



Ensuring Food Security in India

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) states that food security emerges when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Food security has three important and closely related components, which are availability of food, access to food, and absorption of food. Food security is thus a multi-dimensional concept and extends beyond the production, availability, and demand for food.

The green revolution initiated in the late 1960s was a historic watershed that transformed the food security situation in India. It almost quintupled food grain production over the next three or four decades and consequently reduced by over 50 per cent both the levels of food insecurity and poverty in the country, this was achieved in spite of the increase in population during the period, which almost doubled. Food grain production in the country registered a steady increase from only 50 million tonnes in 1950–51 to around 250 million tonnes now. Presently, the government has more than 50 million tonnes of food-grains, much more than stipulated 17 million tonnes.

Notwithstanding the achievement of macro level food security and the discernible improvement in per capita consumption, the country is still home to a-fifth of the world's undernourished population. This given situation has been ascribed to high and increasing population pressure with nearly 16 million people being added annually to the already large population exceeding 1.2 billion. This situation of hunger and malnutrition is also equally on account of serious problems related to the distribution and economic access to food, which adversely affect household and individual level food insecurities.

Despite the large increase in production, access to food continues to be a serious issue especially in the context of extraordinarily high-inflation rates in food commodities in recent years and limited access in large parts of the country to high-quality diets. The weak link between income growth and nutritional outcomes implied that food security would require special attention of policy-makers and cannot be presumed to follow as a consequence of growth. This is quite apart from a parallel discourse that argues for

a rights-based approach to food security so that primary responsibility rests with the state.

What do we mean by food security?

The concept of food security includes peoples' access to basic food products, both physically and economically. The problem of access to basic foods is particularly acute for the vulnerable sections of the society and in the deficit and inaccessible regions of the country. It implies a situation where everyone has access, at all times, to the food needed for an active and healthy life.

An approach to national food security, which relies largely on domestic production of food needed for consumption as well as for building buffer stocks, can be described as a strategy of self-sufficiency. However, a strategy for food security should not preclude external trade in food. Trade may take place on the margin and according to need: exports in surplus situations and imports in deficit periods. Even though India has now reached a stage where the country is no longer exposed to famines, all the same there still exist pockets within the country where people have to face acute starvation.

Need for Self-Sufficiency

Twelve famines and four major scarcities occurred during the period of the rule of the East India Company in India (1765–1858). The frequency of famines increased after the transfer of power to the Crown. In 1943 famine occurred in Bengal and it was a tragedy of unprecedented magnitude. The death toll due to starvations and diseases was around 1.5 million persons. Periods of famines in India have also been the periods of high food prices and agricultural unemployment.

Famines were caused during the period of British rule due to many reasons including large-scale unemployment following import of machine-made goods from Britain, over-exploitation of farmers and restricted access to food. India suffered two very severe droughts in 1965 and 1966. India achieved self-sufficiency in food grains by the year 1976 through the implementation of the seed-water-fertiliser-led Green Revolution. The country is no longer exposed to real famines. However, lack of purchasing power however continues to haunt people in some parts of the country.

Role of Government in Food Security

- Promoting domestic production to meet the demands of growing population.
- Providing minimum support prices for procurement and storage of food grains.
- Operating a Public Distribution System, and
- Maintaining buffer stocks to counteract any increase in prices of food grains during periods of shortages.

Currently, the food security system and price policy, basically consist of three instruments: procurement prices/minimum support prices, buffer stocks, and the public distribution

system (PDS). Minimum Support Prices and Procurement Price Policy for agricultural commodities seeks to ensure remunerative prices to growers for their produce with a view to encouraging higher investment and production, and at the same time, safeguarding the interest of consumers by making available supplies at reasonable prices.

Access to food can be increased through employment due to growth in labour intensive sectors and/or through social protection programmes. India has government programmes such as TPDS including AAY, nutrition programmes like mid-day meals, and ICDS to improve food and nutrition security. NREGS and self-employment programmes can also increase access to food and nutrition. Social protection programmes in India helped in improving incomes and providing protection from shocks for the population, particularly the poor. However, there are a number of gaps and inefficiencies in social protection programmes.

Right to Food and National Food Security Act (NFSA)

The National Food Security Act will provide a statutory basis for a framework which assures food security for all. According to this proposed law, every family below the poverty line in rural as well as urban areas will be entitled by law, to 25 kilograms of rice or wheat per month at Rs. 3 per kilogram. It is felt that the statutory guarantee to food with fixed entitlements to the poor would be an important step in the direction of ensuring food and nutritional security of the country.

Although the ongoing ‘targeted public distribution system’ (TPDS) is supposed to provide subsidised food-grains to the BPL population, the legislative measure may lead to better accountability by making the PDS system more responsive in reaching out to the targeted population.

Aside from an overarching obligation to protect everyone from hunger, as well as to promote sustainable and equitable food production, essential provisions of the proposed Act include:

1. A universal public distribution system (providing at least 35 kg of grain per family);
2. Special food entitlements for destitute households (including an expanded Antyodaya Programme);
3. Consolidation of all entitlements created by recent Supreme Court Orders (e.g., cooked mid-day meals in primary schools and universalisation of ICDS);
4. Support for effective breastfeeding (including maternity entitlements and crèches);
5. Safeguards against the invasion of corporate interests in food policy; and
6. Elimination of all social discrimination in food related matters.

The general view is that at the very least the RTF Act has to build on four major types of interventions including nutrition schemes for children, the PDS, social assistance for vulnerable groups (e.g., pensions, Antyodaya Anna Yojana) and other interventions.

The NFSA provides that every State Government shall constitute a State Food Commission for the purpose of monitoring and review of implementation of the Act. The NFSA envisions a comprehensive legislative framework for protecting an individual’s right to food, furthering the vision expressed in the Constitution of India. It is conceived as a system of interventions following

a life-cycle approach, whereby at every stage of an individual's life, a safety net would be provided by the state to ensure food security.

This law aims to provide subsidised food grains to approximately two thirds of India's 1.2 billion people. Under the provisions of the bill, beneficiaries are to be able to purchase 5 kg per eligible person per month of 75 per cent of rural and 50 per cent of the urban population are entitled for 3 years from enactment to 5 kg food grains per month at ₹3, ₹2, ₹1 per kg for rice, wheat and coarse grains (millet), respectively.

The fundamental critique levelled at the NFSA is the implied large presence of the State in grain markets in the country and the costs involved in procurement, storage and distribution as part of what is widely seen as a flawed mechanism, the PDS.

A strategy for food security based largely on self-sufficiency in food production has the advantage of promoting both productivity and purchasing power among small peasants and agricultural labourers. In general, policies for improving household food security should include:

- Development strategies and macro-economic policies that would create conditions for growth with equity;
- Accelerating growth in the food and agricultural sectors which provide direct sources of food and income with which to buy food;
- Promoting rural development that focuses on the poor;
- Improving access to land and other natural resources;
- Providing cheap credit for poor households;
- Increasing employment opportunities;
- Introducing income transfer scheme, including provision of public distribution of subsidised cheap food;
- Stabilising food supplies and food prices;
- Improving emergency preparedness planning for providing food aid during natural disasters like drought, flood, earthquakes, etc. India has come a long way from being a food deficient country to a food sufficient country through a judicious mix of policies. Even though India has attained sufficiency in food production, the distribution continues to be an area of concern. It is with this in view that India has further framed customised programmes to ensure access to food for everyone in the country, particularly the weaker sections. One just hopes that the policies and programmes framed shall be equally matched with efficient and effective implementation of the same.

Salient Points

- Food security implies a situation where everyone has access, at all times, to the food needed for an active and healthy life.
- Notwithstanding the achievement of macro level food security, the country is still home to a-fifth of the world's undernourished population.
- India achieved self-sufficiency in food grains by the year 1976 through the implementation of the seed-water-fertiliser-led Green Revolution.

- Despite the large increase in production, access to food continues to be a serious issue.
- Food security system and price policy consist of three instruments: procurement prices/minimum support prices, buffer stocks, and the public distribution system (PDS).
- The National Food Security Act provides a statutory basis for a framework which assures food security for all.

Glossary

Access: A way or means of approaching

Imply: To suggest

Buffer: someone or something that buffers

Green Revolution: Unprecedented rise in agricultural production by way of using high yielding inputs

Vulnerable: Exposed to harm