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Research Paper

Ensuring Sustainable Food Security for the People of India

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ABSTRACT: *Ensuring food security ought to be an issue of great importance for a country like India, which is home to the world's largest hungry population at 190 million and one-half of all chronically undernourished children. An Indian, on an average spends more than 50% of its total expenditure on food, as compared to an average of less than 20% in the developed world. The Indian reality of higher food prices and lower levels of disposable income makes majority of the population food insecure. There is therefore no doubt that Food Security is one of the most urgent issues for a country like India. In the ensuing analysis of the available data, we take a look at the status of India in providing food security to its people.*

Keywords: *Deprivation, Global Hunger Index, Malnutrition, Nutritional Security, Sustainability*

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, food security concerns include not only the problems of physical availability of food stocks and economic and physical access to food stocks, but also biological utilization of food consumed. One of the most important observations of the nutrition security debate of the 1990s has been that, people's food security does not automatically translate into their nutritional wellbeing. In addition to having access to foods that are nutritionally adequate and safe, people must have sufficient knowledge and skills to acquire, prepare and consume a nutritionally adequate diet, including those to meet the needs of young children; access to health services and a healthy environment to ensure effective biological utilization of the foods consumed; and time and motivation to make the best use of their resources to provide adequate family/household care and feeding practices (FAO, 2000).

In addition, the idea of "sustainability" or future sustenance forms part of the more inclusive contemporary conception of food security. A Science Academies Summit convened by M S Swaminathan Research Foundation in June1996, prior to the World Food summit held in Rome later that year, combined "Food security" with "future sustenance" to make it "Sustainable food security". This is to emphasize the fact that food security in the future is as important as ensuring food security today. Hence it is important to ensure that food originates from efficient and environmentally benign production technologies that conserve and enhance the natural resource base (Swaminathan, 1996). Thus food security is a dynamic concept.

We live in an unequal world. This is an unfortunate but real fact of life. 805 million people globally do not have enough to eat and 80% of the humanity lives on less than US$10 per day. About 64% of the world's extreme poor live in 5 countries- Congo, China, India, Nigeria and Bangladesh. The combined wealth of 85 richest people in the world is equal to that of poorest 3.5 billion-half of the world's population (Economic Times, Apr 21, 2016, adapted from World Bank, FAO, UNICEF data, 2015). The situation is no different in India, where simultaneous existence of overflowing public granaries with widespread poverty has caused the proverbial embarrassment of riches for the domestic policy makers.

The 2020 Vision of the International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington DC, describes food security as: a world where every person has access to sufficient food to sustain a healthy and productive life, where malnutrition is absent, and where food originates from efficient, effective, and low-cost food systems that are compatible with sustainable use of natural resources and environment. While the benefits of the above to the poor are obvious, with the possibility of a healthy productive life, the gains for the affluent are also significant—a world with less risk of conflict and terrorism, less conflict over scarce resources, less need for emergency relief, less poverty driven migration and associated problems, less environmental degradation and a healthier economy (IFPRI, 2014).

The India Vision is no different. Even the Prime Minister in his 2001 Independence Day address had reiterated that by 2007 the nation should be substantially free from hunger and deprivation (Kalam, 2003). The

millennium development goals and the 12th five year plan targets reflect that. While the actual food deprivation level in India is less than 2%, the malnourishment is as high as 40%; and therefore it is the latter that should be targeted in India. For it is not supply that is the main constraining factor but it is the various factors that determine economic access and absorption (NSSO, 2012).

No country can hope to become an economic super-power with the support of a few pillars composed of the educated elite. The structure must necessarily be a broad-based one. If the country's future lies in its human resources, human development at an accelerated pace must accompany, if not precede, economic development. It is in this background that the issue of sustainable food security gains immediate relevance. Malnutrition, ill-health and illiteracy are the most serious threat to poor human development.

The causal relationship between hunger and poverty needs no reiteration. Poverty, everywhere, is accompanied by hunger, malnutrition, ill health and illiteracy. So far, public policy aimed at poverty alleviation assumed that reducing poverty will automatically result in a dramatic improvement in food intake and nutrition levels. However experience has proved otherwise. The slow progress achieved in terms of basic human development indicators like infant mortality, the percentage of low birth weight babies, the proportion of undernourished children and the large numbers of anaemic women and children indicates the need for a new approach.

It is thus evident that food security for all, must in every case, be at the core of national poverty reduction strategies. As has often been stated, hungry people cannot wait for the benefits of improved infrastructure, a more equitable distribution of resources, access to land and credit and other elements of macro policy (FAO, 2000).

While the state's continued efforts at poverty alleviation and economic development have resulted in declining poverty ratios, the absolute numbers of people living in poverty and the numbers of hungry and malnourished have been on the rise. Human development indicators, particularly health and nutrition related ones, such as anemia, morbidity, mortality, etc. reveal an acute need for well-targeted interventions. The core question is how India can achieve sustainable development with such large numbers of hungry and malnourished people. Even if structural adjustment and globalization create employment opportunities and boost the economy, there is no guarantee that a weak and hungry labour force will be able to take advantage of these newly created opportunities.

II. ECONOMICS OF HUNGER

One of the most significant and perhaps a less visible area of concern today is that of chronic food and nutrition insecurity, which is so widespread. This is a situation where people regularly subsist on a very minimal diet that has poor nutrient and calorific content as compared to medically prescribed norms.

Ignoring under nutrition has significant costs for any country's development. One of the most obvious is the direct cost of treating the damage caused by under nutrition and malnutrition. A very rough estimate of medical expenditures in developing countries, attributed to child and maternal under nutrition, suggests that these direct costs added up to around US$30 billion per year. India loses over USD 12 billion in GDP to vitamin and mineral deficiencies alone (World Bank, 2014).

The indirect costs of lost productivity and income caused by premature death, disability, absenteeism and lower educational and occupational opportunities are phenomenal. India loses 2-3% of GDP every year due to under nutrition among children in the age group of less than 2 years. Stunting in early life leads to long term deficits and irreversible damage to human capital.

Addressing under nutrition is cost effective. Costs of core micronutrient interventions are as low as USD 0.05-3.60 per person annually, while returns on this investment in human capital are as high as 8-30 times the costs (World Bank, 2014). Therefore, maintaining nutritional security, is not only necessary to ensure global human security, but is also the most rational investment to ensure sustainable development.

III. POLICY RESPONSE TO FOOD INSECURITY AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

The government of India's policy in this direction has been two-pronged, adopting an economic growth approach and, simultaneously, a welfare approach. With this orientation, it has focused on a combination of strategies including increased agricultural production, maintaining buffer stocks, subsidized food for sections of the population, and integration of food distribution into various development schemes. However in large part, the development policies and actions adopted have bypassed the most vulnerable. Neither the growth driven nor the welfare oriented strategies have succeeded in any significant measure in effectively reaching the poorest.

There are several reasons why some of these measures have yielded sub-optimal results:

- Failure of economic growth to trickle down; in fact economic growth led to widening economic disparities.
- Failure of social support strategies.
- Falling investments in agriculture; excessive official emphasis on agricultural exports; absence of land reforms; inadequate growth in rural non-farm sector.

- Mismanagement of food procurement and distribution
- Ineffective delivery of poverty alleviation programmes.
- A conscious policy of withdrawal of the state in the post 1990s, leaving matters in the hands of the market.
- Emphasis on cash crops instead of subsistence crops in the post reform period; increased commercialization and corporatization of agriculture impacting quantity and diversity of local food availability and relative prices of food in the domestic market; excessive dependence of farmers on external inputs and credit leading to indebtedness and farmers suicides.
- Inadequate market access for poor households in a commercial market economy severely undermined food security at the household level; eviction and marginalization of small farmers.
- Adverse impact of market oriented production systems on the control of women on production and income leading to poorer access of women and girls due to intra household gender discrimination.
- Environmental pressures, overexploitation of natural resources leading to sustainability issues particularly in the Green Revolution belt.

IV. GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX

The GHI is a tool designed to comprehensively measure and track hunger globally and by region and country. Calculated each year by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the GHI highlights successes and failures in hunger reduction and provides insights into the drivers of hunger, and food and nutrition security.

To reflect the multidimensional nature of hunger, the GHI combines three equally weighted indicators into one index:

- Undernourishment: the proportion of undernourished people as a percentage of the population (reflecting the share of the population with insufficient calorie intake)
- Child under nutrition: the proportion of children younger than age five who are wasted (have low weight for height, reflecting acute under nutrition) and those who are stunted (have inadequate height for age reflecting chronic under nutrition).
- Child Mortality: the mortality rate of children younger than age five (partially reflecting the fatal synergy of adequate food intake and unhealthy environments).

The 2015 GHI has been calculated for 117 countries for which the most recent data on these three component indicators are available and for which measuring hunger is considered most relevant (IFPRI, 2015).

4.1 Global, National & Regional Trends

The 2015 GHI for the developing countries as a group fell by 27% since 2000, from a score of 29.9 to 21.7. Despite the fall, the absolute number of hungry in the world remains very high at 795 million people worldwide-(1 in 9) chronically undernourished. As of 2013, 161 million children (1 in 4) were stunted while 51 million children were wasted. Furthermore, half of the child deaths in the world can be attributed to malnutrition, which is nothing less than about 3.1 million children under age 5. Despite the progress in the last decade, the world GHI remains in the "serious" category.

Moreover these global averages mask dramatic differences among regions and countries. Compared with the 2000 scores, the 2015 GHI scores show remarkable improvement in the East and South East Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. There is considerable progress in Eastern Europe and the Common wealth of independent states. The two regions with the highest GHI scores are South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa at 29.4 and 32.2 respectively. Both reflect "serious" levels of hunger. Social inequality and the low nutritional, educational and social status of women are major causes of child under nutrition in the region (IFPRI, 2015).

The pattern of decline in GHI scores of South Asia between 2000 and 2015, is completely determined by the scores in India, where nearly three-quarters of South Asia's population lives. India ranks 81 among the 104 countries for which the GHI scores have been estimated. Also India bears the highest burden of stunted, wasted and underweight children under five, in the world (UNICEF, 2013). India may be one of the fastest growing economies of the world, but it fares far worse than lesser economies when it comes to taking care of its undernourished children; far worse than even Nepal (31.6), Bangladesh (31.0) and Sri Lanka (25.9) in the neighbourhood! The war ravaged countries of Serbia and Lithuania are better off, so are people in cold deserts of Mongolia and large and diverse countries like China and Brazil (IFPRI, 2015).

Consider the evidence on nutritional outcomes from the phase 1 of the most recent National Family Health Survey (Round-4), 2015-16, available for 15 states. It shows that 37% of the children under age 5, are stunted; a fall of just 5% points in the last decade. These national averages mask locational differences: Bihar and Madhya Pradesh are worse off with 48% and 42% of the children stunted. During the last decade, the proportion of underweight children has reduced equally slowly from 39% to 34%, with Bihar and Madhya Pradesh being

worse off again. The one success has been in the area of wasting, a decline from 48% to 22% for the states for which data is available (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, India, 2015-16).

4.2 Indian State Hunger Index

These all India averages do not capture the wide variation across states and even within states. For example, the Indian State Hunger Index (ISHI) calculated in 2008 showed large differences across 17 major states, ranges from 13.6 for the best performing Indian state, Punjab, to 30.9 for Madhya Pradesh. If those states could be ranked in the GHI, Punjab would rank 34th and Madhya Pradesh 82nd. Even the best performing Indian state, Punjab, lies below 33 other developing countries ranked by the GHI (IFPRI, 2008).

It is shocking to know that even the fertile Punjab, the food bowl of the country figures pathetically low on the hunger index. On this basis IFPRI concludes that there is no link between economic progress and hunger. Punjab, the best performing Indian state in terms of hunger level, ranks below countries like Honduras and Vietnam, which are placed low in global ranking. Twelve states including Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat and West Bengal are in the "alarming" category. Four states: Punjab, Kerala, Haryana and Assam are in the "serious" category. One state, Madhya Pradesh falls in the "extremely alarming" category (IFPRI, 2008).

V. SUGGESTIONS BY EXPERTS FOR A GENUINE FOOD SECURITY PROGRAM

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's work has been emphasizing for more than a decade now, to not to think of poverty in terms of an income level to buy a food of a certain calorific value to keep human metabolic processes going. The entire concept of social inclusion is about getting closer to understanding the experience of poverty by focusing on relational features in the capability deprivation of the poor (Sen, 1981). India has the most austerely defined poverty line in the world and the official approach appears to be to restrict support to the BPL families. The number of BPL families calculated (taking 4 persons as the average size of a family) varies from 9.25 crores (Tendulkar Committee) to 20 crores (Justice D P Wadhwa Committee). The National Food Security Act 2013 specified that up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population shall be entitled to food grains. Of these, only 46% and 28% respectively, would be categorized as priority groups (NFSB, 2013). One of the greatest proponents of food security in India, Professor Jean Dreze had bitterly criticized this exclusionary bill (Dreze, 2010).

For a successful food security program, it is important for the government to follow a multi pronged approach that extends beyond a legal promise. It is evident that genuine food security is not just confined to the production and distributional aspect of food alone. It involves a multipronged approach with a wide range of features, most of which are associated with the need for some public intervention. Some of these issues are:

- Ensuring adequate supplies of food- requires increases in agricultural productivity, possible changes in cropping patterns and above all ensuring sustained viability of cultivation.
- Ensuring access to all- requires that people have the real purchasing power to buy the necessary food; this in turn means that stable growth, employment, remuneration and livelihood, and inflation related issues are to be dealt with.
- Ensuring absorption and nutrition- Absorption of food is closely linked to sanitation, clean drinking water, and access to basic amenities like education and health care and knowledge about desirable eating habits. This requires dealing with a gamut of issues including education of women that needs top priority.
- Social discrimination and exclusion that still play unfortunately large roles in determining both access and livelihood too need to be reckoned with.
- Ensuring Future Sustenance: it is important to produce enough food at present without damaging the environment and the natural resource base required for future food production. It is to be ensured that food originates from efficient and environmentally benign production technologies that conserve and enhance the natural resource base of crops, animal husbandry, forestry and fisheries.

However this does not mean that a food security law would be meaningless. It is a stepping stone that would force the central and state governments to take up these issues, which relate to not just actual food distribution. It also shows that fortunately, India is moving away from a 'patronage-based' to a 'rights-based' approach in areas relating to human development and well being.

It is re-iterated time and again that emphasis on small farm productivity, will as a single step make the largest contribution to poverty eradication and hunger elimination. Increasing the production and consumption capacity of the poor, the masses, will improve purchasing power, hence demand and therefore the viability of agricultural produce. In addition, national and state efforts should be supported at the local level to build a community Food Security system involving seed, grain and water banks (Swaminathan et al, 2004).

In India, agriculture, including crop and animal husbandry, fisheries, forestry and agro processing, is the backbone of rural livelihood security system. However the contribution of agriculture to GDP has been steadily

declining over the years. But, the share of agriculture in providing employment has been static. Thus, the onus of providing employment and livelihoods to majority of the population continues to remain with agriculture, in spite of the diversification of the economy.

Another important issue is that of sustainability. The inextricable link between ecosystems and food is often ignored while policymaking and implementation. With ecological thresholds being exceeded, food provisioning services of the ecosystem are being seriously affected. For serving the long term needs of food security, a more holistic perspective is needed. This will entail an integrated approach for managing land and water resources and ecosystems (Ghosh, 2014).

The experience of several decades has shown that while economic growth may be a necessary condition for food security as it contributes to increased food production and a strengthened external trade position, it is not sufficient in that it does not increase equitable access to food. For growth cannot deliver poverty reduction as long as there are large inequalities in human capital, employment, access to land and other productive assets. Accordingly hunger and malnutrition need to be directly and explicitly addressed to reduce poverty and to create a situation whereby the poor can in fact participate in the country's growth. The battle against hunger needs to be fought at various levels and the role of governance is especially prominent in this regard.

VI. CONCLUSION

The challenge before India now points to developing an approach that reconciles the situations of 'plenty' and 'scarcity', in a manner that addresses the most basic food needs for all. Such a strategy would require a multi- pronged approach that addresses multiple aspects such as agricultural and rural development; incentives for local production and strengthening of the local production base; sustainable management of natural resources; removal of trade barriers; equitable access to land, technology and finance; social sector and other investments such as in health, education and infrastructure; improved governance and so on

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