



International Conference on Critical Public Health Consequences of the Double Burden of Malnutrition and the Changing Food Environment in South and South East Asia

India International Centre, New Delhi

28th – 30th March, 2018

CONFERENCE DECLARATION

More than 350 people, with 72 invited resource persons, including researchers, activists, practitioners and policy makers from 13 countries and 21 states in India met over three days in the International Conference on Critical Public Health Consequences of the Double Burden of Malnutrition and the Changing Food Environment in South and South East Asia.

Five plenary sessions and 13 workshops provided a platform for the sharing of global campaigns, studies, and experiences, including specific country experiences from Brazil, Afghanistan, Thailand, Bangladesh, Nepal, Mexico, South Africa, Malaysia, and India.

The workshops discussed issues related to agricultural crises, women's labour, livelihood and nutrition, law, policies, programmes at national and global levels, conflicts of interest, culture and indigenous knowledge, scientific evidence on undernutrition, obesity, non-communicable diseases (NCDs), nutrition and the market, management of acute malnutrition along with the role community mobilisation, and networking among campaigns at local, national and international levels. The role and responsibility of the state and public policy in addressing these structural factors was emphasized.

The high level of undernutrition in many countries of South and South East Asia along with rapid transition to obesity resulting in the 'double burden of malnutrition' in the region was discussed. The substantial morbidity and mortality from communicable diseases such as tuberculosis (TB), malaria, pneumonia, and diarrhoea usually associated with under-nutrition; and NCDs like diabetes, hypertension, cardiac disease, and strokes, associated with obesity were raised as major public health concerns. In India, the disease profile of NCDs is somewhat different, with one-third of diabetics actually having low body mass index (BMI) and with haemorrhagic stroke (possibly caused by hypertension) now being the highest cause of death among the poorest quintile of the population. These pathways are not well understood.

The importance of understanding the politics and political economy of hunger, undernutrition as well as obesity was highlighted throughout the Conference. Socioeconomic inequalities based on income, region, caste and gender resulting in an uneven burden of malnutrition and disease, with the most marginalised being most affected, emerged as a common theme throughout the Conference.

The Conference recognised that both undernutrition and obesity have common underlying roots in our globalized world. These primarily relate to the impact on food systems (from farm to fork); on current agricultural practices, and practices related to food production, manufacture, distribution, trade, and commercial practices.

It was also made evident that the global trade regime under the aegis of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and increasingly impacted by Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) has had a profound impact on agricultural practices and food trade in different parts of the world, as well as on food and nutrition security, food habits, and food sovereignty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General Concerns and Call for Action

The Conference calls upon claim holders to organize and mobilize to demand from governments across the world to broaden the purview of nutrition policy to bring in a multi-sectoral approach that simultaneously addresses immediate, as well as basic, causes of malnutrition. Interventions for addressing the double burden of malnutrition must be rooted in an approach that ensures equitable food systems.

The Conference expresses concern that, across the region, local foods are being taken over by processed and ultra-processed foods reducing food diversity and also the nutrient quality of the food. This process is being witnessed across the spectrum in public programmes aimed at tackling malnutrition (e.g. Ready-to-use therapeutic food for severe acute malnourishment, packaged foods as supplementary nutrition) on one end and the spread of ultra-processed foods sold in the markets by global food companies and large corporations on the other. To counter these trends, governments must introduce health-oriented fiscal policies and strong advertising and marketing regulations.

Experiences around the world show that public policies that are oriented towards the poor contribute to more equitable income and resource distribution, and that decline in absolute poverty and universal access to social services are central to achieve improvements in undernutrition. Social determinants of nutrition including access to sustainable livelihoods as well as basic public services are critical in improving nutrition outcomes. Demands for greater equality and universalisation of public services must, therefore, become part of all efforts.

Protecting and promoting decentralised community control over food systems is a must for the creation of food and nutritional security. Apart from provisioning more nutritious foods, it would also foster deeper understanding of the importance of diverse diets and nutrition.

Systems for monitoring by the community and mechanisms for increased accountability and transparency need to be actively pursued by civil society organisations and social movements. Greater decentralisation is required for democratisation of food systems and deepened understanding of the importance of diverse diets and nutrition.

The move towards privatisation of health and nutrition services needs to be resisted and there must be an emphasis on both public funding and public provisioning.

Dietary Diversity and Nutrition

Public programmes for procurement and distribution of food must be designed in a manner where they encourage local production and consumption of locally available diverse foods such as millets, vegetables, fruits, eggs, and meat.

Policies towards making foods such as millets, fruits, vegetables, pulses, nuts and seeds more available and affordable for all must be put in place. Efforts must be made to ensure that such foods (cooked and raw) must be easily available and accessible at all places including the home, school, street, and workplaces.

Micronutrient deficiencies must be primarily addressed through ensuring adequate access good quality food and dietary diversity.

We believe that the dilution of the link between food and nutrition by the medicalisation and commodification of food needs to be continuously resisted.

We raise caution on the introduction of genetic modification technology in food in the name of improving food and nutrition security and emphasise that any interventions that have been known to impact health negatively, need to be resisted.

In the context of infectious diseases, comprehensive management of the disease must include treatment, supplementary food and financial support along with sufficient investments made on interventions for prevention.

Conflict of Interest (CoI) and Commercialisation

The Conference recognises that the increasing trend towards corporate and private philanthropic funding, public-private partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives raises complex issues and concerns in relation to nutrition governance and CoI. The PPPs promoted by international agencies such as the UN and WHO to tackle the global burden of NCDs have led to distortion of the definition of CoI and that has damaging consequences.

The Conference demands guidelines and legal measures to prohibit participation of food corporates and their front organisations in public policy making and programme implementation to avoid conflict of interest. National measures that give effect to the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions must be effectively implemented, monitored and enforced to protect breastfeeding from commercial influence of baby food manufacturers by effective implementation. Vigilance and stern oversight/action on this are asked from progressive movement partners.

The long-term effects of ultra-processed foods on obesity and NCDs is a rising concern. At the same time, evidence on association of mortality with and relative efficacy of Ready-to-use Therapeutic Foods (RUTF); which share many characteristics of ultra processed foods, as compared with different food interventions for the treatment of severe acute malnourishment (SAM) is weak. In this context, the Conference recommends that interventions for addressing SAM be based on the use of home/community based diverse foods along with improved care arrangements. Vigilance and stern oversight/action on this are asked from progressive movement partners.

Effective legal measures need to be put in place to regulate promotion of ultra-processed Foods to children, to levy extra taxes on high fats, high sugar and salt food items and mandatory front of pack nutrition labelling that allows consumers to check labels, thus, avoiding the increasing use of these unhealthy foods causing overweight and obesity.

Community's rights over resources

Laws and policies related to land must be amended to protect the land resources of small and marginal farmers and the agricultural livelihood options of landless labourers and prevent the transfer of agricultural and forest land to corporations. It must be ensured that farmers are not locked into unfair agreements with corporations that violate farmers' right to independently decide on crops to be grown.

Public investments in agriculture must be enhanced towards micro-irrigation and judicious usage of water, promoting resilience to climate change, reviving traditional seeds and crops, decentralised storage and procurement, with remunerative prices for small and marginal farmers for all food crops.

Investments in public food programs, including community-based management of acute malnutrition, must be strengthened through decentralized, production, processing and distribution procurement of local diverse foods which supports rural livelihoods.

Community rights over forest resources must be protected and minimum support price for forest produce must be ensured. Civil society must continue its efforts to mobilize communities to take up this role.

The commodification of water and its illegal appropriation by private enterprise, and, in particular, Big Soda is an area of priority for social mobilization to actively oppose this trend.

Women's labour and rights

The knowledge, as well as unpaid and underpaid labour of women farmers in South Asia, with respect to production, gathering, raising, and processing of food and care, is critical to food environments which have nutrition rich, ecologically sensitive, diverse foods at the household, community, and national level.

Women's social, economic and biological roles have to be recognized as being central to food and nutrition security and nutrition policies have to be looked at through the lens of empowering women and communities to retain and strengthen control over their resources and food environments.

Women's nutrition has to be a priority across the life cycle and not just only be womb centric (only considered a priority during her reproductive years). Addressing gender discrimination (intersecting with class, caste, ethnicity, marital status, disability) in food, education, mobility, access to resources and bodily integrity is critical to sustainable nutritional security.

Comprehensive maternity entitlements and quality child care services are public goods and nutrition security must be ensured with public investments in universal, unconditional entitlements to all women and children.

Evidence use and nutrition policy

There is need for increased political momentum, through use of rigorous processes on collecting, synthesizing and reporting evidence to ensure that policy recommendations on

nutrition and health are informed by the best available research evidence. The use of systematic reviews and evidence and gap maps (EGMs) in nutrition related aspects specific to India could help identify research gaps, inform design of new studies, and provide guidance where evidence is not available, for relevant policy-making in the country.

However, there is also a danger in privileging certain methodological approaches such as RCTs in research, as is the trend in nutrition and public health fields. In this process practitioner-led and operational research tends to be side-lined. An evidence-based approach, in any circumstance, must not undermine human rights-based approaches to food and nutrition on grounds of inadequacy of 'evidence'. Systems must be evolved where rigorous research based on diverse methods as well as experiential knowledge are given due credit. .

Movements

Given the commonality of the problems faced across South and South East Asia, and the potential for learning from each other, there is an urgent need to re-initiate the South Asia Right to Food and Nutrition Movement. The Conference suggests the setting up a small working group for this purpose

The Conference gives a call to all participants to join the World Public Health and Nutrition Association (WPHNA) and collaborate globally especially on conflict-of-interest issues.

The conference gives a call for closer co-ordination between social movements working on food, health, nutrition and land, forests, water, women's rights, trade unions, informal workers to extend the reach of the discourse on the right to food and nutrition.

The Conference reiterates the need for a human rights approach to food and nutrition, an approach which recognizes fundamental rights of people and puts people not profits at the center of all policies and interventions.

Specific recommendations for India

The following are the specific recommendations related to public policy in India that were discussed at the Conference. The various campaigns and movements including the Right to Food campaign, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAM), Alliance against Conflict of Interest that participated in the Conference endorsed these demands. They have been taking up many of these in their activities and will continue to do so. All the Conference participants (individuals and organisations) agree to work towards achieving these through their research, advocacy, and campaign activities.

- Implement Forest Rights Act effectively and amend the draft Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) rules and the Draft Forest Policy to comply with the Forest Rights Act and Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA).
- Amend the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 to protect the land resources of small and marginal farmers and the agricultural livelihood options of landless labourers.
- Expand the foods distributed under the Public Distribution System (PDS) to include pulses, millets and edible oils.

- Make procurement from local farmers, for at least a percentage of the ingredients, mandatory in the mid-day meal and ICDS programmes (as is the case in Brazil).
- Improve the infrastructure and other support services to make fruits and vegetables affordable and accessible across the country during all seasons.
- Include animal- based proteins such as eggs and fruits and vegetables in school and anganwadi meals. Ensure that these meals are locally-made by community groups and include local and diverse foods as per community's choice.
- Introduce a regulatory policy for the sale and advertising of ultra-processed foods. Conduct further research and initiate discussions around health-oriented fiscal policies such as the fat tax in Kerala.
- Introduce stringent front of the pack labelling norms for all foods.
- Ban junk food and sugary beverages in schools and in the vicinity around schools.
- Provide minimum support prices (MSPs) at remunerative levels for a wide range of crops including pulses, millets and oilseeds. Make arrangements for procurement of these crops through decentralised procurement centres, and timely payment systems.
- Introduce community kitchens/canteen across the country in urban areas where affordable, fresh and healthy meals are available.
- Revisit the national nutrition mission from a food system (from farm to fork) approach.
- Mainstream crèches for children under three years within the ICDS.
- Implement universal maternity entitlements as per the NFSA.
- Withdraw all notifications directing mandatory linking of Aadhaar with welfare programmes (PDS, NREGA, social security pensions, midday meals, anganwadi services, maternity entitlements etc.).
- Implement the Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (regulation of production, supply and distribution) Act, 1992 and amendment Act 2003 (IMS Act)
