

BRIDGING THE GAP:

how government-industry collaboration can improve worker nutrition in India

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September 2024

KEY MESSAGES

- Improving nutrition among India's large working-age population, through scaling up workforce nutrition practices, could deliver multiple benefits: to well-being of workers and their families, to employment conditions, to corporate governance, to productivity and profit, and to India's wider economy.
- Both public and private sector employers, employees, and the wider community stand to benefit from incorporating the four key workforce nutrition pillars – 1) access to healthy food, 2) breastfeeding support, 3) nutrition-related health checks with dietary counselling, and 4) nutrition education – into their operations.
- Government has a key role to play in setting expectations, rules, and other incentives to encourage the private sector to be a major part of the mission to a) improve workers' understanding of good nutrition, b) shape how workers eat and feed their families, and c) ultimately improve people's nutritional status and well-being.
- Companies that practice effective workforce nutrition, including through incorporating it into Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting can benefit from healthier and happier employees.



INTRODUCTION

In today's world, where productivity and success take center stage, a crucial element for individuals, families, and societies gets neglected: well-being. This multifaceted concept encompasses not just physical health, but also happiness, prosperity, mental wellness, life satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and the ability to manage stress effectively [1]. **Good nutrition** plays an important role in wellness as it helps people to live healthy and productive lives.

This brief explains how improving nutrition among India's workforce can deliver multiple benefits, and explores the ways that key stakeholders, chiefly government and industry, can support this mission.

Although India has been one of the largest producers of key food items such as milk, pulses, rice, wheat, vegetables and fruits in the world [2], still around 16.6% of India's population is undernourished [3]. In addition, India ranked 111th out of 128 countries in the 2023 Global Hunger Index (GHI)¹, scoring in the "serious category" [4].

Most of the nutrition initiatives such as POSHAN Abhiyan (National Nutrition Mission), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), Mid-day Meal and others supported by India's government are focused on children and pregnant and lactating women. While these women often participate in the workforce, the wider working population has tended to be neglected. This situation impacts not only individuals, but businesses as well as the wider economy. It is not unique to India – indeed, millions of workers and farmers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face the same silent struggle – inadequate nutrition [3]. This often-overlooked issue is in part driven by limited access to healthy food options, as well as a lack of awareness about proper dietary practices within workplaces and communities. The fight against malnutrition needs to include a wider working population, therefore, employers, business leaders and other stakeholders must be part of the drive for change.

¹ The GHI score is calculated on a 100-point scale reflecting the severity of hunger - 0 is the best score (implies no hunger) and 100 is the worst.



Win-win-wins for employers, workers, and economies

An average, employee spends one-third of the day in the workplace. Poor dietary habits among the workforce affect employee health, productivity, and overall well-being, with broader implications for economies. A growing body of research also shows that diet and nutrition have a substantial impact on mood and mental well-being, as well as on work performance [5]. Poor dietary habits among workers thus have far-reaching implications for public health and economic development. Effective workforce nutrition programme that provide access and improve availability of nutritious food and educational initiatives that enhance awareness of healthy eating habits among employees can be part of the solution. These improve workplace environments and enhance employee health and productivity, benefiting both workers and employers. It is thus advisable for employers to consider integrating nutrition programmes into broader worker well-being strategies, such as living wages and gender empowerment. Government also has an important role to play here – discussed further below.

THE GOVERNMENT CAN SUPPORT BETTER WORKFORCE NUTRITION

Around 64% of India's population is of working-age, and the nutritional well-being of such a large segment of the public cannot be ignored. India's realization of its vast economic potential [6] must be in part driven by improvements in its people's individual well-being. A workforce lacking proper nourishment may struggle to adapt to the demands of a knowledge-based economy. Investing in workforce nutrition programs creates a healthier, more adaptable workforce, a crucial step towards achieving India's economic aspirations.. Central to this is ensuring nutrition security for both the current working population and the future workforce.

How malnutrition stunts economic performance

Malnutrition has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond individual health, impacting economic performance due to reduced worker productivity and the substantial healthcare costs associated with malnutrition-related conditions.



Studies across 19 countries estimate annual economic losses of **\$8–38 billion** from reduced productivity due to underweight employees, and **\$4–27 billion** due to obesity [7].



\$8–38 billion
losses



\$4–27 billion
losses

In India, child malnutrition alone accounts for approximately **15%** of the total disease burden, costing the country around **3%** of its gross domestic product (GDP) each year – about **\$46 billion** – and up to **8%** in productivity losses [8].



disease
burden



GDP



productivity
losses

Despite notable efforts in maternal and child health, the nutritional needs of India's working population are largely neglected². Although India has made strides in recognizing the role of employers in promoting good nutrition through initiatives like the Occupational Safety Health and Working Conditions Code (2020), there remains a pressing need for greater policy action [12].

The National Food Security Act, for example, provides subsidized staples, but neglects essential and under-consumed food groups like fruits, vegetables, and protein. This reliance on calorie-dense but nutrient-poor diets contributes to the “hidden hunger” of micronutrient deficiency, and increases people's risk of chronic diseases³. The impact of chronic diseases extends beyond individual health. It weakens the workforce, leading to decreased productivity and absenteeism. India's projected foregone national income due to chronic diseases between 2005-2015 was estimated at a staggering \$200 billion [15].

An analysis of National Health and Family Survey (NFHS) data over the past four decades suggests that while food policies have been successful in reducing absolute hunger by focusing on calorie intake, there may be a need to address micronutrient deficiencies, often referred to as “hidden hunger.” [16]. For instance, despite the long-standing anaemia control programme, NFHS-5 data (2019-20) reveals that India has a high prevalence of anaemia, particularly among women of reproductive age (affecting 57%).

Strengthening policies like the Occupational Safety Health and Working Conditions Code, Social Welfare Code for workers can help initiate or expand workforce nutrition programs and contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as zero hunger, good health and well-being, gender equality, and decent work and economic growth.

In summary, key policy areas to focus on include a) integration of nutrition into government workplace wellness programs, b) fostering collaboration with employers and supply chains, and c) providing incentives for companies to prioritize employee well-being. Additionally, integrating nutrition into reporting mechanisms for the private sector would help drive investments in food system transformation.

By working together, governments and the private sector can create a multiple-win situation whereby improved workforce nutrition leads to a healthier, more productive workforce, a stronger economy, and a healthier future for all.

ROLE OF BUSINESSES IN IMPROVING NUTRITION OUTCOMES

Government efforts alone cannot adequately address malnutrition among the workforce, comprising 477 million individuals spread across various sectors⁴, each with distinct nutritional requirements [16]. The implementation of laws and regulations, like the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, are not enough to guarantee a safe and healthy work environment with regard to nutrition. Indian government programming also lacks targeted nutritional interventions for the workforce. Given this context, businesses and corporations must play an active role in implementing focused and customized initiatives to integrate nutrition into their policies.

2 While India implements schemes including the Integrated Child Development Scheme, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and POSHAN Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission), these interventions often overlook the specific nutritional needs of the working-age population, particularly those in the unorganized sector [9] [10] [11].

3 Deaths due to chronic diseases including heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and others increased from 3.78 million in 1990 to 7.63 million in 2020 (World Bank data repository), accounting for 66.7% of all deaths in India. Additionally, some 80% of the DALYs (Disability Adjusted life years) lost in India are driven by chronic diseases [13] [14].

4 Around 32% in the service industry, 26% in the industrial sector, and 42% in agriculture





Given that most working-age individuals consume at least one meal a day at work, the lack of access to nutritious food in many workplaces is a missed opportunity to provide for the needs of employees. The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) defines Workforce Nutrition (WFN) as a set of interventions aimed at improving access to safe and nutritious food and breastfeeding support through workplace structures [17]. Key WFN pillars are shown in Figure 1. GAIN's approach towards WFN focuses on improving awareness, accessibility, and availability of nutritious foods for employees, while also building evidence on impact to feed policy advocacy and strengthening efforts. More about GAIN's WFN programming, including its four key pillars are described in **Box 1**.

Box 1: Workforce Nutrition at GAIN – Key pillars

GAIN's Workforce Nutrition (WFN) programme leverages existing business structures (workplaces like garment factories and supply chains like tea estates) to improve access to and create a greater demand for healthy diets among workers. Our experience spans various settings, including tea estates in India, Kenya, and Malawi, smallholder maize and rice farming communities in Nigeria, and garment factories in Bangladesh and Ethiopia.

This programme acts as a one-stop shop, focusing on both access and demand. Additionally, as co-convenor of the Workforce Nutrition Alliance, GAIN fosters collaboration among experts, equips employers with resources, and curates data on best practices.

The Workforce Nutrition programme is based on four key pillars:

1	2	3	4
			
<p>Healthy food at work</p> <p>offering healthy food options at the workplace</p>	<p>Nutrition education</p> <p>encouraging healthier dietary habits through awareness campaigns</p>	<p>Nutrition health checks</p> <p>integrating diet-related disease screening and promoting worksite nutrition counselling to identify and address nutrition-related health issues</p>	<p>Breastfeeding support</p> <p>ensuring compliance with parental leave and breastfeeding support policies for working mothers</p>

A compelling business case exists for implementing WFN programs. Simple initiatives like providing healthy and varied food choices at work can reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases, improve energy levels, and enhance task performance. These benefits in turn drive reduced accidents, absenteeism, and mistakes, while increasing productivity and revenue. Additionally, such programs can help to attract customers, retain talent, improve brand reputation, increase employee loyalty, fulfill sustainability commitments, and strengthen overall sustainability strategies.

In a recent development across India and globally, corporate wellness programmes have emerged, offering services like diet counseling and exercise [18]. While these programmes benefit employee health and retention, they only reach a small fraction of workers, primarily in the formal sector. Efforts in capacity building for employers to design and implement employee wellness programmes effectively, incorporating nutrition, might encourage more businesses to invest in them.

In another example, under the Workforce Nutrition Alliance⁵, some large firms like Google, Olam, Ajinomoto, and Unilever are investing in employees, making sure their nutrition is integrated into their organizational policies [19] [20].

Government can support such efforts and help incentivize companies to implement and integrate WFN pillars. Indeed, collaborative efforts between government, businesses, and NGOs can also drive positive change.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY

What can be done by government and industry in the short-term to improve the nutrition of the workforce in India?

Firstly, existing government policies offer opportunities to strengthen WFN initiatives. Food regulators such as the Ministry of Food Processing and FSSAI⁶ can advocate for incorporating minimum nutritional requirements for workplace food based on national dietary guidelines. Incentivizing employers to offer healthy food options, including fortified foods, in canteens can support this. Incentives to employers could include tax benefits, subsidies, or mandatory workplace nutrition standards.

Reinforcing nutrition education at the workplace is also crucial. The government can encourage employers to have mass media campaigns on healthy eating by providing incentives for promoting these campaigns among workers.

Integrating diet-related disease checks within Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) requirements at the state level is another essential step. Comprehensive health assessments, including nutritional status and counselling, can be linked to existing campaigns by the Ministry of Health or other non-communicable disease (NCD) initiatives at the workplace.

Supporting breastfeeding mothers through better enforcement of the Maternity Benefit Act is also critical. Ensuring maternity entitlements, such as leave and nursing breaks, and considering parental leave for supporting spouses can promote breastfeeding and provide necessary support for working mothers.

Secondly, **integrating workforce nutrition into corporate Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting** creates a framework for both implementation and accountability. Comprehensive and targeted workforce nutrition programs have been shown to improve nutrition, health, and

5 For more information see <https://workforcenutrition.org/>

6 Food Safety and Standards Authority of India

business outcomes, especially when integrated into broader employee wellbeing interventions [21]. These programs are particularly beneficial for high-risk groups, such as overweight, obese, or pre-diabetic employees. Efforts of organizations like the World Benchmarking Alliance and the Access to Nutrition Index, which already use workforce nutrition indicators in their assessments, prove that nutrition can be readily embedded within corporate ESG programs [22] [23]. This kind of ESG reporting allows companies to set workforce nutrition targets and roadmaps to achieve them. Moreover, discussing progress against these targets enhances corporate accountability and transparency, improving workplace wellbeing, reducing risks associated with poor working conditions, and promoting effective governance processes.

CONCLUSION

We urge India's government and employers to seize this significant opportunity and implement the recommendations outlined in this brief. By doing so, these recommendations can support the achieving targets of the POSHAN Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission). This collaborative effort will have a transformative impact, fostering a workplace environment that actively promotes the four key pillars of workforce nutrition: Healthy food at work, nutrition education, nutrition health checks, and breastfeeding support.

The benefits will be far-reaching. Employees will experience improved health outcomes, reducing the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. This translates to greater well-being, increased energy levels, and a more fulfilling work experience. Employers will witness a demonstrably increased productivity, fueled by a healthier and more engaged workforce. Reduced absenteeism due to illness will further contribute to a stronger bottom line.

Furthermore, integrating workforce nutrition into Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting frameworks, allowing companies to set clear workforce nutrition targets and track progress towards achieving them, can create a robust system for implementation and accountability. Companies that demonstrate effective workforce nutrition programmes can enhance their ESG credentials. This can foster support of investors, while also aligning with growing consumer demands for ethical and responsible business practices.

Ultimately, prioritizing workforce nutrition, as outlined in the recommendations, will contribute to a stronger, more prosperous India. It can also enhance India's progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as zero hunger, good health and well-being, gender equality, and decent work and economic growth. By working together, the government and industry can create a ripple effect, positively impacting not just the workforce but the entire nation.

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This brief has been produced through the Nourishing Food Pathways programme which is jointly funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands; the European Union; the government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada; Irish Aid through the Development Cooperation and Africa Division (DCAD); and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). The findings, ideas, and conclusions contained presented here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of any of GAIN's funding partners.

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