

## For nutrition security: On undernourishment

The UN's *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report for 2017 has important pointers to achieve nutrition policy reform. At the global level, the five agencies that together produced the assessment found that the gains achieved on food security and better nutrition since the turn of the century may be at risk. Although absolute numbers of people facing hunger and poor nutrition have always been high, there was a reduction in the rate of undernourishment since the year 2000. That has slowed from 2013, registering a worrying increase in 2016. The estimate of 815 million people enduring chronic food deprivation in 2016, compared to 775 million in 2014, is depressing in itself, but more important is the finding that the deprivation is even greater among people who live in regions affected by conflict and the extreme effects of climate change. In a confounding finding, though, the report says that child under-nutrition rates continue to drop, although one in four children is still affected by stunting. These are averages and do not reflect the disparities among regions, within countries and between States. Yet, the impact of the economic downturn, many violent conflicts, fall in commodity export revenues, and failure of agriculture owing to drought and floods are all making food scarce and expensive for many. They represent a setback to all countries trying to meet the Sustainable Development Goal on ending hunger and achieving food security and improved nutrition.

World's hungry population on the rise again, says U.N. report

India's efforts at improving access to food and good nutrition are led by the National Food Security Act. There are special nutritional schemes for women and children operated through the States. In spite of such interventions, 14.5% of the population suffers from undernourishment, going by the UN's assessment for 2014-16. At the national level, 53% of women are anaemic, Health Ministry data show. What is more, the Centre recently said it had received only 3,888 complaints on the public distribution system (PDS) over a five-year period. All this shows that the Centre and State governments are woefully short on the commitment to end undernourishment. Institutions such as the State Food Commissions have not made a big difference either. Distributing nutritious food as a public health measure is still not a political imperative, while ill-conceived policies are making it difficult for many to do this. The report on nutritional deficiency should serve as an opportunity to evaluate the role played by the PDS in bringing about dietary diversity for those relying on subsidised food. In a report issued two years ago on the role played by rations in shaping household and nutritional security, the NITI Aayog found that families below the poverty line consumed more cereals and less milk compared to the affluent. Complementing rice and wheat with more nutritious food items should be the goal.

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