

# Strengthening public health nutrition education in India

Malnutrition remains a major challenge for public health and for human and economic development in India. A lack of adequately trained public health professionals and nutritionists means that this challenge is not being met. Due to resource constraints, the most realistic way of improving this situation is to optimise the use of existing infrastructure. The first step to do this is to assess the current landscape of public health nutrition (PHN) education in India. Based on a situation analysis and recent findings from qualitative studies undertaken by the Transform Nutrition capacity building team, at the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), this brief summarises recommendations for the role of higher education in tackling malnutrition in India.

India currently has a very unhealthy nutrition profile. More than one-third of the world's children who are wasted live in India. Among children under five, 43% are underweight, 48% stunted and 20% wasted. The importance of trained (high quality) nutrition professionals to ensure effective nutrition programme delivery has been repeatedly highlighted. PHFI conducted several research studies to map nutrition education, especially PHN, in India. An initial situational analysis of nutrition teaching and training initiatives in India revealed 190 institutions offering nutrition education at various academic levels. However, most of the courses offered were clinical or therapeutic in focus and PHN was offered in less than 3% of the institutions. An in depth analysis of postgraduate education in nutrition followed, which suggested about 112 Indian colleges offered a Master's degree in nutrition. PHN featured prominently in only one and superficially in 12 of these programs (largely as modules or diplomas). Qualitative interviews with 25 public health experts and professionals working in the area of PHN were undertaken to supplement our understanding of the PHN landscape in India. These interviews highlighted that PHN in India is fraught with several challenges. A dearth of professionals trained in PHN at public policy making level results in a compromised focus on nutrition interventions. In terms of academic initiatives, gaps exist in research skills, practical training, and interdisciplinary focus in the curricula.

The implementation of national nutrition programmes requires sustained institutional commitment as well as human and financial resources. It is evident from the findings of this review that India severely lacks dedicated education and training programmes in



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PHN. The establishment of training and educational initiatives for professionals in the field would help to develop quality and research-based programmes focusing and specialising in PHN. This is also important to sensitise policy makers towards the need and importance of studying PHN as an independent discipline. Policy makers can make a big difference if they understand the nutritional implications of a range of policy decisions. Nutrition capacity strengthening programmes can serve to build research skills which in turn help to influence policy. Thus, a comprehensive effort in public nutrition would need to address appropriate teaching and training of a critical mass of key individuals at every level in the country.

Students of Aarohi Bal Sansar School, Uttarakhand, India enjoying the nutritious mid day meal called poha (made of flaked rice and vegetables).

“The implementation of national nutrition programmes requires sustained institutional commitment as well as human and financial resources.”

## Recommendations

In order to nurture the field of PHN as well as its trained professionals, the team outlined a few F-E-A-S-I-B-L-E recommendations.

**F**unding Improved allocation to PHN research and training

**E**xpand the horizons of nutrition from a clinical to a societal approach to effectively address the nutrition problems and challenges at the community, programmatic and public policy levels.

**A**ugment existing resources to strengthen PNH in the curriculum

**S**trategic positioning of nutrition in India's development agenda

**I**nvest in short term training programs, workshops, distance learning courses and other faculty development programs to enhance the quality of the PHN workforce.

**B**uild mentorship and encourage rigorous training, scientific writing, integrating research methods and hands on experiences.

**L**earn about PHN capacity building and strengthening from successes and failures elsewhere and adapt for contextual validity and sustainability

**E**mployment opportunities must be increased along with satisfactory remuneration.



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Students of Aarohi Bal Sansar School Uttarakhand, India helping to distribute the mid day meal.

“Policymakers can make a big difference if they understand the nutritional implications of a range of policy decisions.”

## Further reading

Horton R, Lo S: *Nutrition: a quintessential sustainable development goal.*

[www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(13\)61100-9/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(13)61100-9/fulltext)

Khandelwal S, Paul T, Haddad L, Bhalla S, Gillespie S and Laxminarayan R: *Postgraduate education in nutrition in south Asia: a huge mismatch between investments and needs.*

[www.biomedcentral.com/1472-6920/14/3](http://www.biomedcentral.com/1472-6920/14/3)

Khandelwal S and Kurpad A: *Nurturing public health nutrition education in India.*

[www.nature.com/ejcn/journal/vaop/ncurrent/full/ejcn201442a.html](http://www.nature.com/ejcn/journal/vaop/ncurrent/full/ejcn201442a.html)

Khandelwal S, Dayal R, Jha M, Zodpey S, Reddy KS: *Mapping of nutrition teaching and training initiatives in India: the need for public health Nutrition.*

[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22115338](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22115338)

## Credits

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