

India : Food Security and Nutritional Challenges

Dr. Venkatesh Athreya

Adjunct Professor

Asian College of Journalism

CHENNAI

Food Security

- Key issue for a significant proportion of the Indian population in both rural and urban areas
- Three important aspects of food security: Availability, Access and Absorption
- Availability of food at the macro level is a function of production and net imports. At the local level, it depends critically on transport infrastructure and market integration

Food Security

- At the micro level, problems of food security can be location-specific (eg. Hilly areas, with problems of physical and economic access).
- They can also be gender-specific, with women facing unequal access in the intra-household distribution of food.

Food Security

- Access to food is primarily a matter of purchasing power, and is therefore closely linked with the issues of access to productive assets and livelihood opportunities.
- Within the household as well as in the larger community, access is also characterized by gender inequality
- Absorption is critically dependent on the availability of sanitation and safe drinking water to ensure biological utilization of the food consumed

Food Security

The key food security issues at the macro level concern the nature of macroeconomic policies which impact upon:

- Growth in food grain production and thus its physical availability,
- The nature of growth in terms of employment, access to livelihoods and purchasing power
- Agrarian policy in general.

A quick history of availability

- Food grain availability low at around 150 Kg per year at 1950, following five decades of stagnation
- Increase at 3 % per year up to the mid 1960s, mostly through increase in area sown
- Crisis in mid 60s, following successive monsoon failures- “ Ship-to-mouth existence”, with PL 480 grain shipments

A quick history of availability

- Green Revolution as policy response-not just new technology, but major role of State re. credit, public investment, farm research, extension and assured procurement as well as PDS
- Growth rate of food grain output higher than population growth rate between 1950 and 1990 but stagnation in food grain output between 1999-2000 and 2006-07. Some improvement since then, but with volatility.

Area, Production and Yield of Food Grain, 2000-01 to 2013-14

Year	Area MHA	Production MT	Yield (Kg/Ha)
2000-01	121.05	196.81	1626
2001-02	122.78	212.85	1734
2002-03	113.86	174.77	1535
2003-04	123.45	213.19	1727
2004-05	120.08	198.36	1652
2005-06	121.60	208.60	1715
2006-07*	123.71	217.28	1756
2007-08	124.07	230.78	1860
2008-09	122.83	234.47	1909
2009-10	121.33	218.11	1798
2010-11	126.76	244.78	1931
2011-12	124.76	259.32	2079
2013-14	NA	263.20	NA

Access and Absorption

- **Slow growth of employment 1993-94 to 2011-12**
- **Sharp rise in issue prices of PDS grain and reduction in entitlement between 1991 and 2003-04.**
- **Targeted PDS drives out APL HHs**
- **Declining terms of trade for farmers**
- **Deflationary policies lead to loss of purchasing power for a majority of the rural population**
- **High rates of food inflation since 2010**
- **Rising education, health, transport and energy costs**
- **Limited social sector outlays constrain improved absorption**

Access and Absorption

- **Employment focus for enhancing purchasing power**
- **Life cycle approach, taking into account age and sex-specific nutritional needs**
- **Strengthening Delivery Systems: PDS, ICDS, MDMS, NREGS**
- **Nutrition Education**
- **Enhanced and effective spending on drinking water, sanitation and environmental hygiene**

What is to be done?

International trade not a perfect substitute for domestic production

Access needs to be addressed by focussing on employment, asset ownership and purchasing power

Reversal of deflationary macroeconomic policies a must to address all three As

Fiscal responsibility has to be revenue-led as well

Enhancing Availability

- **Focus on enhancing production through empowering small farmers**
- **Ensure prompt procurement at reasonable prices**
- **Extend price support and procurement to nutritious millets**
- **Expand PDS basket to include millets**

Enhancing availability

- **Increase public investment in agriculture and rural development**
- **Revamp and strengthen Extension System as per recommendations of the National Commission on Farmers**
- **Strengthen the National agricultural research system (NARS)**
- **Restore input and credit support to small farmers**

The National Food Security Act (NFSA)

- The Indian Parliament passed the *Food Security Act* recently.
- The Act provides 5 kgs per capita per month of grain at specified prices to **eligible families**, subject to a ceiling of 25 kgs per family.
- The coverage is estimated at 67 % of all families across the country, with 75% of all rural families and 50% of all urban families being covered.

The National Food Security Act (NFSA)

- Prices specified at Rs 3, Rs 2 and Re 1 per kg for rice, wheat and millets respectively, to begin with.
- Can be raised to half the minimum support price after three years
- Central government will specify the number of families eligible in each State based on a methodology to be decided by the Planning Commission and provide grains accordingly.
- If any State wishes to provide greater / universal coverage, it would have to bear the extra cost.
- Subsidy estimated at 1.25 trillion rupees per year, a little under 1.5 % of India's GDP

The National Food Security Act (NFSA)

- The Act has evoked strong reactions, with support and opposition on both political and economic grounds.
- Neoliberal critics have called it dangerous and see it as frightening foreign investors away by raising the fiscal deficit
- Supporters say it was a very necessary Act for inclusive growth
- Some, while supporting the intent of the Act, feel it does not go far enough and is also centralizing too much authority in the hands of the Union government

The National Food Security Act (NFSA)

- The argument that the subsidy is unaffordable lacks conviction when one factors in the huge tax concessions to the large corporate sector since 2008 which have been causing an annual loss of tax revenue estimated to average 5 trillion rupees or more.
- The fiscal implications of the NFSA are manageable
- There is in fact a strong case for universal provisions that provide everyone these entitlements.

India's Food and Nutrition Security Challenges

- Three aspects of the hunger challenge: calorie deficiency, protein hunger and micronutrient deficiency or 'hidden hunger'
- India has made progress in terms of addressing calorie deficiency. Yet, as of 2009-10, nearly one-seventh of the rural and one-sixth of the urban population had a daily calorie intake below 1890 calories, which itself is only 70% of the global adult norm of 2700 calories per day.
- Protein deficiency continues to be an issue, and the major strategy to address it has been through increase in the production of pulses as well as milk.
- The biggest challenge is in micronutrient deficiency. Anaemia is prevalent among both children and women in the fertile age group of 13 to 49 years, as seen in the National Family Health Surveys and more recent district level health surveys. Iodine deficiency has been addressed to some extent. Vitamin A deficiency remains a major issue, though the more severe manifestations of it are rarely seen.

India's Food and Nutrition Security Challenges: The government response

- Several programmes/schemes of the government of India seek to address these challenges:
 - The Public Distribution System (PDS) for delivery of subsidised grains to the target population
 - The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme for addressing the nutritional needs of children below 6 years of age, pregnant and lactating mothers and adolescent girls; for immunisation, health check up and referral; for pre-school education; and for nutrition education
 - The Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) for school children in primary and secondary classes of government and government aided schools
 - The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act(NAREGA) and the scheme under the Act intended to provide 100 days of employment per annum for every rural household registering under the Scheme at the minimum wage
 - The National Food Security Mission (NFSM) aiming to increase output of rice, wheat and pulses through increased yields per acre.

India's Food and Nutrition Security Challenges: The Road Ahead

- Policies must address all three dimensions: Availability, Access and Absorption
- Policies must focus on all three types of hunger: calorie deficiency, protein malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies
- Existing interventions need to be strengthened in terms of implementation
- Making the PDS universal will not have significant financial implications and will make implementation much easier.
- The neoliberal policy framework, with its focus on reduction of fiscal deficit essentially by expenditure reduction, needs to be discarded for a Rights-based approach.
- The recent policy reversals in respect of NREGA, rural development expenditure and outlays on health and education cause much concern. NREGA has to be fully implemented
- Fiscal policy must recognise that deficit reduction should be revenue-led.