

THE GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX FALLS SHORT ON ITS OWN NUTRIENT VALUE

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

Its unclear methodology and bias correctives offer cause for doubt that our low rank reflects reality

An index by the name Global Hunger Index (GHI) released its 2021 edition on Friday. Even as it showed India improving its absolute score, its rank slipped because others did better on the four parameters that go into the index, presumably.

In general, these global rankings are problematic for several reasons. One, they take no account of different population sizes, and, second, nor do they consider the different paths that nations have followed. Only one other country has a population comparable to India's. Third, they take no account of different resource endowments. If a country or region was lavished with aid and assistance for a specific purpose, then its achievement on that parameter has to be much bigger. Four, it is not easy to replicate such indices since they involve some quantitative and qualitative aspects. Five, such global indices make nations prioritize rank improvement as an ultimate policy objective rather than improvement in the underlying parameters. That leaves the organizations responsible for such indices open to influence and worse.

It is for these reasons that the 'nutrient value' of global indices and rankings for policymaking is questionable.

In the case of the Global Hunger Index, India has justifiable reason to feel aggrieved. First, let us start with the name. It is a misnomer. It should be more precisely called 'The Global Human Nourishment Index.' Citizens of many developed nations are not hungry but suffer from malnutrition. Even the words 'stunting' and 'wasting' need to be replaced. They represent condescending value judgements.

The index construction is simple enough. It has four components: the proportion of population that is undernourished; under-5 infant mortality; stunting in children under 5 and wasting in children under 5. Undernourishment and child mortality have one-third weight each and the other two have one-sixth weight each. A country's score on any of these parameters is compared to a benchmark value, which is the maximum that prevailed between 1988 and 2013. The lower the number, the better is the country's achievement on the index. '0' means no hunger and '100' means extreme hunger. India's score was 27.5 in 2021 while it was 28.8 in 2012. Only some specific years are reference years and not the previous year. The institution that compiles the index relies on data provided by UN organisations such as the FAO, Unicef, WHO and the World Bank.

India has its own National Family Health Survey. Its fourth survey (NFHS-4) was for 2015-16 and the fifth for 2019-20. But the data for NFHS-5 is incomplete. The fifth round must be completed, results quickly tabulated and discussed. NFHS-4 data is available on a nationwide basis. The proportion of children under 5 who suffer 'wasting' (lower weight for height) has gone up from NFHS-3 to NFHS-4 (from 19.8% to 21.0%). The proportion of under-5 children who are stunted has dropped from NFHS-3 to NFHS-4. That is consistent with what the GHI data breakdown also shows. NFHS-3 was for 2005-06.

India has done well on under-5 mortality as well. Between 1990 and 2019, the annual reduction

in the rate of infant mortality was 4.5%, much better than many nations in the region, except for two. That is reflected in the infant mortality component of GHI as well. So, on two of the four components, stunting and infant mortality, that carry 50% weight, India has done well. On another component, wasting, India has done poorly, but that accords with national data as well. It leaves us only with the fourth item with one-third weight and that is the undernourished population.

The FAO, which supplies the data, shows that India's undernourished population declined from 21.6% in 2004-06 to 15.3% in 2018-20. In the 2020 report that had data for 2017-19, the proportion was 14%. For the 2021 report, the FAO relied on survey data collected through Gallup World Poll because of covid.

Survey data, especially if done over telephones, has drawbacks. The language used and the framing of questions are important. This is true of all countries. For large ones, all regions must be represented too. Specifically for India, the 'bias correction' factor that the FAO had applied could be tricky. Box 3 of the report states, "The population with access to telephones tends to be wealthier, more educated and mostly urban, which implies selection biases that may lead to underestimating the extent and severity of food insecurity." That is not true of India. Even the poor have access to mobile phones and even transact using them. Unless the survey's details, including the questionnaire used, the regions surveyed and the bias correction methods adopted, are shared publicly, it is hard to know if its results reflect true undernourishment.

Given how justifiably proud India has been in avoiding famine-related deaths due to covid and internal migration thanks to its Direct Benefits Transfer Mission, including transfer of in-kind government benefits like foodgrains, India has a right to be aggrieved at the score. Having lodged its protest, it must go back to ignoring all global rankings while continuing to work on nutrition goals for its children and other health goals for its adult population.

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