

BPNI/2017/082

June 2, 2017

Hon'ble Sh. Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India
South Block,
New Delhi.

Sub: Need for High Level Action to accelerate change in scenario of child malnutrition

Respected Sh Modi Ji,

Greetings from BPNI!

Congratulations for completing three years and making progress! Please allow me to introduce myself. I am a pediatrician having experience of more than 40 years, and one of the members of the 'Prime Minister's Council on India's Nutrition Challenges', that was set up in 2008.

Main purpose of writing to you is to draw your attention to the current flawed approach to deal with malnutrition, and seek directions for change.

The States are harping on treatment of severely malnourished children with ready to use therapeutic foods (RUTF) although even recent Indian trials have not shown any advantage over home foods. The clamour for RUTF shifts the focus from sustainable strategies and paves way to such products for all forms of malnutrition.

I am sure you must be aware of the most recent NFHS-4 data on child feeding and nutrition (Annex-1). It shows stunting is 38.4%; underweight is 35.7%, and severely wasted is 7.5%. This serious gap in the nutrition status of India's children exists despite several programmes or schemes, which have been implemented. More than 44 million children are chronically undernourished under-5 years; a grave situation that has negative impact on development of these kids including brain development and is often irreversible.

India is currently reducing child undernutrition at the rate of 1 % per year. If we do not accelerate this rate of reduction, it might be too late.

Very intimately linked to malnutrition are indicators on how children are fed during first year or 2nd year, which is most critical period when undernutrition sets in. Out of about 26 million born today, 41.6% babies are able to begin breastfeeding within one hour (meaning 15 million babies do not). About 55% babies are able to exclusively breastfeed for the first six months, which is a national and W.H.O. health recommendation. Less than 10% kids at 6-8 months receive adequate diet, i.e. solid foods from four food groups required to meet their growing needs. This means about 23 million kids are not optimally fed during 6 to 24 months. This feeding pattern makes children vulnerable to diseases and even death, but just about 24% babies received a health check up within two days of birth.

As a policy, BPNI does not accept funds of any kind from the companies manufacturing baby foods, feeding bottles etc. and organization/industry having conflict of interest.



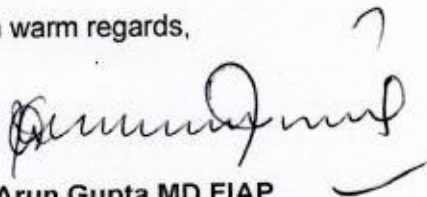
This NFHS 4 information calls for a dramatic change how we deal with child undernutrition. Therefore, I would like to suggest a strategic approach to accelerate reduction in child malnutrition and seek your kind support to this issue. Following steps may be useful.

1. Reorganize the "PM's Council on India's Nutrition Challenges" and chair its first meeting soonest. (Agenda Points are suggested in Annex-2)
2. To serve the PMs Council, establish an empowered Policy Unit in the Social sector of NITI Aayog. This may have full time advisors of every expertise meant to think and make policy on nutrition. A competent person with integrity may head it. Its TORs should include policy/programme review, coordination on nutrition between ministries, which have a sectoral responsibility for the challenges of nutrition and initiate action as well as provide technical support to States. It should report to you every six months through the PM's Council.
3. As you may be aware that human resources to educate people on nutrition and conduct growth monitoring needs strengthening. Consider this as a strategy, that a block team of 4 persons especially women should be appointed to monitor growth of every child born to at least 3 years and take nutrition action accordingly if they detect faltering. This team should be well trained and skilled.
4. At family level, ensure foods for those who do not have it in their homes.

These steps could well be a road to eradication of malnutrition, which was BJP manifesto.

We would be happy to brief you, and therefore request for an appointment at your convenience.

With warm regards,



Dr. Arun Gupta MD FIAP
Member, Prime Minister's Council on India's Nutrition Challenges,
Central coordinator Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI),
Regional coordinator, International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), Asia.

Annex-1

Table: Child feeding and Nutrition Indicators NFHS4

Annex -2

Agenda Points for the first PMs Council meeting