

# Malnutrition: public concerns, private solutions

Lancet's pitch for engagement of private players to fight malnutrition divides top policymakers in India



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**A** new study published in British medical journal Lancet on maternal and child malnutrition has ignited a controversy, dividing top policymakers. The study, published in June-end, says that the incidence of child malnutrition in India is among the highest in the world, and recommends active engagement of private players to solve it. "The private sector has substantial potential to contribute to acceleration of improvements in nutrition, but efforts to realise this have till date been hindered by a scarcity of credible evidence and trust," says the Lancet study. (See box for recommendations.)

While the report serves as a firm reminder to the country's malnutrition woes, its pitch for involving private player has polarised the policymakers into two opposite camps. Renowned

health expert professor K Srinath Reddy, head of the prime minister's health panel and the chairman of the planning commission's high-level expert group on universal health coverage, supports the study. He says, "It has brought back the focus on malnutrition."

On the other hand, well-known paediatrician Dr Arun Gupta, member of the prime minister's national council on nutrition, says the study has market-led provisions and solutions. He adds that the problem of 'national shame' should not have any 'private sector promo'.

Even the 2008 Lancet series had talked about the 'inextricable' role of the private sector. The current study prescribes even more engagement of the private players in the national nutrition system.

Gupta and some other independent experts have jointly written to the government to ignore the study. "The call for engaging with the private sector and unregulated marketing of commercial foods for preventing malnutrition in children raises serious concerns. The inherent conflict of interest will ensure that commercial considerations override sustainable nutritional goals," they have written. The letter also allege the conflict of interest of a few authors who

**While even the 2008 Lancet series had talked about the 'inextricable' role of the private sector, the current study has prescribed even more engagement of private players in the national nutrition system, leaving the country's policymakers polarised.**

recommended the study (see box).

Six years have passed since PM Manmohan Singh first spoke about solving malnutrition within a stipulated timeframe. A national council on nutrition challenges was set up in 2008 under the chairmanship of the PM, which has met only once. It is the same story with the other PM-headed panels, which are mostly ineffective, like the national disaster management authority or the national Ganga river basin authority.

But can and should we trust the private players to keep aside their business interests to help us fight malnutrition? Let's hear prof Srinath and Dr Gupta themselves (turn the page for the interviews).

## MALNUTRITION IN INDIA

### Basic facts

- 42.5 percent of children under the age of five years are underweight
- 48 percent of children are stunted (61 million)
- 19.8 percent of children atrophied due to protein-energy malnutrition (25 million)
- Eight million children are severely wasted
- 56 percent of wasting happens before the age of two
- 22 percent of children are born with low birth weight
- 36 percent women suffer from chronic energy deficiency
- 34 percent of adult men suffer from chronic energy deficiency
- 90 percent of adolescent girls (11-18 years) are anaemic



**Worst states:** Gujarat, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand

**Better states:** Kerala, Mizoram, Sikkim, Manipur, Punjab and Goa

### How does India fare?

- Rates of child malnutrition in India are among the highest in the world
- Rates of child wasting in India are twice as high than in sub-Saharan Africa and ten times higher than in Latin America

### Maharashtra shines

- Successful in reducing stunting of children
- Stunting reduced 39 percent to 23 percent (2005-06 to 2012)
- Severe stunting reduced from 15 percent to 8 percent (2005-06 to 2012)
- Result possible due to convergent action between ICDS and NHRM

### Worldwide success in combating malnutrition

- Brazil reduced child malnutrition from 18 to 7 percent (1975 to 1989)
- Vietnam reduced child malnutrition from 45 to 27 percent (1990 to 2006)
- Thailand reduced child malnutrition from 50 to 25 percent (1982 to 1986)
- China reduced child malnutrition from 25 to 8 percent (1990 to 2002)

## Lancet authors accused of conflict of interest

### Robert E Black



Wrote a chapter on 'maternal and child undernutrition and overweight in low-income and middle-income countries'. Black, who is also Edgar Ber- man professor and chairman of department of international health at John Hopkins Bloomberg School of public health, serves on the Nestle Creating Shared Value Advisory Committee.

### Venkatesh Mannar



Is one of the co-authors of the 2013 Lancet series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition. Heads Canada-based Micronutrient Initiative. Also serves on the Nestle Creating Shared Value Advisory Committee.

**However, both authors have maintained they do not have any conflict of interest.**

## Lancet's recommendations

- Nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions
- Involvement of private sector in preventing malnutrition
- Nutrition sector can draw on innovative ideas from market contracts to promote investment, market levies and taxes in the effort
- Vitamin A administration and preventive zinc supplementation in children aged 6-59 months
- Packages of care and ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF)
- Scaling up nutrition (SUN) movement
- External donors could make a substantial difference to child nutrition. Inclusion of the underweight indicator has probably helped donors and development agencies justify increased attention to nutrition
- Targeted agricultural programmes and social safety nets can play mitigation of negative effects of global changes

## Experts' criticism

- Private sector involvement raises serious concerns
- Study biased towards selection of product-based solutions (particularly RUTF or ready-to-use supplementary foods, or RUSF, and single or multiple micronutrients)
- Creates intense pressure for introducing specific products marketed by multinational corporations (RUTF and RUSF) without supporting high-quality evidence
- Recommendation of Vitamin A is inflated
- Authors of the study have a conflict of interest [see above]
- Global alliance for improved nutrition (GAIN), adviser to Lancet on nutrition, aims to benefit the 600-odd industries in order to reduce malnutrition with a focus on fortification
- SUN movement is supported by private players
- Unilever, Britannia and their front agency GAIN are part of the leadership team of SUN