**Raising a healthy generation**

By [Asghar](https://nation.com.pk/amp/author/asghar/) on February 26, 2022

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| Pakistan is a developing country. However, a developing country, if literally taken, gives an impression that a country is moving in a direction with a vision to eventually graduate into a developed nation. But Pakistan has some major issues, which if not addressed—forget about getting developed—would see the country’s condition worsening with the passage of time. According to the Economic Survey 2020-21, the literacy rate in Pakistan stands at 60 percent. It means that an estimated population of 60 million is illiterate in the country. Our literacy rate is low as compared to other peer nations such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, which have literacy rates of 92 percent and 75 percent respectively. India, with the second largest nation in the world, has a literacy rate of 77 percent. However, there’s one more issue that’s at least equally perilous for the nation. It is the rampant undernourishment of a significant part of the population. |

The biggest threat of undernourishment is death, which this endemic poses. However, death is seen as imminent in Pakistan and already divinely written, therefore little heed is given. To debunk this conviction, we only need to reveal some facts. The average lifespan in Japan is 84 years while in Pakistan, it is 67 years. According to the America’s National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) report, 13 cars out of every 100,000 are involved in a fatal accident, but motorcycles have a fatality rate of 72 per 100,000. For every mile traveled, motorcyclists have a risk of a fatal accident that is 35 times higher than a car driver.

Here, we can understand that life expectancy of an average person of a nation can be increased through intervention by providing better healthcare systems, facilities and sometimes just a little awareness. However, undernourishment, apart from early death, could lead to a list of disastrous effects on children, which can continue to haunt them and their loved ones for the rest of their lives. These effects include delayed development, increased vulnerability to preventable diseases, stunted growth and micronutrient deficiencies of which Iodine, Vitamin A and Iron are the most common. It prevents children from educating well, prospering and doing purposeful work in adulthood to contribute to the well-being of the society. For instance, nearly half of the population in Pakistan is being raised malnourished with an iron deficiency. It is among the top deficiencies among children, 49.1 percent according to the National Nutrition Survey 2018 under 5 years of age.

The problems are intertwined in Pakistan—poverty, the lack of education, therefore a lack of priorities and undernourishment. What leads to what is a mystery. But here the state and conscious segment of the country could play their role for the betterment of the society. Just like efforts we want to make to break the vicious circle of poverty, and increasing literacy rate, there is also a need to address the undernourishment of the society.

There are a host of reasons that lead to undernourishment among children. Poor maternal health also leads to undernourishment in children. If we go back in time, poor maternal health may likely be because of undernourishment in childhood of the mother herself. Poor maternal health is also due to poverty and lack of education and awareness. When the country starts working on raising a healthy generation and eventually a healthy nation. When it does so, it should see where the problem is. Analyse major problems, which could be resolved easily. Take iron deficiency among children for instance. Deficiency of iron causes the most common type of anaemia, Iron Deficiency anaemia (IDA). IDA can either be due to diets low in iron, malabsorption of iron from the gut or due to blood loss.

Chronic iron deficiency in early childhood results in poor cognitive function and lower scores in achievement tests in schools, suggesting that irreversible abnormalities may result from chronic iron deficiency at a critical period of growth and differentiation of the brain. Iron deficiency has an effect on a number of things—from physical and mental health to productivity. To address this, it is imperative that children be given good sources of iron e.g., organ meat, dark green leafy vegetables etc. and products fortified with iron.

If Pakistani startups could replicate ideas that worked in developed nations and successfully apply in Pakistan then Pakistan can also learn from other countries to address its problems. To address the iron deficiency issue among children, the research community in other parts of the world is working on enhancing the nutritional value of food and food ingredients. Massey University New Zealand has come up with a new and improved iron source (known as Iron-plus), which offers three times more absorption in the body against the existing best available source of iron. Learning from this, Pakistan can also work to prevent iron deficiency in the country. Pakistan can also find such successful research that addresses vitamin and iodine deficiency and work on that.