[**Missing nutrition**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1743148/missing-nutrition)

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HEALTHY human capital is a critical gauge of economic stability. The money spent on healthcare is a major determinant of economic growth which can help increase income levels. According to S.J. Mushkin’s hypothesis, it is an investment that concerns the national economy and aids in high productivity and prosperity. Likewise, learning skills have a pivotal role in economic growth; these are enhanced when mental, physical and nutritional needs are fulfilled.

A healthy nation brings quality to the labour force, a lower mortality rate and robust generations. All this means less burden on the healthcare services. Studies show a strong link between health sector expenditure and GDP; the World Bank suggests that half the economic growth differential between developing and developed nations is based on healthcare and longevity, with the developing world worse off in both. Improved budgets for healthcare and learning can be a game changer for the young generation that through less exposure to disease and greater knowledge can contribute towards long-term economic progression.

Preventive measures are always better and less costly than treating a chronic condition. Investing, promoting and establishing healthy initiatives at the initial stage of school life will lead to better physical and mental health and also be cost-effective.

South Asian countries including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh face food insecurity and malnutrition. Food insecurity leads to hunger and contributes to malnutrition; insufficient or poor healthcare services add to this burden. While the National Nutritional Survey 2018 does not focus on ages five to 10 years in Pakistan, according to the WHO, 90 per cent of children aged five to 15 years reside in lower-middle-income countries. A recent review by Aga Khan University of 51 pooled studies from Pakistan of children aged from five to 15 years has found over 23pc to be stunted, 24pc wasted and 6.9pc obese.

Meals at school will ensure productive generations.

Now amid the food and fuel crisis, it has become all the more necessary to address the problem. The Covid-19 pandemic, conflict and the floods have impacted schools which demand transformative changes. Bringing health and education together will provide the best to school-going children and channel their potential positively.

As we observe the 50th anniversary of the National Nutrition Month in March, it is worth reminding ourselves that good health, nutrition and schooling are a right of every child. Taking care of nutritional needs is important in every phase of life, but especially at the growing stage in order to ward off nutritional deficiencies and diseases that could have a lasting impact. School-age is the best time to inculcate healthy dietary habits.

Schools in Pakistan can play a vital role in building those habits by offering meals and educating children on the importance of a nutritious and balanced diet. Robust constitutions, developed through proper nutritional intake, can be the basis on which SDGs on decreasing hunger, poverty and water and sanitation problems can be met. This will promote better attendance among children and may also be an incentive for poverty-stricken parents to send their child to school if they are assured that their child will be given one full meal there.

Unesco, together with other world organisations, has published crucial findings in a 2023 report on school health and nutrition, and how such programmes are affordable and easy to carry out in a school environment. About nine out of 10 schools in the world are providing some form of health and nutrition facilities. The report saw this as a progressively implemented policy for schools globally, both in developed and low-income countries over the last two decades. It is stressed that the policies should be carved according to the needs of the child’s mental and physical health to enhance the learning environment.

Many schools in Pakistan are already delivering deworming medicines and vaccination. The nutrition programme can ensure that healthy meals are provided to the children and that periodic nutritional assessments are carried out as well as psychosocial counselling — besides imparting skills, knowledge and a positive attitude towards life. It will benefit poor children, especially girls, and will address issues which are often overlooked.

A sustainable multi-sectoral approach and collective efforts are required by the government, the health, education, agriculture sectors and public welfare sectors, as well as communities, to meet the goals of a healthy population. Policymakers and academicians should adapt strategies and programmes based on global school health and nutrition initiatives to our local environment, besides concentrating on education, for more productive human capital.

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