

THE LONG ROAD TO FOOD SECURITY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Poverty & Hunger and related issues

India's malnutrition levels are almost twice the level of many African countries. The Global Hunger Index 2020 report has given India the 94th rank among 107 countries, much behind Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal. As per a UN-FAO report, 194 million people go hungry every day in India, comprising about 23% of the world's undernourished population. This flies in the face of the landmark Right to Food case, in which the Supreme Court declared Right to Food as part of Article 21 of the Constitution, that is, the Right to Life.

It is a grim failure that 73 years after Independence, India continues to be gripped by a paradox of plenty in the realm of food security. The country reached self-sufficiency in agricultural production some time ago, and yet, mass hunger is rampant across States. India produces more than the estimated amount required to feed the entire population (in 2018-19, India produced 283.37 million tons of food grains). The country ranks first in millets and second in rice and wheat production in the world. India's horticultural crops, such as fruits and vegetables, are also in surplus (over 313 million tons in 2018-19).

The Hindu Explains | [What explains India's poor rank under the Global Hunger Index, and what are the solutions?](#)

However, according to data released by the Department of Consumer Affairs, almost 62,000 tons of food grains were damaged in Food Corporation of India warehouses between 2011 and 2017. In 2016-17 alone, over 8,600 tons of food grains were lost. A study conducted by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations found that while there is a proliferation of millions of ineligible and bogus ration cards, there are also, simultaneously, a multitude of genuinely poor families that do not even possess ration cards. These data expose the poor management of the food ecosystem in India.

To ensure India's food security, a two-pronged policy is needed. Firstly, the government must ensure remunerative prices for farm produce. For this, the Minimum Support Price (MSP) should be made available to the maximum range of farm products. This will enhance the purchasing power of farmers so that they can purchase essential food items. Secondly, it is crucial that India improves the Public Distribution System and Public Procurement.

The situation could be further improved by revamping the Annapurna Yojana. Under this scheme, ten kilograms of food grains are distributed per month free of cost to destitute persons above 65 years of age, with no or meagre subsistence. The Centre has fixed the target of 20% of the number of persons who are eligible for National Old Age Pension, but who are not receiving such pension. It may be noted that as far as Kerala is concerned, social security pension covers almost all the sections of people in the community. Thus, almost all eligible people are excluded from the Annapurna Yojana. This problem demands immediate attention and resolution.

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Further, according to the Global Pulse Confederation, pulses are part of a healthy, balanced diet and have been shown to have an important role in preventing illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. The World Food Programme (WFP) includes 60 grams of pulses in its typical food basket, alongside cereals, oils and sugar and salt. The Background Note for the

Parliamentary Standing Committee on Food, Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution titled Price Rise of Essential Commodities - Causes and Effects (2020), says, "With dietary shift in favour of proteins, in an otherwise vegetarian society, the consumption of pulses is growing but the production has not kept pace ... However, production of pulses has increased during the last two years which has resulted partly from continuous increase in MSP, increased procurement, and creation of buffer stock of pulses." Hence, this is an ideal time to include pulses too in our Public Distribution System.

Rajmohan Unnithan is an MP and member of the Department Related Standing Committee on Food, Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution

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