

One in 10 children in Thailand live in severe child food poverty



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Around one in ten children under five years old in Thailand experience severe food poverty which threatens their health and overall development, a new Unicef report reveals Saturday, (June 8, 2024).

The Child Food Poverty: Nutrition Deprivation in Early Childhood report is the first of its kind, analyzing the impacts and causes of dietary deprivation among the world's youngest people in nearly 100 countries, and across income groups.

It warns that millions of children under the age of five are unable to access and consume a nutritious and diverse diet to sustain optimal growth and development in early childhood and beyond.

Children living in severe food poverty are those who are fed no more than two food groups per day.

To meet the minimum dietary diversity for healthy growth and development, children need to consume at least five out of the eight defined food groups.

"Poor diets can have lasting effects on children's physical and mental health," said Kyungsun Kim, Unicef Representative for Thailand. "Eating healthy food and getting proper nutrition is essential for their well-being and is a basic right crucial for their survival and growth."

Globally, around 181 million children worldwide under 5 years of age – or 1 in 4 – are experiencing severe child food poverty due to inequity, conflict, and climate crises.

The report also noted that 65 per cent of these children reside in just 20 countries.

Around 64 million affected children are in South Asia, 59 million are in Sub-Saharan Africa and 17 million are in the East Asia and Pacific region.

Four out of five children living in severe food poverty are fed only milk and/or a starchy staple, such as rice, maize or wheat.

Less than 10 per cent of these children are fed fruits and vegetables. And less than 5 per cent are fed nutrient-dense foods such as eggs, fish, poultry, or meat.

The report warns that while countries are still recovering from the socio-economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the effects of growing inequities, conflicts, and the climate crisis have pushed food prices and the cost of living to record-high levels.

Thailand's national survey also indicated concerns about child nutrition.

According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office and Unicef in 2022, just 29% of children are exclusively breastfed during the first six months.

The survey also found that 13% of children under five were stunted and 7% were underweight due to prolonged poor nutrition.

Stunting and wasting are more common among children from poor households, children in non-Thai families and children whose mothers have little or no education.

In Thailand's southernmost provinces, stunting rates among children under five are 20%.

At the same time, obesity in young children in Thailand is on the rise, with 11% of children under five obese in 2022, up from 9% in 2019.

This is largely due to the consumption of food and drinks with high sugar and fat content.

Several factors are fueling the child food poverty crisis, including food systems that fail to provide children with nutritious, safe and accessible options, families' inability to afford nutritious foods, and parents' inability to adopt and sustain positive child-feeding practices.

In many contexts, cheap, nutrient-poor and unhealthy ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages are aggressively marketed to parents and families and are the new normal for feeding children.

Recent Unicef research found that many complementary foods that are sold in South-East Asia - including Thailand - contain excessive amounts of sugar and/or salt, even though they are marketed as suitable for young children.

These unhealthy foods and beverages are consumed by an alarming proportion of young children experiencing food poverty, displacing more nutritious and healthier foods from their daily diets.

To end child food poverty, Unicef calls on governments, development and humanitarian organisations, donors, civil society and the food and beverage industry to urgently:

- Transform food systems so that nutritious, diverse and healthy foods are the most accessible, affordable and desirable option for caregivers to feed young children.
- Leverage health systems to deliver essential nutrition services to prevent and treat malnutrition in early childhood, including support for community health and nutrition workers to counsel parents and families on child feeding and care practices.
- Activate social protection systems to address income poverty through social transfers (cash, food and vouchers), in ways that are responsive to the food and nutrition needs of vulnerable children and their families. - **The Nation/ANN, Bangkok, June 8, 2024**