**Nutrition and politics**

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How can people assess the changes that a political party will bring once it assumes office? What is the idea behind the creation of a particular party? What are its goals and what progress does it want to make in the country?

The answers to these questions and many more can be found in a political party’s manifesto. An indepth study of a party’s manifesto depicts how a political party aims to address the country’s various challenges, and outlines its strategies to address them. A party’s manifesto is a public declaration of its intentions, overarching goals and policy plans. According to Craig Allen Smith, a social scientist, a political manifesto is a document through which parties “characterise themselves and their differences with their rivals”.

Malnutrition is one of the major concerns in Pakistan. But if we analyse various political manifestos put forward over time, we realise that issues pertaining to malnutrition were seldom recognised in these documents. During Election 2018, very few manifestos delved into this area – and that too very superficially. Malnutrition is often ignored and rarely prioritised in these documents. This reflects the lack of awareness regarding the gravity of this issue for policymakers and the challenges faced by the country due to malnutrition.

Although various aspects of basic health and insurance models have been mentioned in detail in recent manifestoes, nutrition – which is quite different from health – has only been mentioned on the surface.

In Pakistan, malnutrition is a problem that needs immediate attention, and high-priority political will. There is a need to understand at the political and policy levels that increasing malnutrition and micronutrient deficiency indicators are one of the main barriers to economic advancement and growth.

The National Nutrition Survey 2010 revealed an alarming picture of the nutritional status of children as 44 percent of children under the age of five are stunted, 32 percent are underweight and 15 percent are acutely malnourished. Malnourished children, particularly stunted children under the age of five, are 4.6 times more vulnerable to die. Those who survive often grow up with compromised health and growth patterns.

Similarly, the survey reflected a very poor status of micronutrient deficiencies among women and children. Moreover, the economic consequences emerging from current prevalence of undernutrition as documented in the National Nutrition Survey of Pakistan 2011 reaches $7.6 billion annually – three percent of GDP.

More than three quarters of this financial burden emerges from nutrition deficits faced by women and children in the 1,000 days from conception to a child reaching 24 months of age. Investing in nutrition guarantees productivity and economic growth, and promotes education, intellectual capacity and social development for the present and future generations of a country.

It is very important that the political parties become cognisant of the link among nutrition, a healthy population and economic development. Election 2018 has been held and new parties have emerged on the political horizon. There is a need to prioritise nutrition to achieve healthy and productive population in the coming years to put the country’s progress on a sensible course.

The government should be committed to improving access, service delivery and allocations for nutrition services. Moreover, indicators of malnutrition need to be demarcated as key priority areas so that steps can be taken to improve statistics in the years to come. Interventions like food fortification; advocacy at all levels; and school meal programmes should be introduced as mandatory steps to combat malnutrition.

Clear financial commitments should be prioritised by making budgetary allocations for nutrition-related activities as Pakistan currently spends only around 3.7 percent of its national budget on nutrition interventions despite having around 52 percent of the population affected by micronutrient deficiencies. Meanwhile, Bangladesh and Nepal spend 8.2 percent and Nepal 13.1 percent of their budgets, respectively, on nutrition interventions. Conclusively, the link between economic growth and nutrition should be stressed in the manifestos released by political parties.

Political will is the most important factor that can bring a change in the country. In the past, malnutrition had never garnered executive interest from top political offices in Pakistan. This resulted in abysmal statistics on nutrition. It is globally evident that a strong leadership and political will coupled with a multi-sectoral approach, which involves institutionalised linkages and sustained funding with effective accountability mechanisms, can visibly enhance nutrition indicators. With the emergence of new parties in Pakistan, we must ensure that the issue of malnutrition is placed high on the political agenda to achieve consistent progress in the country.

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