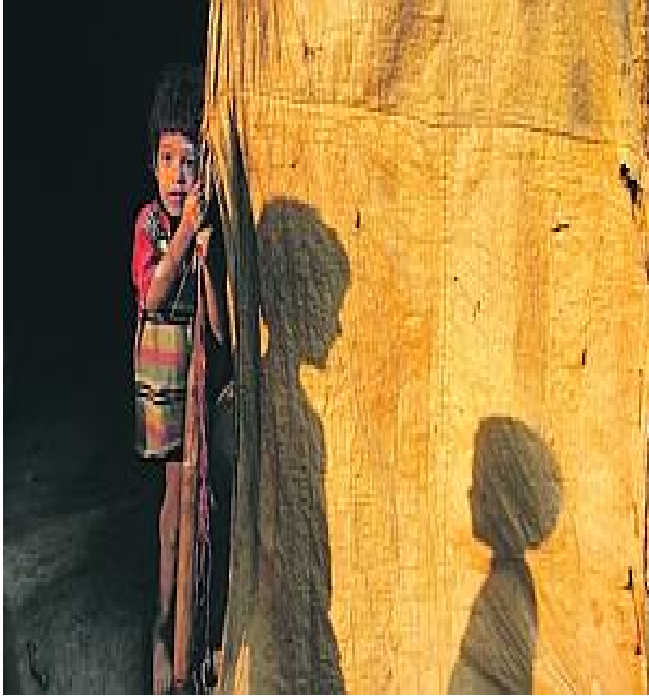


# Cushioning the impact on kids

By Anupama Rao Singh ,  
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A child in the city of Allahabad in northern India. With the financial crisis, there will be more children leaving school and going hungry, with mortality rate among those younger than five likely to rise by an estimated 3 to 11 per cent in some countries. -- PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

JUST when we are hearing of factories closing as the global economic crisis squeezes countries in Asia, we learn of Pan Nan getting hired by one in Cambodia this month. This should be good news. Her family has been eating leaves and scavenging for snails and crabs in the rice paddies.

But Pan Nan is only 16. She lied about her age on the application and then quit school to take the job in Phnom Penh, two hours from her village. She and her widowed mother are counting on the US\$10 (S\$15), after expenses, she will send home each month to pay debts and medical bills. Her four siblings are regularly ill these days with fever, diarrhoea and abdominal pains.

In the Asia and the Pacific region, where about 600 million people live in poverty - on US\$1 a day or less - the impact of the food and economic crises has been devastating. According to recent research analysis, a 10 per cent increase in food prices has pushed an estimated 105 million more people into poverty. Poor families in Asia spend 40 to 60 per cent of their income on food.

To address the worsening situation, Unicef is bringing together some 150 decision makers - including finance ministers, senior government officials, academics and other experts - for a conference this week at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, with the support of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unicef-commissioned researchers have looked at the lessons learned from previous financial emergencies, such as the Asian crisis of 1997-1998. They will make the case for investing in children and social protection. They will show that now is not the time to cut back on social spending. Now, more than ever, we need to maintain - or even scale up - measures to protect children.

We know from the 1997-1998 experience that many families are unable to keep up their strong cultural commitment to education during hard times and that many children are forced to drop out of school. Secondary school enrolment in Indonesia dropped by 11 per cent during the 1997-1998 crisis and by 8 per cent in the Philippines. When large numbers of children like Nan Pan leave school, their long-term development suffers, as do the prospects for their countries' sustained development.

Also, according to Unicef's research, the mortality rate among children younger than five years could rise by an estimated 3 to 11 per cent in countries severely affected by the crises. The analysts further noted that the recent crises, if unaddressed, could increase the prevalence of low birth weight by 5 to 10 per cent. Rates of childhood stunting (already high in this region) could rise by 3 to 7 per cent and wasting by 8 to 16 per cent.

Stunting, or low height for age, is caused by long-term insufficient nutrient intake and frequent infections. Stunting generally occurs before age two, and its effects, which include delayed motor development, impaired cognitive function and poor school performance, are largely irreversible. Wasting, or low weight for height, is a strong predictor of mortality among children younger than five years. It is usually the result of acute food shortage and/or disease. With 28 per cent of children under five years already underweight, the region is far behind its United Nations Millennium Development Goal of reducing hunger.

Most governments in the region have responded to the food price spikes with schemes such as price controls, subsidies, cash transfer for food, food rations, school feeding programmes, and so on. But inadequate coverage is still an issue.

According to Unicef research, most countries in the region - including the poorest ones - have only limited coverage if they have a social protection programme at all. And many programmes are not prepared to cope with the 'new poor' - the previous 'near poor' who have been pushed into poverty.

The 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis illustrated that household coping strategies will sustain considerable pressure for a while. But for how long this time?

Scaling up social protection systems can help boost economies by funding jobs for teachers, health-care workers, child-care workers and social workers. The World Bank reported two years prior to the current crises that interventions to improve child nutrition outcomes could generate benefits that are 5-200 times the cost of the interventions. There is a strong case for placing children at the centre of social protection systems.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which all countries in the region have ratified, reinforces that case. Children, it says, should have first call on all available resources to ensure their rights to survival, development and protection. This is no less true in times of economic challenge.

'The future of my children is a big concern for me, but it is out of my control,' Nan Pan's mother said several days ago, looking out over the last of her four padi fields. The others have been sold to cover bills.

We need to give her back that control. Nan Pan's village neighbours, who are also struggling to cope with the doubling of prices for food, petrol and fertiliser, help out her mother by giving her noodles or hiring her to help with their harvests.

If weakened village communities can help, why can't national governments?

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