

Hidden Hunger: A Looming Crisis in Pakistan's Nutrition Landscape

Versha Rani Rai^{1*} and Berkha Rani²

¹Department of Pediatric Medicine, National Institute of Child Health (NICH), Karachi, Pakistan

²Department of Oncology, Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre (JPMC), Karachi, Pakistan

Pakistan is facing a grave and often overlooked crisis in its nutrition landscape. Hidden hunger, a form of malnutrition resulting from inadequate intake of essential vitamins and minerals, poses a significant threat to the health and well-being of millions of Pakistanis [1]. This editorial sheds light on the prevalence and consequences of hidden hunger in Pakistan, explores its underlying causes, and emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address this silent crisis.

The Prevalence and Consequences: Hidden hunger affects individuals across all age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds in Pakistan. Despite an abundance of food, a large proportion of the population suffers from deficiencies in vital nutrients such as iron, vitamin A, iodine, and zinc [2, 3]. These deficiencies have severe consequences, leading to impaired cognitive development, weakened immune systems, increased susceptibility to diseases, and even higher mortality rates, particularly among women and children.

Hidden hunger in Pakistan can be attributed to various factors. Inadequate dietary diversity, especially among marginalized populations, is a significant contributor [3]. Dependence on staple foods, such as rice and wheat, often leads to imbalanced nutrient intake. Additionally, poor sanitation and hygiene practices, limited access to safe drinking water, and inadequate healthcare services further exacerbate the problem [4]. Socioeconomic disparities and lack of awareness about proper nutrition also play a role in perpetuating hidden hunger [5].

The impact of xenobiotic contamination in a developing country like Pakistan is another concern. Pakistan may be exposed to xenobiotic contamination present in food, air, and water, which can affect overall health and nutrition [6].

Addressing hidden hunger requires a multi-faceted and comprehensive approach. Firstly, promoting dietary diversity is essential to ensure a well-rounded intake of essential nutrients [5]. This can be achieved through education programs that emphasize the importance of

incorporating fruits, vegetables, legumes, and animal-source foods into daily diets. Efforts should also be made to improve agricultural practices, enhance crop diversity, and support small-scale farmers to increase the availability of nutritious food options.

The implementation of dietary interventions in the face of xenobiotic contamination may require the use of dietary activators of anti-aging genes, which are critical for preventing programmed cell death and promoting overall health [6].

Public health initiatives should focus on providing targeted interventions to vulnerable populations, such as pregnant women and young children. Supplementation programs, fortified food interventions, and nutrition education campaigns can significantly improve the nutritional status of these high-risk groups [2, 7]. Collaborations with international organizations, NGOs, and the private sector can further strengthen these interventions and ensure their sustainability.

Investing in infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, is crucial for addressing hidden hunger effectively. Improving access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and healthcare services will not only reduce the risk of infectious diseases but also enhance the absorption and utilization of essential nutrients [4]. Empowering communities through awareness campaigns and behavior change communication can foster long-term changes in nutritional practices and help sustain improvements in dietary habits.

To combat hidden hunger, research and monitoring efforts must be strengthened. Conducting national surveys and studies to assess the prevalence and impact of hidden hunger can provide valuable insights for evidence-based interventions [2, 8]. Monitoring the nutritional status of vulnerable groups and tracking progress over time will aid in evaluating the effectiveness of interventions and identifying areas for improvement.

Hidden hunger poses a significant threat to the health and well-being of the Pakistani population, with long-lasting consequences for individuals, communities, and the nation as a whole. Addressing this crisis requires a collective effort from government bodies, civil society, healthcare professionals, researchers, and communities

*Corresponding author: Versha Rani Rai, Department of Pediatric Medicine, National Institute of Child Health (NICH), Karachi, Pakistan, Email: versharai.sg@gmail.com

Received: May 24, 2023; Revised: October 08, 2023; Accepted: October 17, 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37184/lnjpc.2707-3521.6.17>

themselves. By implementing comprehensive interventions that prioritize dietary diversity, improve access to essential services, and empower individuals with knowledge, Pakistan can combat hidden hunger and pave the way for a healthier and more prosperous future.

REFERENCES

1. Amjad M, Akbar M. Role of socioeconomic factors to overcome micronutrient malnutrition in Pakistan: Application of partial proportional odds model. *Progr Nutr* 2020; 22(3): e2020021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23751/pn.v22i3.8404>
2. Ahmed F. Understanding food insecurity experiences, dietary perceptions and practices in the households facing hunger and malnutrition in Rajanpur District, Punjab Pakistan. *Pak Perspect* 2019; 24(2): 115-33.
3. Lowe NM. The global challenge of hidden hunger: perspectives from the field. *Procee Nutr Soci* 2021; 80(3): 283-9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0029665121000902>
4. Mehboob R. Hidden Hunger, its causes and impact on Human life. *Pak J Health Sci* 2022; 3(4): 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54393/pjhs.v3i04.297>
5. Mashhadi SF, Khan N, Maryam Z, Aamir M, Sahi SS, Amin M. Hidden hunger or knowledge hunger? an interventional study in a public school of Rawalpindi. *Pak Armed Forces Med J* 2022; 72(Suppl 4): S859-63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51253/pafmj.v72iSUPPL-4.9680>
6. Martins IJ. Anti-aging genes improve appetite regulation and reverse cell senescence and apoptosis in global populations. *Adv Aging Res* 2016; 5: 9-26. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/aar.2016.51002>
7. Das JK, Padhani ZA. Alleviating hidden hunger: an infallible bridge to improved health and nutrition. *The Lancet Global Health* 2022; 10(11): e1539-40. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(22\)00421-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(22)00421-1)
8. Yadav L, Maurya NK. Fight hidden hunger through national programs and food based approaches. In *Combating malnutrition through sustainable approaches*. IntechOpen 2022. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.104459> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.104459>