



ECOCIATE WEBINAR SERIES

WORKFORCE NUTRITION **during COVID-19**

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WEBINAR PROCEEDINGS

Ecociate conducted a webinar on Workforce Nutrition during COVID 19 to bring global attention to the subject which is not often discussed by the Nutrition Program designers, donors, policy makers and the civil society. Moreover, during COVID 19 as we observe complete lockdown of economic activities leading to workforce losing income and becoming vulnerable to hunger, infections, and poor health. The emerging scenario further complicates the issues faced in work places where the micronutrient malnutrition, stunting and anaemia is all pervasive and inhibits worker's productivity, regular attendance, and performance.

The panel of speakers in the webinar were Mr. Tarun Vij, Country Director, GAIN, India, Mr. Rajeev Ahal, Director, Natural Resources Management and Agro Ecology, GIZ, and Mr. Basanta Kar, an awarded Nutrition Professional. The webinar was well attended by a mix of industry, donors, INGOs, civil society organizations, academia, and nutrition professionals. The session was moderated by Mr. Saroj Kumar Mohanta, Ecociate Consultants.

The moderator opened the discussion to the panellists to expand on 'Workforce' as the reference is often to workers in organized sector. Mr. Vij described all workforce in various forms of industries like tea estates, brick kilns, mining, textiles and garments and other labour intensive sectors. Mr. Ahal brought the informal sector into the centre of the discussion by focusing on MNRGA and its scheme which, has registered 130 million workers but annually engages 80-90 million workers. Mr. Kar felt that both the formal and informal sector workforce are contributing to the GDP of the nation and should be part of the discussion. The farm sector alone comprising of farmers, dairy, fishery engages a major part of the workforce but are seldom in the consideration of such deliberations.

Workforce and the Covid-19 Challenge

During these times of pandemic workforce nutrition acquires significance, as it is facing unprecedented socio-economic and health shocks across the globe, said Mr Vij. The shocks have led to massive job losses which mostly impacted the bottom of the pyramid population. Secondly, food supply has also been significantly disrupted and has impacted access to nutritious food. Additionally, health systems are getting burdened with the COVID response and resources for natural nutrition and development assistance for primary care schemes are constrained.

Mr. Ahal explained that rural India displays a different form in the definition of workforce nutrition, as it includes agricultural labour, construction activities, migration to urban

locations to render low skill services and engaged in trade services. Agriculture being the core among occupations, engages 50% of the workforce and contribute up to 15% of the national GDP. This workforce, 65% of whom are vulnerable as their dependence is on small landholdings (< 2 hectares) which is mostly rainfed. Many of them migrated for 3-6 months to find alternate income. The Covid 19 has adversely affected their opportunity to find alternate income and in some cases income from his farms as well since the supply chain got disrupted.

“This pandemic has increased the possibility of compounding poverty and vulnerability of the workforce, as levels of nutrition are expected to drop due to reduced access and availability of nutritious food, which may result in failing health of the workforce”, says a worried Mr Kar

According to Mr. Kar, increasing evidence suggesting that malnutrition increases susceptibility to infections and infectious diseases, results in poverty, morbidity, and mortality. The comprehensive national nutrition survey of India finds that 35% children are stunted in India, in comparison to 1% in Germany. Similarly, 53% of women in workforce are anaemic compared to 11% in US. Thus, workforce that is anaemic and having micro nutrient deficiency will certainly be less productive. This pandemic has increased the possibility of compounding poverty and vulnerability of the workforce, particularly that of the above-mentioned population, as levels of nutrition are expected to drop due to reduced access and availability of nutritious food, which may result in the failing health of the workforce.

Mitigating Nutritional Deficiencies of the workforce

Mr. Vij proposed that it will be an imperative to focus on improving the health of the workforce that forms the backbone of the economy. This demands defined roles and responsibilities for the important stakeholders like the government, the civil society, and the companies ensuring that the workforce does not suffer from poor health and therefore poor productivity. Companies, for conducting their businesses in an efficient manner, work with sourcing systems, processing systems, supply chains, market infrastructure and engage with large workforce communities, directly or indirectly. Mr. Vij further shared that GAIN has been working with the Tea Industry in India, in the tea estates of North East India to provide access to nutritious food to the workforce (tea workers) through supply chain innovations. This has resulted in improved health of workforce and has enhanced productivity of the workforce. This has built a business case for the companies to invest in workforce nutrition for not only for better productivity

and lowering absenteeism but also as its responsibility towards the welfare of the workforce and their families. This is all the more relevant during these time as a healthy workforce will determine the rate of the country to bounce back.

“As we are trying to revive the economy, we should not compromise with the workforce nutrition, which can be ensured by minimizing wage cuts, limiting layoffs, providing safer workspaces and ensuring nutrition counselling” Mr Vij remarked

Mr. Ahal found the government program, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Generation Act and scheme (MNREGA), as a platform that can ensure food security to the rural workforce. The scheme assures 100 days of work annually to the rural workforce. It aids the workforce particularly during the months when there are no remunerative agricultural activities. With 70-80 million households benefiting from the program, the scheme has reduced their vulnerability, and created a medium-term resilience for the workforce in the times of pandemic. Budgetary allocation of Rs. 61,500 crores for the program has been increased to Rs.1,05,000 crores under the pandemic relief package.

Mr. Kar restated the importance of nutrition to trigger productivity and growth, achieving demographic dividend and building a healthy workforce. He quoted from an international research study that, 'every dollar spent on nutrition of workforce, gives a return of 16 dollars. The studies also found that 1% loss in a person's height due to stunting converts to reduced productivity of 1.4%. Similarly, eliminating anaemia can increase an adult's productivity by 5-17%. Deficiencies in Vitamin D and Zinc were found in 24% of adolescent groups which compromises their immunity. And these adolescents who subsequently enter the workforce are today most vulnerable in the times of Covid 19.

Experiences in Workforce Nutrition

Mr. Vij further discussed the experience of GAIN projects in the tea gardens of India. According to him, 1.2 million workers live in Tea Estates, which itself is a self-contained microsystem, consisting of houses for tea workers, small retail shops, anganwadis, schools, dispensaries, etc. The households are migrants (British era) from modern day states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh. Women form 50% of the tea garden workforce and live with their families with 4-5 members. GAIN initiated the engagement with the tea companies who sourced tea from these gardens to invest into the nutrition of the workforce for better productivity. The leveraging of the reach of Indian Tea Association and the Tea Board enabled the environment to embed nutrition within the work system of the tea gardens, presently reaching 42000 households. The initial nutrition program focused

on creating demand side for diversified diets, provisioning for fresh fruits and vegetables. Subsequently since 2016, the focus was drawn to access component, by leveraging the supply chain of local kirana stores, from whom these worker families buy their food products. The supply chain intervention has resulted in improving access to products like dairy, eggs, vegetables, fruits, etc and an outcome of tenfold increase in consumption.

Mr. Ahal referred to a project on “Food & Nutrition Security” that is being implemented by GIZ in collaboration with the government of Madhya Pradesh among tribal communities. The project worked with panchayats to identify unused panchayat land and planning the use by the community. The departments and the panchayats were made responsible to form Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the villages who in turn would take responsibility of utilization of the land. Utilising the funds from MGNREGA, the land was used to grow vegetables for self-consumption and surplus sold in the

market. Under the agreement, 75% of the revenue earned was retained by the SHG and 25% was for the panchayat. In an instance in district Shivpuri, the SHG group decided to donate 100 Kgs of vegetable to the 71 migrant workers who were quarantined in the village, raising the hope of creating impacts on the ground.

Mr. Kar addressed the issue of nutrition from the point of first 1000 days of a new born to ensure a healthy child who will grow into a healthy adult. Additionally, with more than 70,000 child births per day, India also needs to take care of the women workforce who need nutrition during pregnancy. One healthy meal for the women workforce during pregnancy is essential. Further, the healthy meal can be sourced from bio-fortified cereals and legumes. He also proposed a collaboration between government, donors, and corporates to ensure that nutrition supplementation programs are integrated for the workforce.

In concluding part of the session, the challenge posed by Covid 19 for the workforce was highlighted as a cause of concern. Mr. Ahal concluded by suggesting that **Agro-ecological approaches to agriculture looking at sustainable agriculture, at a farm level or a landscape and watershed level maybe insufficient, and requires a closer look at a food system level working along with the consuming workforce.** A closer engagement with Farmer organizations like FPOs, FPCs, cooperatives etc address such issues more diligently. Nutrition Movement in covid-19 requires a livelihood impetus. Mr. Vij concluded by emphasizing on the need for diversified diet, food supplements, fortified food and bio-fortified cereals for the workforce which should be enabled through awareness and accessibility through a collaborated approach of the private sector, government, and civil

“Collaboration between local administration and social groups to utilise community land for producing nutritious food is a way of creating local supply for the rural communities” says Mr Ahal

society. Mr Kar highlighted the need of support programs to benefit the workforce employed in the MSMEs; these businesses employ majority of the workforce. Strengthening the public funded nutrition programs, improving access to nutrition products through efficient supply chains will be important cornerstones.

The conclusion of the webinar on 'Workforce Nutrition' is the candid realization that it is a subject not central to various development programs, though it is the basis of assessing health of the population contributing to the productivity of the nation. The Covid 19 raises the question of immunity of the workforce from the infectious disease and their capacity to work efficiently in their workplace. Workplaces cannot overlook the issue as it will adversely impact their production and subsequent business opportunities. Thus, this can only be the beginning of the discussion and not the conclusion. It will be a great learning to discuss about the initiatives on Workplace Nutrition in different programs across the country.

Ecociate is a research and consulting firm which is committed to support organizations by co-creating innovative and sustainable business solutions in the emerging markets. We are a knowledge-based organization with capacity to Ideate, Conceptualize and Activate new business solutions for social and corporate businesses. We aim to enhance the **Quality of life, Societal development, and Economic gains** at the **Bottom of Pyramid**. In one of our projects, we have recently designed a supply chain model for creating access to nutritious products in the tea gardens of upper Assam.



Mr. Tarun Vij leads the India Country Program of GAIN to drive impact at scale through partnerships with both the public and private sectors. Currently GAIN is implementing projects on large scale food fortification, workplace nutrition and biofortification in India. Prior to joining GAIN, he led public health and development organizations such as PATH, American India Foundation and TCI Foundation

Mr. Rajeev Ahal, Director at GIZ India, Natural Resource Management and Agro-Ecology; He leads a key bilateral project on 'Water Security and Climate Adaptation in Rural India', along with other projects on rural development, social protection, sustainable farming systems, market led development approaches (including PPPs), value chain development, livelihood development initiatives; With over 33 years of experience, he has worked with international agencies, governments and the private sector in India and African countries





Mr. Basanta Kumar Kar is known for his outstanding contribution to the nutrition and poverty eradication. He was awarded 'The Global Transform Nutrition Champion' in 2016 and very recently in 2019, the coveted and prestigious, 'Global Nutrition Leadership Award'

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Mr. Saroj Kumar Mohanta, Co-founder and Director, Ecociate Consultants, specializes in developing and designing Business models in social and corporate sectors. He co-designed the supply chain model for nutritious products in the tea gardens of Assam. The Arogya Parivar model for Novartis and the Bhaichara model for Baxter are the other innovative business models he is co-credited with.



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