

# Writing About Nutrition in Indian Newspapers: Lessons Learned from the OneWorld POSHAN Media Fellowship

## BACKGROUND

Despite strenuous efforts by the government and economic progress, undernutrition remains an emergency in India, where almost half of all children under the age of 3 are underweight, 30 percent of newborns are born with low birth weight, and 52 percent of women and 74 percent of children are anemic. Undernutrition is the underlying cause for about 50 percent of the 2.1 million deaths among children under the age of 5 in India each year (UNICEF 2014).

Even in the face of such glaring statistics, the issues of malnutrition and undernutrition get very little attention in Indian newspapers. There are very few articles on the topic and those that are published are typically summaries of research reports or studies with little in-depth investigative reporting or interviews.

The cause of improving nutrition needs the media in India. The use of media can broadcast high priority messages on nutrition quickly and effectively. It can increase understanding, generate buzz, build momentum, change perceptions and influence leaders who are making decisions that affect families and children in India.

To try to raise the profile of nutrition in the Indian media, POSHAN and the OneWorld Foundation, India (OWFI) co-implemented the six-month OneWorld-POSHAN Fellowship on Maternal and Child Undernutrition. The fellowship was designed to highlight the massive prevalence of undernutrition among women and children in India through the mainstream newspaper media. It was envisioned that increased news stories about nutrition would enable readers to not only gain more awareness about malnutrition but also take informed collective action.

This note focuses on the roll out and lessons learned of this program. It aims to contribute to wider knowledge about implementing media fellowship programs. To that end, the paper is intended for those who wish to engage with the media and communicate their health research to wider audiences and to media institutes seeking to build the capacity of journalists to report on health issues in developing countries.

## INTERVENTION

### Fellow selection

A team from POSHAN and OWFI was formed to manage the fellowship, with staff from POSHAN taking the lead on technical support in nutrition and staff from OWFI managing the overall fellowship program and mentoring of journalists.

The team began disseminating information about the fellowship in April 2013. They placed posters at associations for journalists and advertised the program in online communities for journalists. The call for applicants asked for currently employed and freelance journalists from the print, electronic, radio, online media, and news agencies/wires in India to study, analyze, and report on issues of maternal and child undernutrition from different parts of the country. A stipend of Rupees (Rs) 1,00,000 (US\$1640) was offered to fellows to support their research and writing through the six-month period. The fellows were also reimbursed Rs 60,000 (\$1,000) for travel and accommodation purposes and another Rs 5,000 (\$82) for books and periodicals needed for research.

Over 80 journalists applied to be in the program. The application formalities required that the applicants provide samples of published articles on development issues, a letter from their managing editor stating that the journalist's affiliate media group would publish the articles generated from the fellowship, story ideas that they intended to do under the fellowship, and their idea for the 4,000-word essay.

The team held a first round of review of the applications. They eliminated 50 percent of these because requisite materials were missing or incomplete. In the second round of review, the team assessed the 40 remaining applicants based on the visibility of the newspapers for which they wrote and their overall capacity. Based on these criteria, they then narrowed the pool down to 20 applicants.

The team then invited a jury to select the final six fellows. The jury was made up of five experts in nutrition and media (see Exhibit 1).

## EXHIBIT 1 Jury members

- **Sachidananda Murthy**, Resident Editor, Malayalam Manorama Group
- **Paranjoy Guha Thakurta**, Independent journalist
- **Dr Subhadra Menon**, Director, Health Communication & Adjunct Additional Professor, Public Health Foundation of India
- **Ritika Kochhar**, Head, Chevening Scholarships, British High Commission
- **Rajiv Tikoo**, Director, OneWorld Foundation India

The committee made the final selection based on the quality of the journalists' past articles and a desire to balance gender and region in the selection (see Exhibit 2 for background on the fellows). The team notified the fellows of their selection in May 2013.

## EXHIBIT 2 Makeup of fellows

<b>Gender</b>	4 women	2 men
<b>Location</b>	3 based in Delhi	3 based out of Delhi
<b>Primary Language</b>	2 Hindi	4 English

### Orientation

In June 2013, staff from POSHAN oriented the fellows at an event that provided an overview of the state of nutrition in India and current governmental schemes to address these. The fellows then attended a 1-day workshop to get additional knowledge about nutrition, which included an overview on the different stakeholders and agencies working in nutrition in India.

Fellows were required to write six articles and place these in a daily print or online newspaper in India by October 31, 2013. Fellows were also asked to write a 5,000-word essay around the issue of hunger and food security in India.

The stipend was awarded in four tranches based on their completion of these deliverables, with the first part given upon acceptance to the program, the second upon completion of the six articles, the third upon submission of the essay, and the fourth upon all submitted receipts for travel and expenses.

### RESULTS

As shown in Exhibit 3, the fellows wrote 29 articles covering a wide range of issues that included reports of malnutrition in particular regions, investigations on the failures of certain programs, the social and cultural consequence of malnutrition, etc. These were placed in *The New York Times*; English-language papers based in India such as *The Hindustan Times* and *The Hindu*; and national newspapers in various languages such as *Dainik Jagran*, *Chhapte Chhapte*, *Aaj*, *Asomia Pratidin*, and *Dainik Agradoot*.

### LESSONS LEARNED

On March 19, 2014, the fellows had a chance to come together with program organizers and jury members to debrief about their experience and share lessons learned and recommendations.

As a result of participating in this program, fellows reported that they had gained a new awareness of undernutrition that will affect their work for years to come.

Neha Dixit, who wrote for a news website [www.newsclick.in](http://www.newsclick.in), noted: *"I feel that I am still learning about nutrition as I keep finding something new related to the subject."*

Similarly, Pankaj Jaiswal, who wrote for *The Hindustan Times*, said: *"Earlier I thought and considered this subject a part of medical and health beat in journalism. This, perhaps, was the reason I did not touch it much. But now I don't consider undernutrition a part of the medical and health beat and would often do stories on the subject... Undernutrition is a mine of stories. I would continue dig it."*

In separate interviews, program organizers noted that without this initiative, nutrition coverage in the media would have remained dormant. Rahul Kumar, OWFI, said, *"Without this fellowship, the fellows would not have had the exposure to nutrition. Without the push to get these stories placed, I doubt these stories would have ever been written or published."*

Program organizers noted that one of the success factors of the program was that the partnership between POSHAN and OWFI was built on trust and the comparative advantages of each organization. POSHAN provided the technical knowledge in nutrition to the fellows. OWFI provided mentoring to the journalists and overall management of the program. This arrangement of clearly defined roles ensured that each organization exercised their relative expertise, providing what was needed to the journalists to ensure success. This clear division of labor also resulted in a good working arrangement for both parties.

All involved with the initiative noted that one of the main challenges to the placement of stories on nutrition in Indian news media is the competition of other news stories. Even with the best intentions and persistence, some reporters were not able to place their stories in their targeted newspaper due to their editor's preferences for other topics.

By the due date, four out of the six journalists had finished their required six articles (others later completed their articles after the due date), and only two of the six had finished their essay, which meant that effectively, only two received the entire stipend. Part of the lack of completion was due to competing demands on their time by other news stories. However, it raises the issue of what else would have been an appropriate incentive to ensure that all articles were written.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

POSHAN and OWFI are in the process of gathering additional lessons learned from the initiative and will start the second round of the fellowship in the coming year. Participating fellows made the following recommendations for the future:

## EXHIBIT 3 Makeup of fellows

Fellow	Topics	Articles
<b>Malavika Vyawahare</b> , <i>New York Times</i>	Government schemes and culture-specific issues such as the role of a mother-in-law as a caregiver and the nutritional intake of women during Ramadan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Malnutrition Ravages India's Children," <i>The New York Times</i>, August 28, 2013.</li> <li>• "India's Battle Against Nutrition Data Deficiency," <i>The New York Times</i>, October 24, 2013.</li> <li>• "To Lower Maternal Deaths, India Urged to Reconsider Role of Midwives," <i>The New York Times</i>, Jan 8, 2014.</li> </ul>
<b>Mukesh Kejriwal</b> , <i>Dainik Jagran</i>	Government schemes and underprivileged communities with a focus on the two big states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Controversy Over Folic Acid Tablets," <i>Dainik Jagran</i>, August 10, 2013</li> <li>• "Ignoring Nutritional Security," <i>Dainik Jagran</i>, October 02, 2013</li> <li>• "Less than 20 Percent Kids Getting Regular Meals at Anganwadi Centres," <i>Dainik Jagran</i>, December 22, 2013</li> <li>• "Malnutrition In Kids: Who Is Responsible?" <i>Dainik Jagran</i>, December 21, 2013</li> <li>• "Only 2.25 Lakh Pregnant Women Received Govt Assistance," <i>Dainik Jagran</i>, December 23, 2013</li> <li>• "Corruption Can Gobble Up Rs 1 Lakh Crore," <i>Dainik Jagran</i>, December 27, 2013</li> </ul>
<b>Neha Dixit</b> , <i>Freelance Journalist</i>	Marginalised communities and the reach of government schemes related to women and child development in the tribal areas of Kerala. (All of Neha Dixit's articles appeared on www.newsclick.in)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "When Patriarchy is a Scheme to Conquer Malnutrition," December 2, 2013</li> <li>• "Racing Rats or Racing Food," November 5, 2013</li> <li>• "Organised Marginalization," December 16, 2013</li> <li>• "The White Tiger Girls," December 26, 2013</li> <li>• "The Hiranyakashyaps of Uttar Pradesh," December 31, 2013</li> <li>• "Madhya Pradesh: 'Malnutrition Kadildekho'," January 8, 2014</li> </ul>
<b>Pankaj Jaiswal</b> , Deputy Bureau Chief, <i>Hindustan Times</i>	Off-beat initiatives like kangaroo-care, grain banking, and a goat project that have been instituted by communities to fight off hunger and undernutrition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Under-Nutrition Among Kids in UP Alarming," <i>Hindustan Times</i>, September 24, 2013</li> <li>• "Where Infant Safety Is More Than Skin Deep," <i>Hindustan Times</i>, September 25, 2013</li> <li>• "In Bundelkhand Hamlets, Grain Banks Keep Hunger Deaths At Bay," <i>Hindustan Times</i>, September 30, 2013</li> <li>• "Under-Nourished Kids? Go Get The Goat Milk," <i>Hindustan Times</i>, October 4, 2013</li> <li>• "Mission Seeks To End Under-Nutrition Woes," <i>Hindustan Times</i>, October 23, 2013</li> <li>• "Clean Mantra: Soap Can Check Under-Nutrition," <i>Hindustan Times</i>, October 21, 2013</li> </ul>
<b>Saadia Azim</b> , <i>Freelance Journalist</i>	Food schemes of West Bengal and anemic health of women and malnutrition of tribal communities in Jharkhand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Musahars Still on the Brink of Starvation," <i>Chhapte Chhapte</i>, July 14, 2013, and <i>Aaj</i>, July 10</li> <li>• "Musahar Kids Devoid of Breastfeeding," <i>Aaj</i>, August 10, 2013</li> <li>• "Death of newborns in West Bengal," <i>Chhapte Chhapte</i>, October 06, 2013</li> <li>• "Amlasol Women Still Fighting Acute Food Insecurity," <i>Chhapte Chhapte</i>, August 19, 2013, and <i>Aaj</i>, October 22, 2013</li> <li>• "Quality Food is a Far-Fetched Fantasy for These Women," <i>Deccan Herald</i>, October 12, 2013</li> <li>• "Despite Economic Progress in India, Children Go Hungry," <i>Chhapte Chhapte</i>, Nov 20, 2013</li> <li>• "Kitchen Gardens Helping People Fight Malnutrition in Urban Areas," <i>Chhapte Chhapte</i>, December 12, 2013</li> </ul>
<b>Kavita Kishore</b> , <i>The Hindu</i>	Comparison of health issues and the impact of government schemes in two districts of Tamil Nadu—Puducherry and Villupuram.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Weaning Food Nutritious, But Not So Palatable," <i>The Hindu</i>, January 19, 2014</li> <li>• "Puducherry Anganwadis No Longer Serving Hot Food," <i>The Hindu</i>, February 8, 2014</li> <li>• "Changes to Midday Meals Make for Tastier Experience," <i>The Hindu</i>, March 11, 2014</li> <li>• "Malnourishment Affects Recovery Among Cancer-Hit Children," <i>The Hindu</i>, March 17, 2014</li> <li>• "Anganwadis Yet to Use New Standards of Nutrition to Collect Data," <i>The Hindu</i>, January 30, 2014</li> <li>• "Puducherry Has Lacunas in ICDS Implementation," <i>The Hindu</i>, January 30, 2014</li> </ul>

- ▶ Journalists should weave nutrition themes into stories on more popular topics and write about the regional or local aspects of undernutrition so that audience can better connect with the story.
- ▶ Fellow should form an alumni network so that they can support and mentor the next batch of fellows and exchange nutrition-related information.
- ▶ POSHAN and OWFI should solicit applications for the next round of the fellowship from established, known journalists since they have a better chance of successfully pitching a story to their respective media organizations. They should also create a blog so that nutrition stories can be taken to wider audience.

It is clear that gaining the support of newspaper editors and owners to allocate coverage of nutrition in the media remains a major challenge. More work remains to be done in convincing editors and owners on the importance of the

nutrition story in India. Building on best practices from other nutrition advocacy programs in Asia (Alive & Thrive 2013), media gatekeeper training for newspaper editors is another intervention that should be considered.

## NOTE

1. All dollars in this document are US dollars.

## REFERENCES

- Alive & Thrive. 2013. "Engaging the Media: A Practical Guide to Meeting Child Nutrition Advocacy Goals through Working with Journalists." Bangladesh: FHI 360. Available at <http://www.aliveandthrive.org/resource/how-guide-engaging-media>. Accessed October 10, 2014.
- UNICEF. 2014. "Under-nutrition - A Challenge for India." Accessed May 14, 2014. [http://www.unicef.org/india/nutrition\\_1556.htm](http://www.unicef.org/india/nutrition_1556.htm).

## Led by IFPRI

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Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI)

One World South Asia

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Save the Children, India

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**OneWorld South Asia**

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## ABOUT POSHAN

Partnerships and Opportunities to Strengthen and Harmonize Actions for Nutrition in India (POSHAN) is a 4-year initiative that aims to build evidence on effective actions for nutrition and support the use of evidence in decisionmaking. It is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by IFPRI in India.

## ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION NOTES

Implementation Notes summarize experiences related to how specific interventions or programs are delivered. They are intended to share information on innovations in delivery and are not research products.

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