Event Report

Malnutrition and its Impacts on Children and Child Bearing Mothers

11 March, 2015
Muzaffarabad, Azad Jammu & Kashmir

www.act-international.org
**Introduction & Background:**

Malnutrition is affecting children and women and rendering them most vulnerable to multiple ailments. Undernutrition is one of the main causes of deaths among infants and young children. Those malnourished that survive have less learning capacity that reduces their productivity at adulthood, which impacts negatively on the economy. Food security is a key element in ensuring proper nutrition. Results from the last National Nutrition Survey (NNS, 2011) show an alarming nutrition situation in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The statistics of malnutrition in Azad Jammu & Kashmir are alarming. It is indeed very disturbing that 31.7% of the children in Azad Jammu and Kashmir are stunted. AJK has second lowest rate of early initiation of breastfeeding (38.3%). AJK shares the lowest position of initiating of semisolid food at 6-8 months and delayed introduction of complementary feeding. The survey results also highlight micro-nutrient deficiencies including vitamin A, iron, zinc, iodine and vitamin D. Amongst the AJK children, more than 28% are anemic, more than 37% are Vitamin A deficient, 49% are zinc deficient and 32% are Vitamin D deficient. Again the region has high diagnosis of worm infestation (13.9%). The child mortality rate in AJK is 56/1000 births.

Major findings of the NNS 2011 have clearly indicated the urgent need to counter malnutrition by addressing immediate, underlying and basic causes of malnutrition. The evidence shows that most children are malnourished in many ways which affect the development of their brains in the first two years of life, with negative impacts on their performance in or out of school and subsequently, on their work productivity. At least 2% of GDP is lost every year on account of current levels of malnutrition in Pakistan. Emergencies exacerbate the nutrition crisis in Pakistan. The 2010 to 2013, the monsoon floods in AJK intensified malnutrition for populations that were already suffering malnutrition before these disasters hit. Without immediate attention, this on-going nutrition catastrophe will continue to be a significant factor in the high morbidity and mortality rates of children.

All this is indicative of the underlying issues of poor infant feeding practices, poor sanitation and hygiene habits, increasing food insecurity and lack of awareness about child and maternal nutrition. To address the underlying causes of the malnutrition amongst children and child bearing mothers, ACT International has launched an “Education and Awareness raising campaign to alleviate Malnutrition” through a community-led support mechanism. To this end, a seminar on “Malnutrition and its impacts on children and child bearing mothers” was held on March 11, 2015, at the Neelum View hotel in Muzaffarabad. The seminar was one of the series of awareness raising activities of the campaign.
The seminar started with the recitation of verses from the Holy Quran related to nutrition, utilization of nutritious food and hygienic living. Mr. Mubashar Nabi, CEO, ACT International formally welcomed the participants of the event. He highlighted the menace of malnutrition among children and child bearing mothers especially in the context of the alarming challenges of food security which Pakistan would be facing in the approaching decades due to abrupt and disastrous climate changes. He oriented participants with the objective of the “Education and awareness raising campaign against the malnutrition amongst children and child bearing mothers” initiated by ACT International in district Muzaffarabad, AJ&K. He explained, “Nutrition is an important part of leading a healthy lifestyle. Combined with physical activity, our diet can help us to reach and maintain a better health, reduce risk of chronic diseases and promote overall health. There is a dire need of implementing initiatives related to mitigating malnutrition amongst child bearing mother and children.” He emphasized that a national program in a Mission Mode is urgently required to halt the deteriorating nutrition situation in Pakistan and AJK and collaborative efforts by involving key actors including civil society organizations, media, communities and the government on a mega scale can alter the scenario. He concluded, “In a vibrant nation, there is always a kind of dramatic balance between the will of the people, civil society organizations and government, which paves ways for improved health.”

A comprehensive presentation was delivered by the ACT International’s Regional Coordinator for AJK, Mr. Muhammad Meraj Alam. The presentation encompassed introduction of ACT International, current projects and programmes, geographical outreach and future roadmap of the organization. In the presentation the rationale of the campaign was elaborated with facts and findings retrieved through ongoing programmes related to malnutrition in AJ&K.

- Malnutrition is an underlying cause of the deaths of 3 million children each year, one-third of the total children's deaths globally (Unicef)
- Each year 800,000 children die in Pakistan and 35 percent of these occur due to malnutrition.
- It impacts morbidity, mortality, education and productivity.
- 38 percent women and 21 percent children were found malnourished in AJK during a screening supported by WFP (2013-14).
- The infant mortality rate in AJK is 56/1000 live births
The presentation also explained the implementation strategy of “Education & Awareness Campaign to Alleviate Malnutrition Amongst Children & Child Bearing Mothers in Catchment Area of Selective BHUs of District Muzaffarabad.” The key stakeholders of the campaign are: departments of health, education, electronic and print media, UN Agencies and communities. The campaign will be implemented through forward campaigners of the ACT International including SOs of ACT International, Youth Peer Groups and Mother and Child Support Groups at the field level and the communities. The slide No.1 and No. 2 presents the diaspora of stakeholders and the strategy of implementation of the campaign at field level.

**Address by Guest Speakers:**

**Dr. Bushra Shams, Gender Advisor, AJK UNWOMEN,** has been one of the leading public health professional women of AJ&K since 1993. She has played a stupendous role in the protection of women rights and empowerment. Addressing participants of the seminar Mrs. Shams highlighted the impacts of malnutrition on child bearing mothers. She insisted to develop pragmatic strategies to overcome the dilemma in order to save future generations.

**Mr. Yaqub Ali, Representative, WFP,** delivered a comprehensive presentation on the impacts of malnutrition on nervous system of children. He also highlighted the efforts of WFP in AJK to alleviate malnutrition amongst children and child bearing mothers.
Mr. Mian Ikhtlaq Rasool, CEO, AJKRSP, highlighted the initiatives of AJKRSP related to address the issue of malnutrition. He explained that the communities are not well aware of high supplement foods and healthy nutritional practices. He mentioned that huge percentage of households in AJK are not equipped to avoid potential threat of widespread diseases due to malnutrition. He applauded the efforts of ACT International in this context and committed to extend his support to the organization during implementation of the campaign.

Mr. Sardar Mahmood Khan, Director General Health, AJK, insisted on introduction of community led models to deal with the issue of malnutrition. He encouraged the civil society organizations to play their role in capacity building and awareness raising amongst communities regarding better nutritional practices. On behalf of the department of health, Mr. Mehmood assured his administrative and technical support to ACT International for capacity building of communities, advocacy and awareness raising endeavors.

Mr. Raja Abbas Khan, Secretary Education Schools, declared that there is a dire need to introduce information regarding malnutrition, its impacts and mitigation measures in the syllabus. He committed to offer his services for the legislation to incorporate subjects related to malnutrition, nutritional practices and health and hygiene in the schools syllabus. He elaborated that the inclusion of such information in the syllabus would certainly be benefitting and would have a significant impact on nutritional practices contributing to improved health of children and on future mothers as well.

Ms. Sangeeta Thappa, Deputy Country Director, Pakistan (UNWOMEN) expressed her sentiments regarding the campaign. She elucidated that she was highly impressed with the design of campaign and implementation strategy. She highly praised the participation and ownership of government departments, civil society organizations, youth groups, media and the communities in the noble cause of mother and child health care campaign. She explained that nothing can be achieved without collaborative efforts of all stakeholders and proactive involvement of the communities.

Ms. Shaheen Kousar, Dar Deputy Speaker, AJK Legislative Assembly was the chief guest of the event. Addressing the audience, Mrs. Shaheen Kousar Dar laid stress to include education and awareness raising material regarding mitigation of malnutrition in the syllabus. She pledged that legislative measures would be taken in this regard and urged ACT International to take lead role by ensuring true participation of all key stakeholders in AJK. She praised efforts of civil society organizations for highlighting issues related to health of children and childbearing women. She assured her support at all levels to meet the objectives of the designed campaign.
Street theatre

In collaboration with the Pak Youth Society a captivating street theatre was organized during the event. The title of the theatre was “Ahsas e Zindagi,” elucidating the gender discrimination and women rights in the context of health, hygiene malnutrition. The theatre is intended to be presented in the target communities of the campaign. The participants applauded the theme of the theatre and its live performance for it had a clear message aimed at children and mothers’ health and malnutrition.

Signing of Memoranda of Understandings

ACT International believes in the participation of all stakeholders to accomplish the mission. Memoranda of understandings were signed between the departments of health, education, Central Press Club Muzaffarabad and ACT International regarding launching of “Education and Awareness raising Campaign on Malnutrition Amongst Children and Child Bearing Mothers.” The MoUs clearly illustrate the roles and responsibilities of the key stakeholders during implementation of campaign.
Advocacy, Awareness raising & Sensatization

- More than 100 stakeholders including representatives of civil society organizations, UN agencies, government departments, media personnel, youth peer groups representatives and representatives of the communities sensitized on the issue of malnutrition and its impacts on children and child bearing mothers

- 500 leaflets / pamphlets carrying messages related to malnutrition, its causes, impacts and mitigation measures disseminated to participants of the event and general public

- Urban population of district Muzaffarabad sensitized on malnutrition and its effects through dissemination of IEC material at public places including hoardings and hangings carrying informational messages.

Commitments

- Deputy Speaker of Azad Jammu & Kashmir Legislative Assembly promised to incorporate information related to nutritious food and highlight causes, impacts of malnutrition and mitigation measures in the syllabus at school and college level. Secretary education also supported her verdict and committed to make efforts to this end. Deputy Speaker also showed commitment to support legislation in this regard. ACT International in collaboration with its partner organization will take lead for policy advocacy for legislation.

Collaboration

For effective and efficient accomplishment of the proposed campaign Memorandum of Understandings were signed between:

- Department of Health AJ&K and ACT International
- Department of Education AJ&K and ACT International
- Central Press Club Muzaffarabad, AJ&K and ACT International