

## 'India worse than Pakistan, Bangladesh on nourishment'

India is worse than Bangladesh and Pakistan when it comes to nourishment and is showing little improvement in the area despite big money being spent on it, says Planning Commission member Syeda Hameed.

'There has been an enormous infusion of funds. But the National Family Health Survey gives a different story on malnourishment in the country. We don't know, something is just not clicking,' Hameed said.

Speaking at a conference on 'Malnutrition an emergency: what it costs the nation', she said even Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during interactions with the Planning Commission has described malnourishment as the 'blackest mark'.

'I should not compare. But countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are better,' she said. The conference was organised Monday by the Confederation of Indian Industry and the Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region.

According to India's National Family Health Survey, almost 46 percent of children under the age of three are undernourished - an improvement of just one percent in the last seven years. This is only a shade better than Sub-Saharan Africa where about 35 percent of children are malnourished.

Hameed said the government's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme, which is a flagship programme to improve the health of women and children, had not shown results despite a lot of money being spent on it in the past few years.

'We have not been successful in improving the status of health of our women and children,' she added.

The annual budget for women and child development (WCD) ministry in 2008-9 is Rs.72 billion. Of this, Rs.63 billion is for ICDS.

According to Unicef, every year 2.1 million children in India die before celebrating their fifth birthday. While malnutrition is the primary reason behind it, other factors like lack of health facilities, hygiene and good nutrition compound the problem.

Narrating her experiences while travelling the length and breadth of the country, Hameed said in many areas women were still starving and finding it difficult to feed their children.

She said emphasis should be given on inclusive breast-feeding for six months after a child's birth, maternity benefits for pregnant women and food fortification of ready to eat mid-day meals.

'We are concerned and worried that we are losing human beings in such a manner. It is a disappointment and a blot. We have just improved a fraction and we are determined that we do not let it get worse,' she said.

'It is frustrating to see this dark and dismal picture of undernourishment in the country. We have to learn the experiences from other South Asian countries,' she added.

The NFHS survey found that levels of anaemia in children and women had worsened compared to seven years ago -- around 56 percent of women and 79 percent of children below three years are anaemic.

Vinita Bali, managing director of Britannia Industries, said the problem was very critical and action was needed from both the government and the industry.

She said their 'Tiger' biscuits had been fortified with iron and had shown amazing results. These biscuits have been provided to children in [Hyderabad](#) with a midday meal.

'We conducted a study and found that in six months of taking these biscuits, the haemoglobin increased. The biscuits are not only healthy but also fortified,' she said.

Victor Aguayo, the head of child nutrition and development at Unicef, said fighting malnourishment is central to the survival of the child.

'There should be a balance between prevention and treatment. Our focus should be to target the most vulnerable and then only we will have a much healthier future for India,' he added.

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