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Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture: An Intermediary for Nutritional Security

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Abstract:

Nutrition security goes beyond food security with due consideration to the nutritional value of food and the systemic factors that determine an individual's nutritional status. It is about an individual's access to essential nutrients, not just calories. Undernutrition, malnutrition and increasingly overnutrition are still grave issues in many developing countries including India. Whereas achieving nutritional security in the context of the burgeoning population, climate change, diminishing land and water resources, and changing incomes and diets will require not just approaches to sustainably producing more food, but also smarter ways of producing food via nascent approaches such as Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture (NSA). NSA is a gentle nudge in the right direction towards attaining nutritional security.

Keywords: Nutritional security, Malnourishment, Nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

Introduction:

Nutrition security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to food. It exists when they are able to consume it in both sufficient quantity and quality to meet their dietary needs and food preferences, and they are supported by an environment of adequate sanitation, health services, and care, allowing for a healthy and active life (FAO, 1996). In order to fulfil the nutritional security of its population, the Indian Government has been formulating and implementing many nutritional schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), and National Nutrition Mission, etc. since its independence. Despite its efforts, India continues to be among the countries having more than one-third of its population malnourished. While at the agriculture forefront, it has been flourishing and gaining accolades as the world's largest food producer and fastest-growing food exporter. This great irony has forced us to rethink and reevaluate the production-centred approach of the Indian agricultural sector, there is a dire need to bring about a paradigm shift

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from the production-centred to a more nutritionally sensitized approach in order to avert such ironical instances for its growing populations' well-being whereas the nutrition-related schemes are also required to explore its potential via a multi-disciplinary commitment to ensure nutritional security.

Agriculture and nutrition are basically two sides of the same coin, intertwined together yet holding onto their own identity. Food is the interlinking and governing force that demands an amicable relationship between agriculture and nutrition, as each is incompetent without the other. The growing malnutrition and hunger issues have further shed light on the potential of having a reinforcing relationship between the two fields. This led to the advent of Nutrition-sensitive agriculture in order to combat the discrepancy and provide a multi-disciplinary approach to tackle hunger and malnutrition.

Nutrition sensitive Agriculture:

Nutrition-sensitive agriculture is a food-based approach to agricultural development that puts nutritionally rich foods, dietary diversity, and food fortification at the heart of overcoming malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies (FAO,2014). This approach stresses the multiple benefits derived from enjoying a variety of foods, recognizing the nutritional value of food for good nutrition, and the importance and social significance of the food and agricultural sector for supporting rural livelihoods. The overall objective of nutrition-sensitive agriculture is to make the global food system better equipped to produce good nutritional outcomes.

NSA focuses on the unique and critical role that agriculture can provide in improving the nutritional status. The key linking factors between agriculture and nutrition are as follows:

- **First, agriculture has the most direct influence and contact with the majority of households where undernourished individuals reside.** The agriculture sector employs nearly 58 per cent of the total Indian workforce and generates more than 55 per cent of the rural income, so the potential for agriculture to influence nutrition at scale is large. Beneficiaries of typical agricultural projects overlap with those most affected by undernutrition: the rural poor. Any development activity reaching this segment of the population has enormous potential to influence factors that constrain human capital and well-being, of which nutrition is an essential part. For example, agriculture extension workers have direct and ongoing contact with smallholder farmers

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and therefore have a unique opportunity to strengthen messages regarding not just production, but also the consumption of nutritious foods, including bio-fortified crops, especially by vulnerable groups (Shekar,2015).

- **Second, agriculture is the sector best placed to affect the production and consumption of nutritious foods needed for healthy and active lives.** Physical and economic access to adequate and affordable nutritious food is primarily a function of the agriculture sector, through support to increased production, improved post-harvest storage and processing (including food safety issues such as aflatoxin control), and reduced transport costs which can lower food prices for poor consumers. Agriculture does not directly influence consumer demand but can help make nutritious food available to consumers at affordable prices.
- **Third, in India more than 80% of rural women engaged in the labour force work in the agriculture sector.** This provides a significant opportunity to unleash the gender dimensions of agriculture-nutrition linkages. According to the National Family Health Survey (2019-21), 67 per cent of children between the age of 6 and 59 months while 57 per cent of women have anaemia. Women being the most vulnerable group facing the brunt of food and nutritional insecurity will get an opportunity to be nutritionally empowered, thereby uplifting the nutritional well-being of their household (Macias and Glasauer,2014).
- **Fourth, the commitment of the Government of India and across the States to invest in agriculture is very strong.** India being an agricultural country and agriculture being a state subject gets a lot of attention and encouragement from the Government via various schemes, policies and programmes to uplift the agriculture scenario of the country. The nutritional sensitization of its various programmes will have a great impact on its beneficiaries

Areas of implementation:

NSA production can be implemented in three main areas:

1. **Making food more available and accessible.** Increasing agricultural production makes more food available and affordable, which improves both the health and the economic status of the community. Sustained income growth in turn will have a sizeable effect on reducing malnutrition.

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2. **Making food more diverse and production more sustainable**. Increasing diversity in food production and promoting sustainable production practices like conservation agriculture, water management and integrated pest management can improve nutrition levels without depleting natural resources. Family farming, home gardens and homestead food production projects can make a wider variety of crops available at the local level.
3. **Making food itself more nutritious.** Fortification can prevent micronutrient deficiencies by enhancing micronutrient content in foods through processing, plant breeding and improved soil fertility. Bio-fortification being an easy entry point towards the promotion of Nutrition-sensitive agriculture, the Indian Government has been promoting the biofortification of staples because the biofortified varieties are 1.5 to 3.0 times more nutritious than the traditional varieties. (FAO,2014; Dominic and Meena,2022).

Conclusion:

NSA can be a game changer for ensuring the nutritional security of the growing population. It can also assist in catalyzing and accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the country by directly working towards the eradication of hunger and malnourishment. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture is the future of research and policies across the globe with its unique multidisciplinary approach to integrate various disciplines to accomplish a common goal of nutritional security among the growing masses. This spirit of integration and multidisciplinary approach will be a solidarity towards a better and sustainable future.

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