

Sri Lanka Launches Effort to Tackle Malnutrition

Colombo, 2 JUNE 2008 - Sri Lanka has launched National Nutrition Month at a ceremony in the capital Colombo, hoping to tackle what one international health expert has called “the confounding mystery of Sri Lanka’s stubborn under-nutrition figures.”

While Sri Lanka’s overall health indicators are on track to achieve - or have already achieved - the international developmental benchmarks known as the Millennium Development Goals, the one notable exception is the nutritional status of hundreds of thousands of children and mothers.

Around one of every three Sri Lankan children is undernourished, with notable regional disparities, particularly in the “Estate,” or old tea-growing regions of the country. The Estate sector, in the highlands of Sri Lanka, has traditionally accounted for the most remote and under-developed areas in the country.

“For a country that suffers no significant food shortages and provides extensive free maternal and child health services, it is paradoxical that malnutrition affects such a large proportion of the population,” said UNICEF country representative, Philippe Duamelle.

The eminent medical journal *The Lancet* recently produced a series that focused on maternal and child under-nutrition globally. The keynote speaker at the ceremony was one of the authors and editors of the series, Professor Zulfiqar Bhutta, who noted that of the millions of children who die each year, as many as a third of those deaths can be attributed to maternal and child under-nutrition.

Bhutta urged the country’s health authorities to focus on what he called “The Golden Interval,” the time between conception and the age of two, beyond which, “it is really too late.” He added that a public health campaign targeting exclusive breastfeeding for six months would go a long way towards changing the situation.

The launch of Nutrition Month was also attended by the Minister of Healthcare and Nutrition, Hon. Nimal Siripala de Silva, the Secretary of Healthcare and Nutrition, Dr H.A.P. Kahandaliyanage, and a host of UN agencies, government departments, and journalists.

“The Government of Sri Lanka has placed malnutrition at the forefront of its health priorities,” said Minister de Silva, “and UNICEF is backing this effort to the hilt. We know that a minimum package of high impact and cost-effective interventions can be integrated into the life-styles of women and children to ensure that good nutrition practices are sustained.”

The package includes things such as breastfeeding counseling, vitamin and nutrient supplementation, the promotion of proper complementary feeding, the treatment of severe acute malnutrition, disease reduction, and other strategies to promote good nutrition practices in the family and in the community.

“This series from *The Lancet* confirms many elements of what we have known for a long time,” said Duamelle. “Armed with this good knowledge, we now need good partnership amongst diverse actors – the government, UN agencies, civil society and the private sector - in order to tackle malnutrition head-on, and to make a real difference for children.”