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Understanding malnutrition in North East India

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Introduction

Malnutrition is a pressing concern in North East India, where several states grapple with high rates of undernutrition, overnutrition, and various forms of micronutrient deficiencies. This region, known for its rich cultural diversity and picturesque landscapes, is marred by a hidden crisis that affects the health, growth, and development of its population. This presentation aims to shed light on the malnutrition situation in North East India, emphasizing the importance of addressing this issue for a healthier future and outlining the purpose and objectives of our discussion.

Importance of addressing malnutrition for a healthier future

Human Capital Development: Malnutrition poses a significant obstacle to the region's potential for human capital development. Stunted growth, cognitive impairments, and weakened immune systems resulting from malnutrition can hinder individual productivity, ultimately affecting the economic growth of the region.

Healthcare Burden: High rates of malnutrition contribute to a substantial healthcare burden. The increased prevalence of malnutrition-related diseases, such as anemia, can strain the already fragile healthcare infrastructure in North East India.

Inter-generational Impact: Malnutrition often perpetuates a cycle of undernourishment, passing from one generation to the next. Addressing malnutrition today is critical to breaking this cycle and ensuring a healthier future for the region's children.

Socioeconomic Inequalities: Malnutrition disproportionately affects vulnerable and marginalized communities in North East India, exacerbating existing socioeconomic inequalities. Addressing malnutrition is a key step towards promoting social justice and equity.

Food Security: Improving nutrition is closely linked to achieving food security in the region. Sustainable agricultural practices and better food distribution systems can help combat malnutrition and enhance food security.

A. Types and Forms of Malnutrition Prevalent in the NE Region

Malnutrition in North East India encompasses a range of types and forms, affecting individuals across all age groups. The prevalent types of malnutrition include:

- 1. Undernutrition:** This is characterized by insufficient intake of essential nutrients, leading to stunted growth, wasting, and underweight among children. It is a significant concern in the region, especially among tribal and marginalized communities.
- 2. Overnutrition:** Overnutrition, primarily in the form of obesity and associated non-communicable diseases, is on the rise in North East India. High consumption of calorie-dense, low-nutrient foods, coupled with sedentary lifestyles, contributes to this issue.
- 3. Micronutrient Deficiencies:** North East India grapples with various micronutrient deficiencies, including vitamin A, iron, iodine, and zinc deficiencies. These deficiencies can lead to a range of health problems, such as anemia and impaired cognitive development.

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B. Causes and Contributing Factors to Malnutrition

Several complex and interrelated factors contribute to the prevalence of malnutrition in North East India:

1. **Dietary Practices:** Limited dietary diversity, reliance on carbohydrate-heavy diets, and inadequate intake of fruits, vegetables, and proteins are common dietary practices in the region.
2. **Poverty:** High levels of poverty, especially in rural areas, limit access to nutritious foods and healthcare services. Poverty often forces families to prioritize food quantity over quality.
3. **Lack of Awareness:** Limited awareness about proper nutrition and hygiene practices, particularly among marginalized communities, hinders efforts to combat malnutrition.
4. **Poor Sanitation and Hygiene:** Inadequate sanitation facilities and poor hygiene practices can lead to increased risk of infections, which in turn exacerbate malnutrition.
5. **Geographical Isolation:** The region's remote and hilly terrain can make it difficult to access healthcare services and nutritious food sources, especially during adverse weather conditions.
6. **Cultural Practices:** Traditional beliefs and practices related to food, infant feeding, and healthcare can sometimes be at odds with modern nutritional guidelines.

C. Impact of Malnutrition on Health, Development, and Economy

Malnutrition has far-reaching consequences in North East India, affecting individuals, communities, and the region's overall development and economy:

1. **Health Impact:** Malnutrition increases susceptibility to diseases, weakens the immune system, and leads to higher mortality rates, especially among children and pregnant women. Chronic malnutrition can also result in lifelong health issues.
2. **Development Impact:** Malnourished children often suffer from cognitive impairments, hindering their educational attainment and future earning potential. This perpetuates the cycle of poverty and malnutrition.
3. **Economic Impact:** The economic burden of malnutrition is substantial, as it leads to increased healthcare costs and reduced labor productivity. It hampers the region's ability to thrive economically.
4. **Social Impact:** Malnutrition contributes to social inequalities and disparities in North East India, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. It can also lead to social stigmatization, especially in the case of obesity.

In summary, the types and forms of malnutrition prevalent in North East India are diverse and complex, stemming from a combination of dietary, economic, cultural, and geographical factors. Understanding the causes and consequences of malnutrition is essential for developing targeted interventions and policies aimed at improving the nutritional status and overall well-being of the region's population.

D. Key Challenges in Addressing Malnutrition

A. Socioeconomic and Cultural Factors Influencing Malnutrition

1. **Poverty:** High levels of poverty in North East India are closely linked to malnutrition. Poverty limits families'

ability to purchase nutritious foods and access healthcare services. As a result, households often resort to cheaper, calorie-dense, but nutrient-poor options, perpetuating the cycle of malnutrition.

2. **Cultural Beliefs:** Traditional beliefs and practices related to food, infant feeding, and healthcare can influence dietary choices and child-rearing practices. Cultural norms may sometimes discourage the consumption of certain nutritious foods or promote early weaning, affecting child nutrition.
3. **Gender Disparities:** Gender inequalities can exacerbate malnutrition. In some communities, women may have limited decision-making power regarding food choices and may face unequal access to healthcare and education, which impacts maternal and child nutrition.
4. **Food Taboos:** Certain food taboos and restrictions based on cultural or religious beliefs can limit dietary diversity and nutrient intake. This can particularly affect pregnant women and children who require a wide range of nutrients for healthy development.

B. Limited Access to Nutritious Food and Healthcare Services

1. **Geographical Isolation:** The rugged terrain and remoteness of many areas in North East India pose significant challenges in accessing nutritious food sources and healthcare facilities. Poor road infrastructure and adverse weather conditions further hinder access.
2. **Food Insecurity:** Inconsistent food availability and accessibility, exacerbated by factors such as seasonal variations and food price fluctuations, can lead to food insecurity. This uncertainty in the food supply chain can contribute to malnutrition.
3. **Healthcare Disparities:** Uneven distribution of healthcare facilities and skilled healthcare providers in the region results in limited access to quality healthcare services, including antenatal and postnatal care, which are crucial for maternal and child nutrition.
4. **Lack of Awareness:** Limited awareness about the importance of proper nutrition and healthcare practices can lead to underutilization of available services. Communities may not seek timely healthcare or make informed dietary choices.

C. Infrastructure and Logistical Challenges in Delivering Interventions

1. **Transportation Challenges:** Poor road networks and difficult terrain make it challenging to transport nutritious food items and medical supplies to remote areas. This hampers efforts to address malnutrition effectively.
2. **Healthcare Infrastructure:** Inadequate healthcare facilities, especially in rural and tribal areas, limit the reach of nutrition interventions. The lack of trained healthcare personnel compounds the issue.
3. **Data Collection and Monitoring:** Gathering accurate data on malnutrition rates and tracking progress is often hindered by logistical challenges. Remote areas may lack the necessary infrastructure for data collection and analysis.
4. **Capacity Building:** Building the capacity of local healthcare workers and community volunteers to

deliver nutrition interventions can be impeded by logistical constraints, including difficulties in organizing training sessions in remote locations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing malnutrition in North East India is a complex task due to a combination of socioeconomic, cultural, and logistical challenges. Effective interventions must consider these challenges and employ context-specific strategies that take into account the region's unique characteristics and needs. Collaboration among government agencies, NGOs, communities, and other stakeholders is crucial to overcoming these obstacles and making progress in the fight against malnutrition.

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