

Editorial***Hidden Hunger in South Asia: An Analysis of Current Patterns and Enduring Issues***

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The global scenario

The term 'hidden hunger' refers to human shortages in important vitamins and minerals, commonly known as micronutrients. Micronutrient deficiencies impact around two billion people, or nearly one-third of the global population¹. Iodine, Fe, vitamin A, and zinc deficiency are the most common micronutrient deficiencies worldwide, causing significant health and developmental effects. Approximately one-third of children aged 6-59 months (children <5 years) in low- and middle-income countries have vitamin A deficiency (VAD)². Fe-deficiency anemia affects 2 to 18% of children under 5 years old³. Similarly, 30% of persons globally are deficient in iodine⁴ and 17% in zinc⁵.

Hidden hunger is a global issue, with overlap between population and individual shortages and limited documentation of their entire degree. Despite recent accomplishments in economic growth, agricultural productivity, and health care, South Asia has the highest frequency of micronutrient deficiencies on a worldwide scale.

South Asia's nutrition challenges

South Asia presents a contradiction: on the one hand, it has become the world's 'fastest growing developing region'⁶. South Asia has the highest prevalence of malnutrition, with stunted children under 5 years old, rising rates of overweight and obesity, diabetes and chronic heart disease, and widespread micronutrient deficiencies⁷.

Patterns and trends of South Asia's hidden hunger**Zinc**

Using FAO food balance sheet data, a recent analysis of the impact of rising concentrations of atmospheric CO₂ on Zn deficiency has suggested that climate change could put an additional 138 million people at risk for Zn deficiency by 2050: 48 million of the affected people would live in India under a business-as-usual scenario⁸.

Iodine

While all South Asian countries have a median urinary iodine concentration (UIC) within an acceptable public health range at the national level, meaning that insufficient iodine status is not considered to be a public health problem at the country level, more than 20% of each country's population has a UIC < 100 µg/L, indicating mild or moderate insufficient iodine at an individual level⁹.

Anaemia and iron status

Fe deficiency is the leading cause of anaemia among men and women in South Asia, accounting for an estimated half the cases of anaemia¹⁰. Slow progress towards reducing anaemia has been made in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. However, all South Asian countries, except for Sri Lanka, have a prevalence of anaemia problems (≥40%); in Sri Lanka, the problem is classified as 'moderate' (20.0–39.9%)¹¹.

Vitamin A

South Asia remains the world's region with the greatest number of children affected by VAD. As with other deficiencies, little progress has been made towards reducing VAD between 1991 and 2013². Based on the national nutrition survey 11% of women of reproductive age are vitamin A deficient in Afghani-

stan⁹, 40% of non-pregnant, non-lactating women in Bangladesh have VAD¹¹, and 42% of non-pregnant women and 46% of pregnant women in Pakistan have VAD¹⁰.

Policy implications of hidden hunger

Policymakers in South Asia face an immediate need to confront a complex challenge in enhancing nutritional well-being. They must make substantial and targeted investments in diverse areas to efficiently combat prevalent undernutrition. Additionally, they should aim to curb the escalation of overweight and obesity among children, adolescents, and adults, or at least contain its spread. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for increased focus on addressing the significant micronutrient deficiencies affecting millions of individuals. This issue is particularly concerning for the future of South Asia, as it is linked to substantial health repercussions that result in significant economic losses. Despite advancements in economic growth, agriculture, poverty reduction, and certain aspects of child nutrition across much of South Asia, the region's challenge of micronutrient deficiencies has seen little improvement over several decades.

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