



Mains Practice Question

Q. Even after having a number of schemes to address malnutrition, malnutrition remains a mighty challenge for India. Discuss. (250 words)

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Approach:

- Mention relevant data to indicate the status of malnourishment in India.
- Explain the reasons for prevalent malnourishment in India.
- Give suggestions to improve the condition.

Introduction

- The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that 194.4 million people in India (about 14.5% of the total population) are undernourished. India ranks 102 out of 117 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2019.
- Even after a bunch of policies targeting malnutrition (Integrated Child Development Scheme 1975, the National Nutrition Policy 1993, the Mid Day Meal Scheme for school children 1995, the National Food Security Act 2013, and the ongoing National Nutrition Mission), malnutrition in India remains a major challenge.

Body

Reasons for prevalent malnutrition in India:

- **Changing dietary habits:** Focusing on wheat and rice has led to lower production and consumption of indigenous traditional grains like millets, fruits, and other vegetables, impacting food and nutrition security in the process.
- **Poverty:** Though poverty alone does not lead to malnutrition, it affects the availability of adequate amounts of nutritious food for the most vulnerable populations.
- **Lack of sanitation and clean drinking water:** Lack of potable water, poor sanitation, and dangerous hygiene practices increase vulnerability to infectious and water-borne diseases, which are the direct causes of acute malnutrition.
- **Migration:** Children and women are most affected by deprivation during seasonal migrations in search of livelihood opportunities impacting their health condition.
- **Gender injustice:** Malnourished girls become malnourished adolescents who marry early and have children who become malnourished, and so the cycle continues.
- **Lacunae at policy level:** There is a lack of real-time data for comprehensive analysis to show the extent of India's malnutrition.
- **Lax implementation:** Providing nutritious food to the country's children is more a matter of political will and effective policy implementation at the grassroots level.
 - For example, the Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES) outbreak in Bihar marked the failure of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) in the state.

Way Forward

- **Multi-sectoral approach:** Substantial improvements across malnutrition indicators in the states of India would require an integrated nutrition policy.
 - These improvements include providing clean drinking water, reducing rates of open defecation, improving women's status, enhancing agricultural productivity and food security, promoting nutrition-sensitive agriculture.
 - **Integrated nutrition policy** can be brought by harmonization of efforts across ministries, political will, and good governance.
 - Such coordinated efforts will ensure that essential nutrition services reach the most deprived communities.
- **Promoting women education:** Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2019 by Health and Family Welfare Ministry highlighted that children received better diets with higher levels of schooling among mothers.
- **National Nutrition Mission (POSHAN Abhiyaan)** seeks to ensure a "malnutrition free India" by 2022.
 - POSHAN Abhiyaan, which envisages improving nutritional outcomes for children, adolescents, pregnant women, and lactating mothers, is a step in the right direction.
 - However, it would require long-term investments in health, sanitation, and nutrition in preventing deaths due to severe acute malnutrition.
- **Decentralisation:** Panchayats should be allowed to have a bigger say in running welfare schemes.
- **Diversification:** Public Distribution System should be diversified, to include millets.
- **Strengthening MGNREGA** to ensure better food security. MGNREGA can play a vital role in mitigating the disastrous effects of droughts in rural areas.

Conclusion

Eliminating the challenge of malnutrition in India is critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) and Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being). Also, better implementation of the existing schemes can lead to better results than rolling down a new scheme. Therefore, in order to deal with the issue of malnutrition in India, the country needs to address the multidimensional problems associated with it and needs to tweak the policy framework accordingly.