nutrition advantage girls have over boys in the first months of life seems to be reversed over time as they grow older.

According to the survey, the mothers' education level also determines children's nutrition.



THE BARE BONES

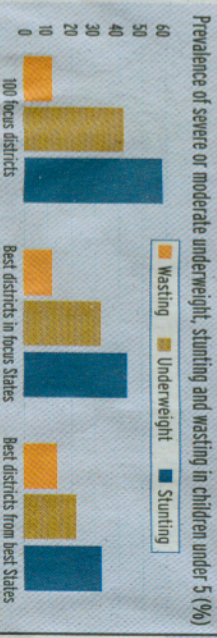
DEFINITIONS

Underweight Low weight for age, defined as the percentage of children under five whose height are less than two standard deviations (SDs) below median height for age of reference population. Stunting measures cumulative deficient growth associated with chronic insufficient daily protein intake.

Wasting Low weight for height defined as less than two SDs below median weight for height of reference population, usually indicates a recent and severe process of weight loss, often associated with acute starvation or severe disease.

THE STATES

100 focus districts drawn from focus States of Bihar, Jharkhand M.P., Odisha, U.P. and Rajasthan. **Best states are Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh.**



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(HUNGA) Survey covered 109,093 children under 5 between Oct. 2010 and Feb. 2011)