

Alarming reality: About 500,000 children under five in M'sia suffer from stunted growth

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About half a million children below the age of five in Malaysia have been classified as suffering from stunted growth, a problem that should not exist in advanced nations like ours. - NSTP/AZIAH AZMEE

KUALA LUMPUR: About half a million children below the age of five in Malaysia have been classified as suffering from stunted growth, a problem that should not exist in advanced nations like ours, according to Senator Dr. RA Lingeswaran.

Lingeswaran said he was shocked to learn that 498,327 children were classified as stunted. This was mostly due to their socio-economic condition.

He said this alarming situation should not be happening in Malaysia.

According to him, the figure represented 21 per cent of the population group, and it was indeed worrying, especially in a country known for its abundance of good food and healthcare.

"We need to look at this issue seriously, as we know that stunting and low body weight during children's formative years will also affect their brain development. This will subsequently lead to a phenomenon known as education poverty," he was quoted as saying in FMT today.

Education poverty is defined as a process of limitation of children's right to education and deprivation of their opportunities to learn and develop skills they need to succeed in this rapidly changing society.

Lingeswaran, who was also a former Sungai Bakap hospital director, said Pahang recorded the highest rate of stunted children, with almost one out of every two facing the problem.

This was followed by Kedah, Kuala Lumpur, and Putrajaya (24.3 per cent, respectively), Sabah and Labuan (23.8 per cent), and Melaka (22.9 per cent).

Meanwhile, Negri Sembilan, Penang, and Perak had the lowest stunting incidence, ranging from 10 per cent to 15 per cent.

Lingeswaran said among the causes that led to stunted growth in children, as listed by the ministry, were poor diet among expectant mothers (which leads to babies being born weighing below 2.5kg) and being fed enough animal proteins that can help with their growth.

Other factors included feeding babies with solid food too early and not ensuring that they were given nutritious food; and children from underprivileged families, where the parents were either unemployed or earning low incomes.

The ministry also added that the problem of stunting was also caused by short parents—mothers who were below the height of 1.5m or fathers who were less than 1.6m tall.

He added that all state and federal authorities must look into the matter.

"Various advocacy and food intervention programmes were being carried out by the ministry, but we need more wholesome efforts by the federal and state authorities to tackle the problem," he said.