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AFGHANISTAN: Soya beans to stave off malnutrition?



Photo: Masoud Popalzai/IRIN

A 2-month-old malnourished baby girl at Faizabad Hospital, northeastern Badakhshan Province

KABUL, 28 August 2008 (IRIN) - Fatema takes her four-year-old daughter, Nafeesa, to a free soya-milk distribution centre in Herat city, western Afghanistan, three times a week in a bid to protect her against malnutrition.

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Three months ago medical experts told Fatema about protein deficiency in Nafeesa's body and warned that unless the child was well fed she would be malnourished.

"I told doctors about our poverty and that we could not provide good food and fruits for my daughter," said Fatema whose husband, Najibullah, earns a modest income from his bicycle repair shop.

"Doctors told me about this soya-milk distribution centre for pregnant women and children," she said.

The free soya-milk distribution centre is jointly run by the department of women's affairs and a non-governmental organisation, and is funded by a Canadian donor.

"My daughter's health has improved since I brought her to this centre and she has stopped complaining about bone pain," Fatema told IRIN.

High infant mortality

Afghanistan has an infant mortality ratio of 165 deaths per 1,000 live births. One in four children dies before reaching the age of five, mostly due to acute malnutrition and preventable diseases, the UN Children's Fund, UNICEF, reported.

"Among under-five children, 7 percent suffer from acute malnutrition and 54 percent are chronically malnourished. The nutrition figures could be higher in the areas affected by conflict and drought, where access is denied and humanitarian services are difficult to deliver," says UNICEF's [Humanitarian Action Report 2008](#).

Soya bean products (milk, flour and beans) are also highly recommended by medical experts for pregnant and lactating women who do not have access to adequate food and nutrition.

Afghanistan is only second to Sierra Leone in terms of high maternal mortality rates, with at least 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births, according to UNICEF.

Most pregnant and lactating women die due to lack of access to adequate food and nutrition, health experts say.

Protein-rich

The soya-bean is a species of legume and considered by nutritionists to be a rich source of amino acids and protein essential for the human body.

Afghanistan's climate and soil are suitable for the cultivation of soya beans, particularly in the south, east and southwest which have hot summers.

A USA-based nutrition expert, Steven Kwon, introduced soya beans to Afghan farmers for the first time in 2003 through his small organisation - Nutrition & Education International (NEI) - to help tackle protein deficiency and malnutrition among children and women.



Photo: Zia Entezar/IRIN

Soya-bean is promoted to tackle malnourishment among women and children

The NEI distributed two tonnes of soya seed in 2005 which produced 10 tonnes of soya beans, and over the years the number of farmers has risen to over 4,000 and production has soared to 2,000 tonnes in 2007, the NEI said.

"If Afghanistan produces 300,000 tonnes of soya beans annually it will be able to meet the protein requirements of 30 million people and will be able to eradicate malnutrition," Kwon told IRIN on 28 August.

Setback

One third of the 60 tonnes of soya seed which the NEI had imported from the USA for distribution to Afghan farmers could not be used as seed because the consignments had been held for too long in the hot weather at customs inside Afghanistan, Kwoon said.

"We have only distributed 20 tonnes of seed this year and as a result production levels will be lower than 2007," said Kwon adding that the country would still produce about 1,000 tonnes of soya beans.

The NEI said it was working with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock to end the country's reliance on soya seed imports by establishing a domestic seed production capacity.

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