

IT'S ABOUT FOOD, NUTRITION AND LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues of Buffer stocks and Food Security

The current national lockdown to tackle the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has highlighted the problems of food, nutrition and [livelihood security](#) confronting a large number of rural people, in particular, migrants to cities. While some measures have been announced, such as provision of additional rice or wheat, some pulses and oil free of cost, as well as 1,000 cash for the purchase of other essential commodities through the Public Distribution System (PDS), we need to understand the different dimensions of food security in a holistic manner in order to address this problem in its totality.

[Coronavirus | Lockdown extended till May 17; curbs stay on public transport](#)

The first is the availability of food in the market, and this is seen as a function of production. Fortunately, thanks to the Green Revolution, today we have enough food in the market and in government godowns. This is a great accomplishment by Indian farmers who converted a “ship to mouth” situation to a “right to food” commitment. Yet we cannot take farmers’ contributions in terms of sustaining production for granted. While some special exemptions have been given to the agricultural sector, farmers are confronted at the moment with labour shortages, many of the inputs, including seeds, are expensive or unavailable, marketing arrangements including supply chains are not fully functional, pricing is not remunerative, and public procurement is also not adequate. There is no room for complacency, as in the absence of demand, the lack of storage or value addition facilities, especially for perishable commodities, we do not yet know exactly what the impact of the current pandemic will be on the kharif sowing and food availability in the future.

The second dimension is the access to food, which is a function of purchasing power, as unless you are a farmer and grow your own food, others have to buy it. Fortunately, the government, through the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and the PDS, has assured some additional food to every individual during this crisis. This should be further strengthened and the food basket widened by including millets, pulses and oil. Steps should also be taken to avoid hidden hunger caused by the deficiency of micronutrients in the diet. In light of the closure of schools and anganwadi centres, and the consequent disruptions in the provision of midday meals or other nutritional inputs, it is important to pay attention to the life cycle approach advocated in the NFSA, particularly the first thousand days in a child’s life, when the cognitive abilities of the child are shaped. We may otherwise see negative effects on nutritional security in the medium to longer term.

Food security and access to nutritious, good quality food is also contingent on job security. Today, a lot of people employed both on farms and in the non-farm sector are without jobs. If job security is threatened, then so is food and nutrition security. We have to ensure people do not lose their jobs, and one way of doing this will be to ensure value addition to primary products. One example of such value addition is the Rice Biopark in Myanmar, wherein the straw, bran, and the entire biomass are utilised. This would of course mean some attention to and investment in new technologies that can contribute to biomass utilisation. The Amul model provides a good example from the dairy sector of improved incomes to milk producers through value addition. Similar attention needs to be given to the horticulture sector on a priority basis. Women farmers are at the forefront of horticulture and special attention needs to be given to both their technological and economic empowerment during this crisis.

Full coverage | [Lockdown displaces lakhs of migrants](#)

A second pathway to livelihood security for small and marginal farmers and landless households, and women within them, is strengthening the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The definition of a worker in MGNREGA has so far been applied only to unskilled, manual work, and not to skilled jobs in agriculture and allied activities. Given the [lack of jobs and incomes during the COVID-19 crisis](#), it is imperative to expand the definition of work in MGNREGA to cover skilled work related to farmers and their farming activities. This is particularly important for women farmers and workers, who should not just be given tasks of carrying stones or digging mud. Apart from farming, they engage in a range of essential care tasks, including caring for children, the elderly and sick people. These tasks, often invisible, need to be recognised as work and supported with appropriate education, including on nutrition.

[Coronavirus | MGNREGA jobs crash to 1% of normal](#)

The third dimension of food security is absorption of food in the body or its utilisation, which is dependent importantly on sanitation, drinking water and other non-food factors, including public health services. Ensuring that these services are functional depends on the capacities of the local panchayats and their coordination with other local bodies. The lack of adequate clean water in particular has come to the fore in both rural areas and urban slums in the context of COVID-19, where one of the key measures for stopping transmission relates to frequent hand-washing.

If we can ensure food availability, food access and food absorption, then we have a fairly robust system of food and nutrition security. All the above dimensions are, however, now threatened by the novel coronavirus, as discussed earlier. It is very critical to highlight the linkages between agriculture, nutrition and health. While the PDS may be able to meet calorie needs, the inability to harvest, transport and market perishable fruits and vegetables at remunerative prices during the current crisis, has not just deprived farmers of incomes and livelihoods, but consumers too are deprived of micronutrients in their diets. Farmers making losses, and agriculture moving from being job-led to jobless, raise questions about the sustainability of the production cycle. At the same time, this can have long-term consequences on nutrition and health security.

[Coronavirus | Economists call for urban jobs scheme](#)

India avoided what could have been a big famine in the 1960s through the help of technology and public policy, which actively worked with and supported farmers to achieve significant increases in yield. Today's problems are not as daunting. Through a combination of farmers' cooperation, technological upgrading and favourable public policies in procurement, pricing and distribution, we can deal with the fallouts of the pandemic. We hope that this pandemic will help recognise the contribution of our farmers.

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