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Food Security and Children

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I. Introduction

Food insecurity and malnutrition for the children poses a unique challenge to the policy and decision makers with enormous development planning implications. It has profound impact on their health and development including recurrent episodes of hospitalization and ill health, iron deficiency, developmental risk and behavioral problems manifested in aggression, anxiety, depression and attention deficit disorder¹. This early life deficit invariably leads to the increased risk of poor school readiness, poor school performance and subsequent health disparities and poverty. Nutrition has also increasingly been recognized as a basic pillar for social and economic development. Well-nourished children have better ability to learn and acquire education and think critically and creatively. Adequately nourished children, in addition, ultimately contribute to the improved longevity, societal educational achievement, women's empowerment, and maternal and child health status.

Distinct from adults, empty stomachs and in perpetual state of hunger, the children experience cognitive, emotional, and physical awareness of food insecurity. They tend to assume responsibility for managing food resources through participation in parental strategies, initiation of their own strategies, and generation of resources to provide food for the family. Adults are not always aware of children's frame of mind, disposition and intensity of their efforts. While the adult perspectives of food insecurity are conditioned on inadequate money for food, those of a child are grounded in the immediate household social and food environment: quality of child/parent interactions, parent behavior, and types and quantities of foods available for children to eat.

II. Food security and nutrition

Food security and nutrition have been consensually recognized as one of the major development issues and deeply anchored in the Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero hunger) in the SDG Agenda for 2030. There is an implicit cognizance in the SDGs of the susceptibility of hungry, mal-

¹ Cook, J. T., & Frank, D. A. (2008). Food security, poverty, and human development in the United States. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1136, 193-209.

marginally nourished children to infectious diseases e.g., diarrhea, measles and pneumonia and possible death.

Food security, especially for children, has four distinct dimensions:

- **Food Availability:** at the household level, food of sufficient quantity and quality must be available in the right place and at the right time for the children;
- **Food Access:** by households and children through adequate resources to produce and/or acquire appropriate foods for a nutritious diet.
- **Stability of Access:** households and children should not be at risk of losing access to food.
- **Food Utilization;** through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation, and health care, which highlights the importance on non-food inputs in food security.

III. Incidence of Food Insecurity

Around the world inflicted by COVID-19 pandemic, 821 million people do not have enough of the food they need to live an active, healthy life. Nearly 690 million people are undernourished; 144 million children (26.8%) suffer from stunting, a sign of chronic undernutrition; 47 million children or 17.4% suffer from wasting, a sign of acute undernutrition; and in 2018, 5.3 million children died before their fifth birthdays, in many cases as a result of undernutrition.

The situation in Pakistan is alarming. In the 2020 Global Hunger Index, Pakistan ranks 88th out of 107 countries. With a score of 24.6, Pakistan has a serious level of hunger. The national poverty ratio, which was 31.3% in June 2018, sharply jumped to estimated 40% by June 2020. In absolute terms, people living in poverty increased from 69 million in June 2018 to 87 million by June 2020: a 26% increase in poverty-addition of 18 million people in first two years of PTI government. Nearly 45% of children younger than five years of age are stunted, according to the UN World Food Program (WFP). The national survey palpably 2018 showed that around 18% of children under 5 suffer from acute malnutrition (2nd highest in the region) and 29% are underweight. Only 14% in age 6-23 month receive a meal with minimum dietary diversity and around 82% are deprived of the minimum number of daily meals.²

IV. Policy Recommendations

(a) General:

Ending hunger and malnutrition is an essential part of overall national sustainable development. To do so, policies and investments for food and nutrition security need to embody the following elements:

² <https://www.wfp.org/countries/pakistan> (accessed 8 April 2021)

- Increased food production through vertical productivity enhancement while protecting natural resource endowment base through green growth and climate SMART agriculture and ensuring inclusive rural development;
- Curbing food waste and losses along the food chain and crop management cycle from producer to consumer;
- Ensuring and securing year-round access to the varieties of food required for good nutrition of people as per their dietary requirements;
- Ensuring access to all members of the household to the food according to their dietary and nutritional requirements through benefiting from:
 - Adequate productive resources;
 - Decent work;
 - Well-designed social protection and food assistance programs with focus on sustainable food and nutrition security and resilient livelihoods that protect the food security and productive potential of the most vulnerable; and
 - Knowledge and understanding on nutrition and care, especially needs in pregnancy and childhood.

(b) Children Specific:

Investing in child food and nutrition is imperative to children's growth, cognitive development, school performance and future productivity and human capital formation. Country like Pakistan can benefit enormously from its demographic boon and dividend. The returns from investment in nutrition have been documented to demonstrate that every dollar invested in reducing stunting generates an economic return equivalent to about US\$18 in high-burden³. This, a priori, entails a firm commitment for action in establishing a robust and responsible food and nutrition system for better food and improved nutrition for the children. It may also be reiterated that countries are accountable to report on the progress achieved in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals including SDG 2 which includes children nutrition and wellbeing. It indeed is the collective responsibility of the government and parents and all the key stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector to work together in ensuring food security and nourishment of the children as per the dietary requirements of their age groups. More specifically, some of the suggested measures are:

- Children food security and nutrition must constitute an integral part of the national food systems to fulfill their unique food and nutritional needs. Financial incentives should be provided to ensure the availability of healthy and affordable foods for the children

³ HE STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN 2019 Growing well in a changing world

especially for the low-income communities. Fiscal regime to disincentivize the unhealthy foods can improve children's diets e.g., taxes on sugary foods and beverages, fast food etc., to reduce consumption by children.

- Comprehensive and well targeted programs in the health, water and sanitation, education and social protection sectors could play a crucial role in promoting and supporting good nutrition for children, adolescents and women.
- The fortification of complementary foods and staple foods with micronutrients is a cost-effective intervention to ensure dietary and nutritional food for the children, young people and women. Policy incentives and programs like healthy school meals, could promote the availability of such foods
- Healthy food environments and affordable options could provide the children and families with better food choices: private sector should be encouraged to invest in producing variety of foods to induce and respond to the demand nutritious foods and healthy diets;
- The pivotal role of legislation and regulatory frameworks should be harnessed to promote healthy diets for children e.g., regulating the markets for breastmilk substitutes, unhealthy junk food, package labeling, standards for artificial food additives etc.
- Communication and awareness programs aimed at attracting the children and parents should be instituted to promote healthy eating habits.