Abstract

Child undernutrition in India, higher than that of some poorer and lower-growth countries of sub-Saharan Africa, is a hotly discussed and debated issue. This dissertation proposes a new measure of undernutrition, the mean of squared deprivation gaps that looks beyond the headcount ratio of the undernourished, drawing explanations from biomedical literature. Using Third National Family Health Survey data, it finds that state-ranks with respect to this measure often diverge from those according to the headcount.

The dissertation looks into the roles of household economic status and public policies in determining child undernutrition, not only modelling the conditional mean, but also treating the conditional quantiles of nutritional status as the dependent variable. Using data from the India Human Development Survey, it finds that nutritional policies often do not cater to the worst affected children lying at the lower end of the distribution.

The seminal contribution of this thesis is the comprehensive treatment of the issue of nutritional inequalities. Applying inter-quantile regression on data from India Human Development Survey, it looks into the determinants of pure or univariate inequalities in nutrition. It finds that while increase in household wealth reduces dispersion in nutrition, public facilities overall fail to do so. The dissertation proposes a new measure of bivariate nutritional inequality across classes of household wealth. This measure captures socioeconomic inequality in level, depth and severity of undernutrition. Comparing state-wise values of the measure, it is found that even if socioeconomic inequality in the level of undernutrition is relatively low, that in the composite measure may be higher.

While the literature has so far concentrated on inequalities along single dimensions of social power such as wealth, caste and gender, this thesis treats the issue of multivariate, intersectional inequalities in child nutrition. Given the well-documented reality of gender disparity in India, it probes into the apparent non-significance of gender in the determination of child nutrition. Using Third National Family Health Survey data, it is found that gender disparity in child nutrition, though not evident when we consider the total child population, is widespread in certain groups such as non-poor upper caste Hindus.