

COPRODUCTION: CHILD SURVIVAL IN NEPAL / March 2000
Shradha Shah/ Anke Rasper
"Infant and Child Health"

MUSIC

CHILD SURVIVAL - Infant and child health in Nepal -

A Coproduction by Radio Nepal and Radio Deutsche Welle, Germany's international broadcasting station.

Music up and fade down

SFX Sounds of baby

Misa Mangboba is sitting in the sun outside her hut, gently massaging her baby with mustard oil. The girl is one month old. She is small for her age and looks a little weak, but her mother has never had her checked by a doctor. The baby might be lucky and grow into a healthy child. But in Nepal, child and infant mortality is high. Every year, 80,000 children die. 80 out of 1,000 babies die before they reach their first year, and 118 before they are five years old. In most cases, the causes for their death could have been prevented, says Stewart Mc Nab, a specialist for Child Development from Unicef.

Voice Clip Stewart McNab (English)

"Children mostly die of preventable diseases, diseases such as diarrhoea, diseases like respiratory infections, pneumonia, and also I'm sorry to say, even in this day and age of immunization, measles. The reason why that continues to happen is because it's very difficult to reach out and cover all the children in Nepal with immunizations. As you can imagine, the topography and the geography of the country is really quite difficult and reaching out to all children continues to be a major challenge."

80 percent of the Nepalis live in rural areas. But the majority of well-trained medical practitioners live in the cities, while village health staff mostly have only minimal medical training. Apart from the lack of access to health services, the living conditions of many Nepalis make their children prone to diseases, says Jean Smith from the World Health Organisation, WHO:

Voice Clip Jean Smith (English)

The conditions in which you see many people in a country like this living are houses with very crowded conditions, many members of families all living together, many many young children, the families may have, there is poor ventilation in all those huts and houses, they may have a central fire, a cooking fire that they keep smouldering all day, and it is literally smouldering, this also promotes the collection of smoke and fumes and then you have all these people living together, exchanging their breathing air in a very closed and crowded condition. And of course these crowded living conditions with low levels of hygiene with people defecating in the open also promotes transmission back and forth of viruses and bacteria and parasites that cause diarrhoea as well. /

Children are especially endangered because small children are always more vulnerable to infections."

Respiratory diseases ranging from a simple cough, or a sore throat, to fever, pneumonia and tuberculosis trouble many children in Nepal. About 30,000 to 40,000 kids under five die every year due to pneumonia. Often, they are weakened by Diarrhoea in addition. Only one in five Nepalis has access to sanitary facilities, and only few villages have latrines. And one third of the population have no clean drinking water, which enhances the chance of children catching diarrhoea. On average, each Nepali child suffers from it at least three times a year. And typical childhood infections like measles, which are not dangerous for otherwise strong and healthy children, are often highly infectious and severe in Nepal - and can be fatal. The reason for this is chronic malnutrition, says Stewart McNab:

Voice Clip : Stewart McNab (English)

"When a child's immunal system is weakenrd by malnutrition, then the child is more susceptible to measles diarrhea or pneumonia. We're in a situation now where we can say that about 54 percent of all children in Nepal under the age of five are chronically malnourished, and regrettably, the situation has not changed much over the past 20 years."

Even though many national and international organisations have been working to improving the health and nutrition situation, the fast population growth of about 2,6 percent every year also increases the problems. Average families have about 5 or 6 children.

SFX Village children playing , establish and fade under

Nearly two thirds of the kids under three are too small for their age, due to malnutrition. However, most parents are not even aware that their children may be malnourished, says Wing Sei Chen from the Unicef communication section.

Voice Clip Wing Sei-Chen (English)

"If you go to the villages, you can see that among this group of children parents won't be able to tell the difference, because every child looks the same. But you can almost tell, when you walk up to a child, that child could be 7 but he appears to be only five or six. The challenge in the next couple of years, we want to work on a way in which we can bring the difference to the attention of the parents, to let them know that the patterns in which children are growing is not normal, and that there is a much bigger potential in terms of weight or heighz which is the best indicator whether the kid is malnourished.."

A key factor for infant malnutrition is the health of their mothers during pregnancy and after delivery. But gender bias against women makes pregnancy a risk in Nepal. The maternal mortality rate in the country is the highest in Asia, and one of the highest in the world. One out of 32 women is at risk of death during pregnancy, delivery or shortly after the baby is born.

Traditionally, women and children eat only after the men have had their meals, that means they get the least in the family. But not feeding the mothers well puts their baby's health at risk too, says Dr. Karuna Onta from the Linkages network promoting Mother and Child health.

Voice Clip Karuna Onta (English)

"Not only mothers, a girl child, from a very early age, is not very well fed. So because of poor nutrition, she is highly anaemic all the time, and when she has a child, the child tends to be low birth weight and one of the reasons of the child not surviving for long is because of the low birth weight, they tend to die very easily. (...) And really, to have a good birth for a baby, you have to feed the mother well."

The majority of pregnant women is severely anaemic and deficient in essential micronutrients such as Vitamin A, because they don't eat enough meat and vegetables. One out of three babies is already underweight at birth. But adequate nutrition in the first five years is essential. Studies indicate that children between six to 18 months who are malnourished never catch up at a later stage. Yet most mothers have little time to take care of themselves and their little ones.

SFX cleaning, Cooking

With household chores like cooking, cleaning, fetching water and hard work in the fields, women in Nepal work on average more than 14 hours a day. Tsewang Tamangin lives in a mountain village close to the Chinese border.

Voice Clip Tsewang Tamangin (Nepali with English Voice over)

"We women have to work so much, even when we are pregnant or have just given birth. We can maybe rest for one day after the baby is born, but then we have to work as usual, cut grass, collect firewood and do work in the fields. Many women in our village hardly have time to eat themselves, and they don't have time to prepare adequate food for their children. In our village many children die"

Even though little children need at least five or six meals and snacks a day to grow properly, many mothers simply don't have the time to prepare several meals a day and feeding them often enough.

If the kids get sick, the situation gets even more difficult, since mothers can't stay at home to take care of the sick child, because they have to work in the field to make sure the rest of the family can eat.

SFX Hospital ward : child crying

15 month old Sanjit Shrestha is being treated for malnutrition in Kanti hospital in Kathmandu, the only children's hospital in the country. When his parents brought him here two days ago, he had bad diarrhoea, blood in the stool and his body was swollen. He had not eaten for more than a week. Because his case

was so severe, his parents were transferred here from a village near Pokhara, 8 hours bus trip away. Like Sanjit, many children only come here when it is almost too late, says Nutritionist Rekha Adhigari from the malnutrition ward.

Clip Nutritionalist: (nepali with engl Voice over)

"The major cause of malnutrition is that when a child is sick, he does not want to eat. And the mothers don't insist that the child should eat. So the child gets dehydrated, and that can lead to really tragic cases. A few weeks ago, we had a two year old patient who weighed only 4 kilos. We had to feed him through a tube for several weeks, but he was lucky he survived. "

Sanjits mother Shakuntala is only 17. The boy is her first child.

Voice Clip Mother: (Nepali with English Voice over)

"We don't have much at home. We only have Dhal Bhat and tea. We simply cannot afford to eat anything else."

Dhal Bhat, or Rice and Lentils, is the standard diet for most Nepalis. It's healthy and provides lots of the nutrients important for mothers and children. But many poor people water it down too much to make it last. And they don't know that it's important to supplement Dhal Bhat with vegetables and fruits, says Arzu Deoba who is working for the NGO "Safe Motherhood"

voice Clip Arzu Deoba (English)

Like for example the pumpkin, full of vitamin A, is a taboo food during the time you are lactating. and after child birth, Nepali belief is that you catch cold if you eat pumpkins. So the women who have been eating pumpkin all the while stop eating that food. Which is actually very nutritious for a new mother and a new baby. so things like that, there should be lot of education around nutrition. It's not only poverty, it's also not knowing what to eat."

There are many other taboos and traditional beliefs around mother and child care that hinder the baby's healthy development. Colostrum, the first breastmilk, is widely believed to be "stale" and not fed to the baby right after the birth. In fact, colostrum is highly nutritious and vital to help build up the infant's immunal system. In other cases, mothers feed their children breast milk for too long, or they give additional food to early or too late.

To raise awareness about proper nutrition and health care for both mothers and children, the Nepali government is working together with UNICEF, WHO and many NGOs. Awareness campaigns are using media as varied as wall paintings, Street theatres, and TV and Radio Dramas. Social workers take electricity generators and recorders to remote villages to play educative Television and Radio Dramas to the communities. "Chumantar" for example mixes entertainment and fun with serious information about health and child care.

SFX "Chumantar" Radio Drama

One of its episodes addresses a common misconception about how to treat diarrhoea in children. Many parents believe that the kids should not eat or drink

anything until the disease gets better. But in fact, fluids are vital to prevent dehydration. And like with many other children's diseases, it's not always necessary to buy expensive medicines, like antidehydration solutions. Home remedies like a mix of water, salt and sugar, also called Nunchinci Pani, can help just as well.

To tell people about simple remedies like this, many thousand so called Village Health Volunteers have received several weeks of training in basic health issues in recent years. But since the health volunteers are only getting paid little by the families in need, some villagers complain that their services are not sufficient. Jean Smith from the WHO:

Voice Clip Jean Smith: (English)

" It really depends upon the makeup of that individual village health worker or female community health volunteer. How conscientious is she or he, how much do they care, how hard working, what is their relationship with other people. Ahm, having said that, I will say that when I go out and do fieldwork in this country, I always come back from the field feeling very optimistic and impressed at the unbelievable dedication and hard work that I see among most of the people working out at the village level. these may be people who have to walk seven days to get out to a child to take a vaccine, or seven days to go to a mother who's about to deliver a baby."

It takes time to change people's attitudes. But education, like about the connection of health and hygiene, is beginning to make a difference in the communities. As soon as people realize the importance of hygiene for the health of their children, they also take the initiative, says Dr.Hans Steinmann from the German Organisation for technical Cooperation GTZ.

Dr. Steinmann (english)

"A young village chairman he realized that there are a high number of children suffering from diarrhoea in his VDC so he approached us, we explained what the reasons for diarrhea are and he immediately formed a group..they did start to construct toilettes with our technical assistance...we initiated a process./ people are starting to wake up... "

Community involvement and the cooperation of health workers on all levels, from district hospitals to village health volunteers, have made some health programmes extremely successful, like the regular distribution of Vitamin A capsules to little children and pregnant mothers. More than two thirds of the children receive Vitamiin A capsules every six months. It is estimated that about 12,000 children are prevented from dying every year because of this.

Also, more and more children receive vaccinations and immunizations against diseases like tetanus, measles and polio. According to the latest survey of the Department of Health, 64 percent of Nepali children are fully immunized, 91 percent received at least one vaccination. The eradication of Polio has progressed even faster than expected, with 95 percent of children under five being immunized in 1998. That's due to an international campaign to eradicate Polio. In Nepal, NGOs, government health workers and the communities have

been working together successfully on polio immunization. For four years, millions of children received their oral vaccinations during the National Immunization Days.

SFX polio immunization day , child

Children don't like taking the bitter drops against polio, but immunization is the only way to prevent the dangerous virus. Once the virus has entered the spinal chord, the damage is done. But the majority of people in Nepal are now aware of the risk of polio and take their children to get immunized. Thanks to the massive immunization, there were only two new cases of Polio in Nepal in 1999.

Despite the successes, more than 230 children under the age of 5 still die every day in Nepal. Education will play a key role in improving children's health in the future. Tackling complex problems like malnutrition will remain a major challenge in Nepal in the years to come. In the next 20 years, Nepal is planning on decreasing child and infant mortality by half. Chances are good, says Jean Smith from WHO

Jean Smith:

"the solutions to these problems mostly lie not within the health sector. or health improvements per se, or improvements in medical care. But really in development of society. That is economic things, improved standards of living, improvements in job options, when you have an improvement in people's economic standards, then frequently you see improvements in education following. Education in women has been shown to be extremely important. You teach mothers to read, and they and other social changes follow."

As a common Nepali saying goes - educate a man and you educate an individual. Educate a woman and you educate the entire family. Initial steps in the right direction have begun. Yet in the future, efforts from all sectors involved in the area of child survival will play a significant role to ensure the children's right to survive.

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