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Prime Focus on Addressing Malnutrition

By Milind Kokje, Chief Editor, NUFFOODS Spectrum

By **Shraddha Warde** | February 4, 2025



un-proclaims-decade-of-action-on-nutrition

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In her budget address to the nation, describing investment as the ‘third engine’ of the country's development and growth, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has rightly commenced with ‘investing in people’. Further, when speaking of investment in people, the FM focused on the issue of nutrition. Investing in people - in their health, education and opportunities – can give

good returns for a long time and save several unnecessary expenses.

It is cliched to say that the problem of malnutrition is very serious in the country. Still, it requires repeated mention and discussion as the problem is not even near a permanent solution despite the implementation of several programmes in the past many years. The finance ministers have to take note of it in their budget speeches each year, which speaks volumes about the severe problem.

Nutritional status in the country is a complex and multifaceted issue, as the country faces both undernutrition and overnutrition, along with various micronutrient deficiencies. Around 35 per cent of children under five are stunted as per the National Family Health Survey (2019021) indicating chronic malnutrition. Over 19 per cent of children are wasted indicating acute malnutrition and over 32 per cent of children under five are underweight, pointing to chronic and acute malnutrition.

Though the problem is severe among the children, women too are suffering. Over 52 per cent of women in the reproductive age group and almost 60 per cent of children between 6 months and five years suffer from anaemia. A significant number of adolescent girls are also affected. Even several male senior citizens, too, suffer from some nutritional deficiencies.

On this background, the announcements of some new schemes and enhanced allocations for some ongoing schemes in the recent budget assume importance for improving the nutrition status.

An important step is setting up of Makhana (seed derived from lotus plant) board in Bihar to improve production, processing, value addition and marketing of Makhana. This is an important step from the perspective of nutrition since it is an excellent source of several important nutrients, rich in micronutrients making it an important addition to a healthy, well-rounded diet.

The finance minister has increased the allocation for Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0 scheme from Rs 21,200 crore in the last budget (Rs 20,071 crore in revised estimates 2024-25) to Rs 21,960 crore in the latest budget. The scheme has provided nutritional support to over 8 crore children, one crore pregnant women and lactating mothers, and around 20 lakh adolescent girls in aspirational districts and the North East region.

The 2nd Gene Bank with 10 lakh germplasm will be set up for future food and nutrition security, after almost a decade. A comprehensive programme for promoting production, efficient supplies and processing of vegetables, fruits and millets is another step in the direction of improvement in nutrition support. The third important step could entail self-sufficiency in pulses production.

The question is, however, considering the magnitude of malnutrition and undernutrition, will the allocation, though increased, be enough. Another crucial issue is translating the funds into actionable schemes and making them available to the last person, while implementing them in a timely manner. It has been observed several times that the administration fails to reach the well-funded and well-devised schemes to the last corner, particularly inaccessible areas. Hence the number of stunted and wasted children is not reducing drastically.

Non-completion of the schemes in the given time is another issue. The government then has to announce the same scheme in subsequent budgets. For instance, self-sufficiency in pulses production was announced in the interim budget presented by the finance minister. The mission was to be implemented till 2027-28 then. Now its period will be up to 2031-32.

Along with new schemes, the government will have to come out with a specific mechanism to take all these programmes up to the last stakeholders to make them really successful. Only then such moves will have some meaning.

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