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EGYPT: Fears of rising malnutrition amid increasing poverty



Photo: [Martina Fuchs/IRIN](#)

Experts say malnutrition in Egypt is not related to a shortage of food, but rather to a lack of access to proper foods, leading to a deficiency in essential micronutrients

CAIRO, 9 March 2012 (IRIN) - Nasser Ali Hossan Morsy, who worked as a porter in central-northern Egypt, knew he needed another source of income when he suffered lower back problems last year so he decided to take a loan and buy a motorcycle.

The motorcycle, he reasoned, would help him provide for his wife and five children. Once operational, it could also help him pay back the 3,500 Egyptian pound loan (US\$580). But things took a turn for the worse when the motorcycle was stolen, and shortly after, major protests erupted throughout Egypt in February 2010, leading to the ousting of then President Hosni Mubarak.

Since then Morsy has been scrambling to make ends meet in his home town of Maghagha, some 175km south of Cairo. Between his debt and back problems, earning enough to feed his wife and children, aged two months to 16 years, has been a real challenge. "I don't find enough food because there's no more work," he said.

He is not alone. "Poverty is a common result of the 25 January revolution," said Nabil Gamil Mohamed, professor of paediatrics at Minya University and regional head of political party the Muslim Brotherhood. Increasing poverty, he added, has had two effects: new cases of malnutrition have emerged, and families already dealing with malnutrition are facing more pressure to feed properly.

In Maghagha's Qulyan neighbourhood, where Morsy lives, many people now feed only on 'ful' (cooked and mashed fava beans) and sesame-sprinkled ta'meyya (deep-fried fava bean patty) sandwiches. Their daily diet does not include fruit, vegetables or dairy products, and last time most had meat was last November, during Eid al-Adha, he said. It had been donated by the local al-Gama'ayat al-Shara'aya, the social arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.

According to Awad Abdul Hafiz, head of the charity al-Gama'ayat al-Shara'aya responsible for Qulyan, about 30 new needy families registered with his organization last year. It is a small number, mainly because Maghagha did not witness the same level of violence that rocked the Egyptian capital and the Nile delta.

Currently, his organization provides about 650 Maghagha families with a meal every two weeks, and a minimum monthly food allowance of 20 Egyptian pounds (\$3) per child. This supplements an average monthly family income of 200-300 Egyptian pounds (\$33-50).

Al-Gama'ayat al-Shara'aya's money comes from roughly 1,000 donors, but the economic turmoil in which Egypt finds itself has had an impact on this as well. "There's been a slight decrease in donations since the revolution," says Abdul Hafiz.

Low incomes

According to figures released by the World Food Programme (WFP) in November, the monthly income of about 77 percent of vulnerable households in Egypt did not cover their monthly needs.

Another WFP report released in December but based on 2009 government data showed that governorates in Upper Egypt were already at great risk from food insecurity, which was linked to their precarious economic situation.

According to Alia Hafiz, a nutrition programme officer at WFP's office in Cairo, an assessment is currently under way to examine the consequences of last year's events on food security and vulnerability. However, she added, anecdotal evidence suggests that poverty is on the rise in Upper Egypt, and that malnutrition is following an upward trend in the region.

“Malnutrition is an issue that is not improving, and it is not stable. It may be on the rise because of the unstable situation,” she said.

Experts say malnutrition in Egypt is not related to a shortage of food, but rather to a lack of access to proper foods, leading to a deficiency in essential micronutrients. Indicators from the 2009 data showed that 30 percent of Upper Egyptians suffered from caloric deprivation, and 49 percent had poor dietary diversity.

Almost a third of Upper Egyptians suffer from iron, zinc, or vitamin A deficiency. Iron deficiency leads to loss of attention and low productivity, which impinges on education and work. “[Anaemia](#) mainly affects children, because their bodies have higher demands,” said Hafiz.

A lack of vitamin A may lead to night blindness, also known as nyctalopia, while zinc deficiency may cause severe diarrhoea and pneumonia. These two health problems are common among children in the governorate of Minya, according to Mohamed of Minya University.

“This is a vicious circle, because diarrhoea and pneumonia weaken the immune system, and a weak immune system leads to more diarrhoea and pneumonia,” he added.

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