

Poor nutrition harms children and stunts nation's growth

By Chrisanthi Christopher

The death through starvation of an 11-month-old child in the Hambantota district last week has cast doubt on the health sector's effectiveness in making sure youth are properly fed.

While media reports speculated that the infant died mainly due to economic reasons and the family could not afford appropriate nutritious food, nutritionists say the dysfunctional state health mechanism and the mother's poor knowledge of nutritious food were contributory causes for the debacle.

One in three children younger than five years is anaemic, the National Nutrition Policy of Sri Lanka reveals. This fate is attributed to inappropriate feeding and caring practices, inadequate knowledge and caregivers' time constraints.

Professor Janaki Gooneratne, nutritionist and former head of the food department of the Industrial Technical Institute, said despite the Health Ministry's effort to eradicate under-nourishment in children through various programmes, mal-nutrition prevails because pregnant and lactating mothers, through lack of understanding, resorted to inappropriate complementary feeding.

In this age of television, mothers both in the rural and urban areas, are influenced by infant products marketed through commercials.

Prof. Gooneratne said although a child may be given nourishing, locally-blended food (a combination of rice, peanuts and green gram/cow pea), most mothers go for the commercial products sold in shops at exorbitant prices.

"Either they do not want to follow the grandmother's formula or are carried away by the media which peddles commer-



The parents of 11-month-old child who died reportedly of starvation

plantation sectors.

A 2016 World Bank report, "Tackling Chronic Under-Nutrition in Sri Lanka Plantations" said under-nutrition was not only an economic problem but also a behavioural and cultural problem for this country.

Surveys showed mothers in the estate sector were unsure of introducing complementary food such as fish, meat and eggs to children and ignored the importance of introducing such food in six months.

Also, traditional beliefs that eggs cause phlegm and fresh milk trig-

gers allergies, skin rashes and shortness of breath stopped parents from giving children nutritious food.

The report said Health Ministry programmes failed to reach the targeted population, lacked resources and was not properly monitored or coordinated.

The report recommended comprehensive behavioural change to reach mothers and childcare providers and creating awareness on risks to long-term health and the economic impact of stunted growth during the first 1,000 days of life.

Trends in nutritional status of children under age 5

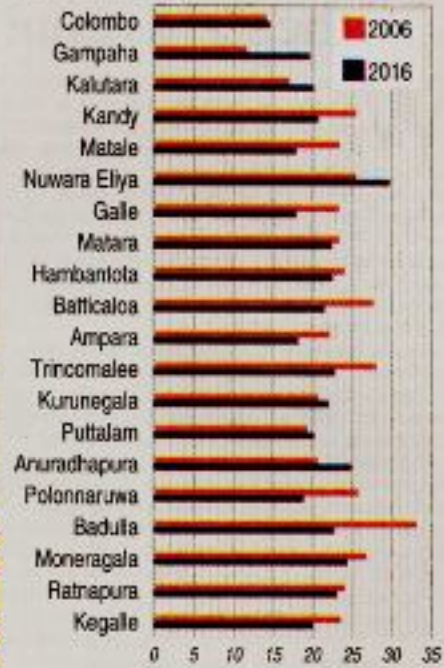
Note : Excluding Northern Province

17% are stunted (short for their age) | 15% are wasted (thin for their height) | 21% are underweight (thin for their age)



Source: Department of Census and Statistics

Comparison of underweight of children under age 5 by District, 2006 and 2016



ST Graphic: Nalin Balasuriya

The poor man who cannot afford luxury food fails to realise that similar nutrients can be obtained from our locally available vegetable and cereals."

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