

Improving Community Nutrition: A Holistic Approach to Health and Wellbeing

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Good nutrition is essential to achieving a healthy society, as it forms the foundation for physical health, cognitive development, and overall wellbeing. Improving community nutrition goes beyond individual dietary choices; it requires a community-wide strategy that combines education, access to healthy foods, and support from various societal sectors.

Sri Lanka currently faces a “Double Burden” of malnutrition. High rates of undernutrition persist alongside rising concerns with overweight

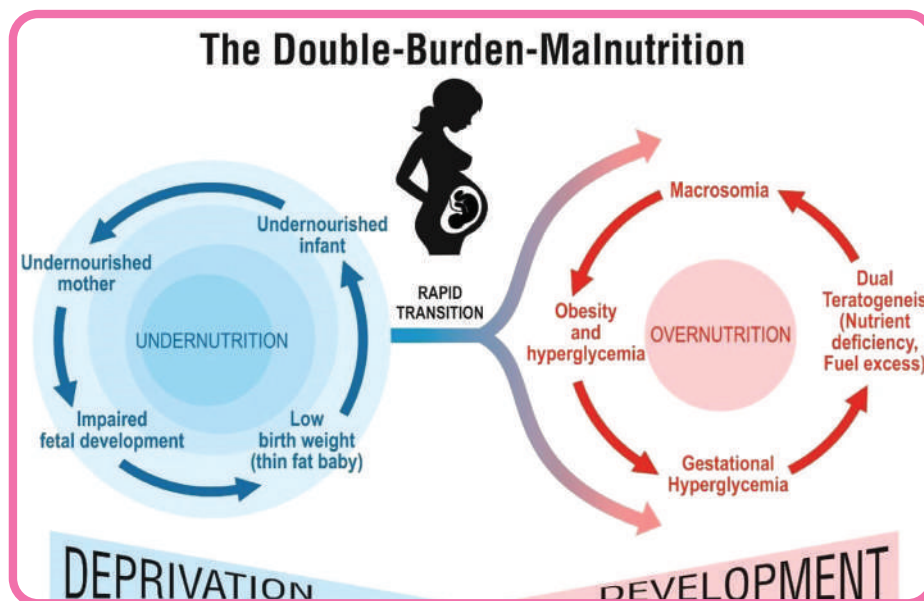
and obesity. For instance, stunting affects around 17% of children under five, a figure that has shown some improvement but still falls short of global targets. Wasting, however, remains alarmingly high at 15.1% Among young children, significantly above the regional average. Additionally, one-third of children under five face malnutrition challenges, affecting their physical and cognitive development potential.

Among adults, 8.9% Of women and 3.7% Of men are obese, with

adult obesity levels rising alongside a high prevalence of diabetes (around 8.6%). This reflects insufficient dietary diversity, as many sri lankans do not consume adequate fruits, vegetables, or other nutrient-dense foods. On average, the daily fruit and vegetable intake falls short of the who's recommended 400 grams, partly due to limited food variety and economic constraints. This nutritional inadequacy is intensified by the economic crisis, with food insecurity impacting approximately 17% of households, forcing families to adopt coping strategies like borrowing or relying on low-nutrient staples.

A holistic approach to improving community nutrition

Sri Lanka's Multi-Sector Action Plan for Nutrition (2018-2025) and National Nutrition Policy (2021-2030) are also key frameworks aimed at enhancing food accessibility, promoting dietary diversity, and tackling both undernutrition and rising diet-related non-communicable diseases.



Community Engagement and Empowerment is one of the 10 Guiding Principles of the National Nutrition Policy of Sri Lanka 2021-2030. It also recognizes the importance of community mobilization as a key strategy to address nutritional deficiencies in the country.

The following are key strategies to promote better nutrition within communities and the lasting impact such improvements can have on public health.

1. Education and awareness: building a nutrition-literate society

Education is one of the most powerful tools for improving community nutrition. Increasing community awareness about the importance of balanced diets and the impact of poor dietary choices helps individuals make informed decisions. In Sri Lanka, extensive public education material including guidelines have been developed on – low cost nutritious diets, novel approaches to community nutrition.

Community education on nutrition can be delivered through;

Community workshops:

Partnering with local health staff to conduct nutrition workshops on healthy meal planning, understanding food labels, and recognizing nutritional needs across different life stages.

School programs: Integrating nutrition education in school activities helps instill good dietary habits from a young age. Teaching children about

fruits, vegetables, and the dangers of processed foods encourages lifelong healthy habits.

Media campaigns:

Using media platforms to spread information about nutrition can reach a broader audience. Social media, radio, and local television programs can highlight the benefits of healthy diets and offer quick, affordable, and nutritious recipes.

2. Improving access to healthy foods

Access to nutritious food is essential for communities striving to improve their overall health. Unfortunately, many communities, particularly in rural and low-income urban areas, and in the estate sector, struggle with



"Food Deserts" where access to affordable, fresh produce is limited. Solutions for improving access include:

Home and community gardens, and urban farming:

Creating home gardens enables residents to grow their own fruits and vegetables, increasing both access to and awareness of fresh produce. These spaces also foster social interaction and can be an excellent educational tool for children.

3. Encouraging healthy eating habits in the community

Encouraging healthier eating habits requires a concerted effort to change existing behaviors. This can be achieved by:

Community kitchens:

Organizing community meals where nutritious, affordable foods are shared can inspire people to replicate these meals at home. During the recent economic crisis, many civil society organizations set up community kitchens to provide nutritious meals to needy persons in the community. These



community kitchens can also serve as venues where local nutritionists can demonstrate simple recipes and meal preparation techniques.

Healthy food policies in public places: Implementing policies to offer healthier food options in schools, workplaces, and hospitals helps promote balanced diets.

The nutritional status of school children impacts on their health status, quality of life and learning achievement. The population of age 5 to 18 years spend more than 6 hours a day in school and the improvement of their nutritional status is an investment in achieving educational targets and development of human resources necessary for the advancement of the country. Sri Lanka has over 4.2 Million children studying in over 10,100 schools in sri lanka. School canteens play a critical

role in nutrition of school children. Hence its important community leaders and community organizations also monitor the implementation of the health canteen policy particularly in rural schools, as canteen operators are usually from the local community itself.

Nutrition at work places: Many people spend most of their days at work.

Employers can offer healthy food options in cafeterias, inexpensive access to a gym, and work-based health programs. Cafeterias in workplaces should include fresh, nutrient-dense options and limit high-sugar or high-fat snacks. There are guidelines available for running “Health Canteens” in work places.

Some very practical actions that can be undertaken in a work environment include; organizing a “Walking Group” at lunch, before work, or afterward, organizing a team for local runs, walks, or a challenge event, and conducting seminars on nutrition, fitness, or weight loss.

Peer support groups: Volunteer community groups focused on nutrition can motivate community members to make healthier choices. These groups can organize recipe swaps, meal-planning sessions,



and even small challenges to reduce sugar intake or incorporate more vegetables into daily diets.

4. Leveraging technology for community nutrition improvement

Technology can be a powerful tool in promoting community nutrition through mobile apps, online platforms, and data collection. Specific ways technology can support nutrition include:

Nutrition apps: Apps that offer easy access to recipes, low cost options, meal planning, and grocery list management can support families in their journey toward better nutrition. Also, simple nutritional assessments such as body mass index (BMI) can be an effective tool in monitoring community nutritional status. Many apps allow users to track their nutritional intake and monitor their progress over time.

Remote health consultations: Though not very widely used in sri lanka, telemedicine and online consultations with nutritionists



can be helpful, especially for communities with limited access to in-person care. Remote consultations provide guidance for those managing specific health conditions, such as diabetes, where dietary monitoring is essential.

Data collection for better policy making: Collecting data on the community's nutritional needs can inform public policy and help local leaders address specific dietary gaps. By understanding local dietary habits, policymakers can design tailored nutrition programs that better serve the community.

5. Policy advocacy and support

Community based organizations (CBOs) play a critical role in creating a supportive environment for improved nutrition. Advocacy for nutrition-friendly policies can include:

Incentives for healthy foods: Offering tax concessions on healthy foods like fruits

and vegetables can make them more affordable. Conversely, taxing sugary drinks and high-fat processed foods can discourage unhealthy eating habits.

School nutrition policies: Implementing regulations on the nutritional quality of food served in schools helps foster healthier habits in children and young adults.

Nutritional support for vulnerable populations:

Government and civil society sponsored programs, such as supplemental nutrition assistance, can help ensure vulnerable populations, like low-income families and the elderly, have access to balanced diets.



Collaborative efforts bring together local businesses, health staff, schools, and voluntary organizations to tackle nutrition from multiple angles. CBOs can:

Provide funding and resources: Volunteer organizations and local businesses can fund nutrition programs, provide food donations, and offer cooking equipment to community kitchens.

Provision of nutritional support during emergencies: Sri Lanka faces emergency food shortages due to economic crisis but also due to natural disasters such as floods. Community organizations play a vital role in caring for the vulnerable and

6. Community engagement and collaboration

Improving community nutrition is most successful when the community itself is actively involved.



the affected people during such emergency situations. During the period 2022 and 2023, UN agencies and a large number of CSOs provided food relief to millions of people in districts which were reporting high levels of food insecurity. However, such interventions should be followed by sustainable nutrition-focused programs that build resilience among vulnerable communities while promoting broader access to nutritious food options.

Creating healthy environments:

With rapid urban and suburban growth, parks and recreation facilities are quickly disappearing, taking away prime places to exercise. There's increasing evidence linking poor access to sidewalks, parks, and recreation facilities to greater obesity risk. Communities where it is easy to walk, play, and exercise safely have less obesity. CBOs can lobby with local government bodies to establish walking paths, parks, gyms, bike paths, and green spaces.

Feedback loops: Establishing mechanisms for community feedback ensures programs meet the actual needs of the community. Regularly collecting input from

residents helps refine initiatives to be more effective and responsive.

Community monitoring of food and nutrition: CBOs can support vendors and shops in local areas to promote fresh and quality food and also advocate local eateries and restaurants to serve healthy food options. They can also support local farmers' markets such as weekly fairs (*Pola*).

Finally, a vitally important area related to nutrition in Sri Lanka is *food safety*. Food safety is about preventing contamination of food with hazardous material throughout the supply chain including production, handling, storage, transportation and ultimate preparation of food ensuring the quality of food. The presence of hazards may make food injurious to the health of the consumer acutely or in long term. Currently the implementation of food safety activities is not at a satisfactory level, due to a variety of reasons which include lack of adequate laboratory facilities, human resources, monitoring, and



evaluation of services. Therefore educating the community on food safety throughout the supply chain is recognized as a critical area in nutrition in Sri Lanka.

In conclusion, when communities prioritize nutrition, they invest in the health, productivity, and potential of all their members. A well-nourished community experiences fewer health problems, enjoys higher educational attainment, and ultimately leads to a stronger, more resilient society. Improving community nutrition requires a holistic approach, bringing together education, access, policy change, and community involvement. By addressing these factors, communities can foster an environment where healthy choices are accessible, supported, and sustainable.



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