

Repositioning Nutrition Education: Challenge for Public Health

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The fundamental role played by good nutrition in enabling personal, social and economic development is now widely recognized as presenting an important global challenge that has to be addressed if major national and international problems are to be resolved in the coming decades. Nutrition is crucial to both individual and for national development. Unlike many other countries in South Asia, nutrition-related health statistics are dismal in Pakistan with both under-nutrition and malnutrition highly prevalent. More than 40% of the population suffers from chronic malnutrition nationally. Pakistani women and children suffer the highest rates of malnutrition in the world with a national nutritional stunting of 43.7% in children under five. According to the National Nutrition Survey (NNS) of 2011, 70% of Pakistani children and adults have essential micronutrient deficiencies (vitamins and minerals)¹. Chronic disease are more evident and is contributing to the burden of disease with more than 40 % of women overweight or obese². The extent of the country's nutrition problem is reflected by the fact that among the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), "malnutrition" remains the most important issue and continues to hinder all efforts towards achieving the remaining MDGs²⁻³. Therefore, malnutrition is not simply a health hazard but a serious impediment towards Pakistan's national development.

Unfortunately, Pakistan is faced with a weak and inadequate institutional capacity and a critical shortage of human resource to deliver effective public health nutrition. Those in the forefront of nutrition related activities are characterized by partial knowledge, lack of technical expertise and no formal training in nutrition. Hence, the country has become highly dependent on external technical support to address nutrition-related

problems without creating many opportunities to develop internal local expertise to sustain initiatives rendered by external and international nutrition consultants. These international experts work on an ad-hoc manner and most often emergencies are dealt and subsequently the work or projects lack to produce lasting nutritional effects on the communities⁴.

Recently the increase in focus by the government on nutrition has grown in parallel to recognition that workforce capacity is a critical missing link in scaling up nutrition initiatives for reducing maternal and child under-nutrition as well adult malnutrition in many South Asian countries. Teaching of nutrition in colleges and at university level is an important contributor to building the capacity of individuals to think effectively when combating malnutrition⁵. However, over the past several decades the field and scope of nutritional sciences in Pakistan has remained in its infancy since it was first introduced in 1954 through the establishment of various colleges of home economics in different provinces of Pakistan. A commitment for the development of this field was never given serious consideration by different governments with ownership from nowhere. As a result, major deficiencies in nutrition education remain to date. To quote a few, there is a failure to provide administrative & institutional support for teaching nutrition at all levels in educational institutes, an alarming lack of adequately trained faculty and the absence of a defined place for the nutrition in the academic curriculum of health sciences disciplines. Despite repeated recommendations by local, national and international organizations to rectify these shortfalls, nutrition was never given due recognition. Therefore, very few educational and training opportunities are available across Pakistan for both undergraduate and graduate degree programs in nutritional sciences. The major hurdles include insufficient public and private budgetary resources towards education, capacity building and training of human resource in nutrition. Moreover, there is no nutrition council or any regulated government

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body in Pakistan that can guide, assist, regulate and evaluate the nutrition courses taught in Pakistan to produce nutrition professionals. This is the case despite the strong commitments of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and huge budgetary allocations towards the advancement of all other related sciences. Reversing adverse trends in nutrition needs appropriate and trained personnel in nutrition, policy direction, political commitment and a concerted effort from all sectors. Furthermore, those universities where the nutrition course work is currently offered should be evaluated against a standard benchmark to be more conducive in capacity building, workforce development and creating competencies among nutrition professionals. These professionals must be adequately trained in the basic principles of nutrition and be capable of identifying and assessing the nature of the problems at local level and deciding how these can be best addressed through participatory and inter-sectoral approach by collective actions⁶.

With the 18th constitutional amendment all the provinces in Pakistan are at different stages in the formulation and implementation of nutrition policies/strategies and action plans to address nutrition issues. Yet, the country is facing weak and inadequate institutional capacity as well as a critical shortage of human resource to deliver effective nutrition interventions. This is true in particular with the Sindh province, where the necessary human capability in public health nutrition is severely limited and with challenges such as poverty, lack of education, lack of political commitment, and bad health governance, little change has been observed in nutrition indicators over the last many years⁷. Public health nutrition as academics in Sindh is very poorly served by undergraduate and graduate offerings resulting in lack of trained public health nutrition professionals. A critical mass of skilled nutrition experts are needed to design, plan, and monitor nutrition interventions as well as to deliver essential and quality nutrition services in Sindh. It is gratifying that some of the progress has been observed in Sindh, a province with the greatest malnutrition burden. Until recently, graduate and undergraduate nutrition training was not common in Sindh except for few individual courses that were offered as part of other health related programs. The

recent introduction of the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree in the School of Public Health departments in few universities in Pakistan has enabled the inception of undergraduate, graduate training programs and short courses in public health nutrition. Eliminating hunger and malnutrition is technically feasible. The challenge however lies in strengthening human capacity for nutrition, generating the requisite political will, and strategies to promote and strengthen the education, training and accreditation of relevant nutrition professionals⁸. It should be noted, however, that workforce preparation is only one component of nutrition capacity development, which also includes the overall health system, organizational and community level factors, which are needed to support the performance of nutrition work force in order to address nutrition-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and help reduce malnutrition in Pakistan⁶.

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