

Topic II: Enhancing welfare through human and social development, safety and security – Factors driving disparities in health and nutritional status in the urban setting

Analysis of the disparities in nutritional status in the urban setting

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Recent initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals have recognized the inter-sectoral linkages required to eradicate poverty. Interrelated aspects include, hunger, literacy, gender equality and improved health. Improvements in health and nutritional status are among the first priorities needed to achieve sustainable development.

Nutrition is the cornerstone of development. Poor nutritional status contributes to over fifty percent of all childhood mortality. Over two billion persons suffer from iron deficiency and lack of just this one micronutrient, can lead to losses in GDP of 1-1.5%. In communities where the diet is monotonous, multiple micronutrient deficiencies are common, compounding the number of days lost to illness and decreased productivity. Studies of selected Asian countries have estimated conservatively that the combined effect of stunting, iodine deficiency and iron deficiency was to reduce GDP by 2 to 4 per cent per year. Conversely, improvements in nutritional status have been associated with increased productivity and wages, increased school enrolment of children and improved maternal health.

Poverty in the urban setting is becoming increasingly common, yet many of the current development initiatives focus on reducing rural poverty. Similarly, there is a lack of consistent information on the nutritional status of the urban poor, though widespread documentation highlights a syndrome of marginal service provision, marginal employment and insecure housing.

The urban landscape is complex and can not be easily characterized. There is a dichotomy of malnutrition in many cities. On the one hand many remain undernourished with frequent episodes of infectious disease, on the other, there have been epic changes in the incidence of diet related chronic diseases and related overweight and obesity. Thus not only are developing countries faced with a large percent of the population suffering from undernutrition, they also must now contend with large segments of the population with nutrition related problems on the other spectrum.

This paper will address what is known about the trends and disparities of malnutrition in urban areas, as well as programs which address these problems. Special attention will be given to the need for analysis of nutritional status by socio-economic level. Programs which address both ends of the spectrum of malnutrition are needed, this is a new phenomenon and will require a shift in policy.