



General Studies-2; Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

Addressing Sanitation Issues to tackle Malnutrition

Introduction

- According to the World Health Organisation, **50 per cent of all malnutrition can be traced to diarrhoea and intestinal worm infections**, caused by poor water, sanitation and hygiene.
- It's evident that there is a **direct correlation between sanitation and nutrition**, and the sooner we acknowledge it, the faster we can work towards fixing it.
- With the onset of Covid-19, proper hygiene and sanitation measures have assumed even greater importance.

Nutritional insecurity

- Of all the problems confronting the youth, nutritional insecurity is the worst, holding the power to cripple the future of an entire generation.
- A recent UNICEF report stated that nearly 12 lakh children could die in low-income countries in the next six months due to a decrease in routine health services and an increase in wasting.
- Nearly three lakh such children would be from India.
- National Family Health Survey (NFHS 5) indicates that since the onset of the pandemic, acute undernourishment in children below the age of five has worsened.
- According to the latest data, 37.9 per cent of children under five are stunted, and 20.8 per cent are wasted.
- This is much higher than in other developing countries.

Causes for Malnutrition

- **Inadequate dietary intake** is the most direct cause of undernutrition.
- Several other factors also affect nutritional outcomes, such as **contaminated drinking water, poor sanitation, and unhygienic living conditions**.
- Nutrition and **water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)** are intricately linked, and changes in one tend, directly or indirectly, to affect the other.
- Poor hygiene and sanitation in developing countries leads to a sub-clinical condition called “environmental enteropathy” in children, which causes nutritional malabsorption.
- Environmental enteropathy is a disorder of the intestine which prevents the proper absorption of nutrients, rendering them effectively useless.
- Diarrhoeal diseases, intestinal parasite infections and environmental enteropathy together impact the normal growth and cognitive development of children.

Way Forward

- India must use the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to come up with **long-term multi-stakeholder solutions** to the problem of nutrition in the country.
- States must ensure “**adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking water**” to combat disease and malnutrition.
- Safe drinking water, proper sanitation and hygiene can significantly reduce diarrhoeal and nutritional deaths.
- Greater attention to, and investments in, WASH can bolster the country’s nutritional status.
- In India, both WASH and nutrition must be addressed together through holistic, sustainable community engagement to enable long-term impact.
- A simultaneous approach to nutrition and WASH will aid India’s fight against malnutrition, bolster Covid resilience amongst the most vulnerable sections of society and also safeguard against monsoon-related health challenges.
- **A safe and healthy population will make the 75th year of Independence a watershed moment in India’s journey.**