



Midday Meal Scheme: New Study

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Why in News

Recently, a new study on the **intergenerational benefits** of India's **Midday Meal Scheme** was published.

Key Points

- **About the Study:**

- It found that midday meals leave a **long-lasting impact**. Children of mid-day meal scheme beneficiaries **show better growth**.
- The study used the **nationally representative data on cohorts of mothers and their children** by birth year and socio-economic status spanning 23 years.
- It is a **first-of-its-kind inter-generational analysis** of the impacts of a **mass feeding programme**.

- **Height-to-Age Ratio :**

Girls who had access to the free lunches provided at government schools, had children with a **higher height-to-age ratio** than those who did not.

- **Linkage of Midday Meal & Stunting:**

- By 2016, the **prevalence of stunting was significantly lower** in areas where the mid scheme was implemented in 2005.
- The **linkages between midday meals and lower stunting in the next generation were stronger in lower socio-economic strata** and likely work through women's education, fertility, and use of health services.

- **Interruption:**

The interruptions to schooling and to the midday meal scheme could have even **longer term impacts, hurting the nutritional health of the next generation** as well.

Note:

- Malnutrition refers to **deficiencies, excesses or imbalances in a person's intake of energy and/or nutrients**.

- The term malnutrition covers 2 broad groups of conditions. One is ‘**undernutrition**’— which includes **stunting** (low height for age), **wasting** (low weight for height), **underweight** (low weight for age) and **micronutrient deficiencies or insufficiencies** (a lack of important vitamins and minerals).
- **Hidden hunger** is a lack of vitamins and minerals. It occurs when the quality of food people eat does not meet the nutrient requirements. The food is deficient in micronutrients such as the vitamins and minerals that are needed for their growth and development.

Midday Meal Scheme

- **About:**
 - The Midday meal scheme (under the Ministry of Education) is a **centrally sponsored scheme** which was **launched in 1995**.
 - It is the **world’s largest school meal programme** aimed to attain the goal of universalization of primary education.
 - Provides cooked meals to every child within the age group of **six to fourteen years** studying in **classes I to VIII** who enrolls and attends the school.
- **Objective:**
Address hunger and **malnutrition**, increase enrolment and attendance in school, improve socialisation among castes, provide employment at grassroot level especially to women.
- **Quality Check:**
AGMARK quality items are procured, **tasting of meals by two or three adult members of the school** management committee.
- **Food Security:**
If the Mid-Day Meal is not provided in school on any school day due to non-availability of food grains or any other reason, **the State Government shall pay food security allowance** by 15th of the succeeding month.
- **Regulation:**
The **State Steering-cum Monitoring Committee (SSMC)** oversees the **implementation of the scheme** including establishment of a mechanism for maintenance of nutritional standards and quality of meals.
- **Nutritional Standards:**
Cooked meal having nutritional standards of **450 calories and 12 gm of protein for primary (I-V class)** and **700 calories and 20 gm protein for upper primary (VI-VIII class)**
- **Coverage:**
All government and government aided schools, Madarsa and Maqtabas supported under the **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**.

- **Issues and Challenges:**

- **Corrupt Practices:**

There have been instances of plain chapatis being served with salt, mixing of water in milk, food poisoning etc.

- **Caste Bias and Discrimination:**

Food is central to the caste system, so in many schools, **children are made to sit separately according to their caste status.**

- **Covid-19:**

- **Covid-19** has posed serious threats to children and their health and nutritional rights.
- The nationwide **lockdown** has disrupted access to essential services, including Mid-Day Meals.
- Although **dry foodgrains or cash transfers have been provided to families instead**, food and education advocates have warned that this would not have the same impact as hot cooked meals on the school premises, especially for **girl children who face more discrimination at home** and are more likely to drop out of school due to the closures.

- **Menace of Malnutrition:**

- According to the **National Family Health Survey-5**, several states across the country have reversed course and recorded worsening levels of child malnutrition.
- India is home to about **30% of the world's stunted children and nearly 50%** of severely wasted children under the age of five.

- **Global Nutrition Report-2020:**

As per the **Global Nutrition Report 2020**, India is among 88 countries that are likely to miss global nutrition targets by 2025.

- **Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2020:**

India has been ranked at 94 among 107 countries in the **Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2020**. India has a level of hunger that is “serious”.

Way Forward

- Interventions to improve maternal height and education must be **implemented years before those girls and young women become mothers.**

The fight against stunting has often focussed on boosting nutrition for young children, but nutritionists have long argued that **maternal health and well-being is the key to reduce stunting in their offspring.**

- Expansion and improvement of school meals is needed for inter-generational pay-offs. As girls in India finish school, get married and have children all in just a few years — so **school-based interventions can really help.**

Source: TH