

Right to Food and Food Security – An Indian Perspective

Jasneet Kaur Malhi*

Assistant Professor, Department of Home Science, Guru Gobind Singh College for Women, Sector 26, Chandigarh

Abstract – Food demand increase is due mainly to changing food consumption patterns and population growth. Our main concern for the food and agricultural sector is to provide sufficient amount food, to meet the nutritional needs of the ever growing population. Food production and its physical availability are certainly essential to addressing hunger. However, producing more food alone will not be sufficient to achieve food and nutritional security. In fact, food and nutrition security is about more than just producing sufficient food as it encompasses the need to ensure access to food at all times.

Key Words – Security, Indian Perspective, Healthy Life, WTO ETC.

-----X-----

INTRODUCTION

According to FAO, : *“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary requirement as well as food choices for an active, healthy life.”*

For a country like India, where more than one-third of the population is extremely poor and more than half of children under 5 years of age are malnourished, food security must be ensured.

Food security as a concept is used to understand how and why malnutrition arises, and what can be done to address this problem.

Till the 1970's, discussions about food security focussed on the need to produce more food and distributing it. It was discussed that the total availability of food calories at the national and global level was the primary means to address malnutrition (in India's case, under nutrition)

Over time, the food security concept has been broadened to include a wide range of factors that influence malnutrition in all forms.

These factors include, but are not limited to economic liberalization on agriculture, establishment of WTO (Agreement on Agriculture), the phenomenon of hunger despite plenty, Public Distribution System, 'Right to Food' campaign to improve food security in the country and mid-day meal schemes; also to monitor targets under the Five Year Plans and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on poverty, women and child nutrition.

There has been a great shift in the concept of food security, from food availability and stability to household food insecurity, and from assessment of input measures like energy intake to output indicators such as anthropometric measures (height- weight, WHR, BMI) and clinical signs of malnutrition.

AVAILABILITY OF FOOD

Food security at the national level refers mainly to availability in the country of sufficient stocks of food to meet domestic demand, either through domestic supply or through imports. After remaining a food deficit country for 20 years after independence, India became self sufficient in terms of food grains at the national level.

We know that foodgrains, pulses, oilseeds, sugar, fruits and vegetables, poultry, dairy, meat, fish, etc. constitute the bulk of the output in the agriculture sector. The performance of agriculture is important for availability and access to food as more than 55 per cent people in the country are dependent on this sector.

There are both short run and long run problems in Agriculture. Farming is now turning into a non-viable activity as there is limited scope for increase in net sown area. Land degradation has also increased due to erosion and water logging. There has also been an alarming fall in the level of the ground water table.

Minimum Support Prices and Procurement Price Policy in agriculture ensures that minimum prices are provided to growers for their product in order to encourage continued investment and further production. It also safeguards the interest of

consumers by making available supplies at reasonable prices.

Buffer Stock

The importance of building up a buffer-stock of foodgrains -- normally rice and wheat -- is to provide food security to the country. The purpose of buffer-stocking is that whenever there is a large variation in agricultural output (due to weather conditions or due to man-made factors) it becomes imperative for the government to ensure food supplies for its people by maintaining adequate buffer stocks from the surpluses in good production years and by importing the required amounts of foodgrains in times of need. Various committees have suggested the optimal size of the buffer-stock, which varies from 15 to 25 million tonnes, depending on the season.

RIGHT TO FOOD AND NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT

The Presidential address to Parliament indicated that implementation of the National Food Security Act will provide a statutory basis for a framework which assures food security for all. According to this law, every BPL family in rural and urban areas will be provided 25 kilograms of rice/ wheat per month at the rate of Rs. 3 per kilogram. It was realised that this guarantee to food with fixed entitlements to the poor would go a long way in ensuring food security in the country.

PERFORMANCE IN ACCESS TO FOOD AND NUTRITION

At the individual level, food security means that all members of the society have access to the food they need, either from their own production, from the market and/or from the government's transfer mechanism. In order to achieve food security it is also important that the poor have sufficient means to purchase food. Poor people cannot afford to purchase the food they need at market prices, and therefore, social protection programmes are needed. Sufficient purchasing power for the poor so that they can purchase adequate food may be ensured in two ways. One is to have a pattern of growth that favours employment generation, and which can provide remunerative work to the poor and increase their purchasing power with respect to food. Another way is to increase incomes and subsidize food through social protection programmes like PDS and employment programmes.

Even adequate availability of food grains or easy access to food, we cannot guarantee adequate absorption of nutrients, as nutrition depends on various other factors such as health status of pregnant women, practice of breast feeding, sanitation and hygiene, clean drinking water, etc.

ISSUES AND POLICIES ON ACCESS TO FOOD AND NUTRITION

Access to food at the household level and nutrition are inter-related. As mentioned above, access to food depends on increase in purchasing power due to increase in employment and social protection programmes. On the other hand, factors determining the levels of malnutrition are far more varied than those of access to food. Poverty and low income growth is one of the reasons for low access to food and malnutrition. With increase in income and employment access to food can be improved drastically.

Factors Determining Malnutrition

The three main drivers of under nutrition in developing countries are:

- (i) household food insecurity (due to low food availability and access to food)
- (ii) poor maternal and child care practices; and
- (iii) Inadequate access to drinking water, sanitation and health services.

Gender inequality is another important factor that determines malnutrition levels. A distinction can be made between direct or immediate or indirect but substantive and institutional factors responsible for undernutrition. For example, food intake, micro nutrients, diet diversification, health, water, and sanitation are direct determinants while women's empowerment, agriculture, etc. are indirect determinants of undernutrition.

Food intake in terms of sufficient calories, proteins and micro nutrients is important for nutrition. The focus has to be on increasing the range of nutrient-rich foods consumed. This requires that we create and implement programmes that improve the availability and consumption of different types of nutrient-rich foods (such as animal products, fruits, and vegetables) in required quantities. This becomes essential as a large fraction of our population is at risk for or vulnerable to nutritional deficiencies or malnutrition (mainly undernutrition).

Similarly, public health services are poor in India.

Health sector performance shows that there are basically six problems:

- (i) low standard of health indicators;
- (ii) progress in the health indicators is very gradual or slow;
- (iii) significant disparities were noted with respect to region, social strata, and gender;

- (iv) health delivery systems in our country is ailing and;
- (v) many health services, though privatised, have not been beneficial to the population in general.

Low standards of health and hygiene, coupled with poor sanitation and unsafe drinking water also contribute to the poor general health of our people.

Education for mothers is positively associated with better education, health, and nutrition outcomes for the child. Women's economic empowerment, that is, greater access for women to financial resources, not only improves their status within the household, but also leads to more investment in their children. As a result of greater access to economic resources, women's empowerment may lead to a better future for children because empowered mothers are more likely to advocate the interests of their children in their households bargaining and to be taken seriously. Finally, greater individual and household level empowerment may spill over into the empowerment of women at the community level and a more active role for them in demanding or even providing better child related services (Jones et al.: 2007)

One important dimension of accessibility to food is intra-household disparity in consumption. It is widely believed that in India, food distribution in the household is not based on 'need'. The breadwinner, who is usually the male head of the family gets adequate food, while the children get the next share, and women take the remains. In times of scarcity for any reason, the total daily food intake of women and children are most likely to be adversely affected. Among children, boys are given preference over girls in majority of the areas with respect to distribution of food. NFHS data shows slightly higher malnutrition among girls as compared to boys. Generally there is not much difference.

Amartya Sen and Sengupta studied the question of undernourishment in a few villages of West Bengal. Based on the weight-for-age indicator they found a bias in favour of boys over girls. Amartya Sen (2001) cautions about the interpretation of the causal process. The lower level of nourishment of girls may not relate directly to their food intake vis-à-vis boys, but from neglect of healthcare of girls compared to that of boys. Adequate nutrition during pregnancy and the first six months of life are critical because of their impact on birth weight. These problems compound either before, during, or post- pregnancy as under-nourished mothers are more likely to give birth to premature or low birth weight babies. Poor nutritional status at birth is worsened by inadequate breastfeeding and poor supplementary feeding habits, including delayed weaning. It has been found that children are not given nutritious food in the years following weaning, especially when mothers have no/ low education. The regional experience in India

highlight differences in health provisioning, improvements in child care, and health status of women as factors that explain malnutrition differences across states.

CONCLUSION

Food demand increase is due mainly to changing food consumption patterns and population growth. Our main concern for the food and agricultural sector is to provide sufficient amount food, to meet the nutritional needs of the ever growing population. Food production and its physical availability are certainly essential to addressing hunger. However, producing more food alone will not be sufficient to achieve food and nutritional security. In fact, food and nutrition security is about more than just producing sufficient food as it encompasses the need to ensure access to food at all times.

Food security, in terms of availability, access, and absorption or nutrition has been examined and all three are found to be inter-related. For example, availability and access to food can increase nutrition among the households.

Food availability is a pre-requisite for food security. India today produces sufficient amounts cereals but there is still a deficit in oil seeds and pulses. With time, changes in consumption patterns have been noted. There has been an increase in demand for fruits, vegetables, dairy, meat, poultry, and even fishery products. In order to promote crop diversification in agriculture, we need a multi-disciplinary approach. Indian government has also been running programmes such as TPDS, nutrition programmes such as mid-day meals schemes, ICDS, etc. to improve food security and alleviate nutritional status, especially of women and children. Self-employment programmes can also improve access to food and nutrition by increasing purchasing power of the people. Social protection programmes in India must be proactive in order to provide protection to the poor, from shocks in the economy.

Previous policies and actions fell short from addressing the problem of food and nutrition security. In fact, most of the previous strategies focused on food availability - adopting a quantitative approach aiming at increasing agricultural production - while little attention has been devoted to the other components of food and nutrition security mainly food accessibility and food utilization. The challenge of feeding the growing world population requires new strategies to ensure food and nutrition security in which particular attention should be devoted to dietary patterns for developing sustainable agricultural and food systems.

Reforms are needed to make the delivery systems of public services more efficient. Social mobilization, community participation and decentralized approach are necessary to make these programmes work.

Finally, the ‘right approach’ plays an important role in improving implementation of development programmes.

REFERENCES

- Jones, Nikola, Madhuri Mukherjee and S.Galab (2007), Ripple effects or Deliberate Intentions? Assessing Linkages between Women’s Empowerment and Childhood Poverty”, UNICEF/ Young Lives Social policy Paper 0002, May 2007
- P. S. Brahmanand, A. Kumar, S. Ghosh, S. Roy Chowdhury, R. B. Singandhupe, R. Singh, P. Nanda, H. Chakraborty, S. K. Srivastava and M. S. Behera ,Challenges to food security in India CURRENT SCIENCE, VOL. 104, NO. 7, 10 APRIL 2013
- Sen, Amartya (2001). “Many Faces of Gender Equality”, Front Line, 27 October – 9 November, Vol. 18, Issue 22
- Sen, Amartya and S. Sengupta (1983).“Malnutrition of Rural Indian Children and the Sex Bias”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 19, No.24
- Siddalingareddy Research Paper Volume : 5 | Issue : 4 | April 2015 | ISSN - 2249-555X Food security in India; Challenges and Suggestions for effectiveness
- S. Mahendra Dev Alakh N. Sharma, Food Security in India: Performance, Challenges and Policies.

Corresponding Author

Jasneet Kaur Malhi*

Assistant Professor, Department of Home Science,
Guru Gobind Singh College for Women, Sector 26,
Chandigarh

niti_sandhu@yahoo.com