

Food and Nutritional Security in India: Challenges and Pathways Forward

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Introduction:

In a country as vast and diverse as India, ensuring that every citizen has access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food is a monumental challenge. Food security goes beyond just having enough to eat; it also encompasses nutritional security, which means ensuring that the food people consume is rich in the essential nutrients needed for a healthy life. Despite significant progress over the years, India continues to face persistent challenges in achieving comprehensive food and nutritional security. This article explores these challenges and the strategies that can help overcome them.



Understanding Food and Nutritional Security

Food security is generally understood as having physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Nutritional security, on the other hand, focuses on the quality of the diet and the availability of essential micronutrients like vitamins and minerals. The term Food and nutritional security is being widely used the notion behind which is the importance of the complementarity and overlaps between food security and nutrition. Food and nutritional

security is defined as condition under which adequate food (quantity, quality, safety, socio-cultural acceptability) is available and accessible for and satisfactorily utilized by all individuals at all times to live a healthy and happy life.

India's struggle with food security has historical roots, but the issue has evolved over time. The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 70s significantly increased the country's agricultural output, helping to alleviate widespread hunger. However, while food production has improved, issues like unequal distribution, poverty, and malnutrition have persisted. The challenge today is not just to produce enough food, but to ensure that the food available is nutritious and accessible to all segments of society.



The State of Food and Nutritional Security in India

India has made substantial progress in reducing hunger, but the country still faces significant hurdles. According to the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2023, India ranked 111th out of 125 countries, indicating that hunger remains a serious issue. The situation is particularly dire in rural areas, where poverty and lack of access to resources exacerbate food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges, pushing millions back into poverty and worsening food and nutritional insecurity.

Nutritional security is another area of concern. Despite being a major food producer, India is home to a large population of undernourished people. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reveals that nearly 36% of children under five years are stunted, and 19% are wasted. Additionally, a significant portion of the adult population suffers from

micronutrient deficiencies, including iron, vitamin A, and iodine. These deficiencies can lead to serious health issues, including impaired cognitive development in children and increased vulnerability to diseases.



Challenges to Food and Nutritional Security

Several factors contribute to the ongoing challenges of food and nutritional security in India:

1. **Poverty and Inequality:** A significant portion of India's population lives below the poverty line, limiting their access to sufficient and nutritious food. Economic disparities also mean that even when food is available, not everyone can afford it.
2. **Agricultural Productivity:** While India is a top producer of several crops, agricultural productivity is often hampered by factors such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of access to modern farming techniques, and climate change. Small and marginal farmers, who make up the majority of India's farming community, are particularly vulnerable.
3. **Climate Change:** Changing weather patterns, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and rising temperatures are affecting crop yields. Climate change also poses a threat to water security, which is crucial for agriculture.
4. **Post-Harvest Losses:** India loses a significant portion of its food produce due to inadequate storage, poor transportation, and lack of processing facilities. These post-harvest losses not only reduce the availability of food but also affect its affordability.



5. **Malnutrition and Dietary Diversity:** The Indian diet is often heavily reliant on staples like rice and wheat, leading to a lack of dietary diversity. This contributes to micronutrient deficiencies, particularly in children and women.
6. **Public Distribution System (PDS) Inefficiencies:** India's PDS, which is designed to provide subsidized food to the poor, faces issues such as corruption, inefficiency, and exclusion errors. These problems prevent the most vulnerable populations from accessing the food they need.

Pathways to Achieve Food and Nutritional Security

Addressing the challenges of food and nutritional security requires a multi-faceted approach. Here are some key strategies:

1. **Improving Agricultural Productivity:** Enhancing agricultural productivity is crucial for food security. This can be achieved through better access to technology, improved irrigation, and the adoption of sustainable farming practices. Initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY) aim to improve irrigation infrastructure, while the promotion of organic farming and agroforestry can help make agriculture more sustainable.
2. **Strengthening the Public Distribution System:** Reforming the PDS to make it more efficient and inclusive is essential. This includes leveraging technology to reduce leakages, improving targeting mechanisms to ensure that the right people receive benefits, and enhancing the nutritional quality of the food provided.
3. **Promoting Dietary Diversity:** Educating the population about the importance of a balanced diet and promoting the consumption of a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables, pulses, and animal-sourced foods, can help address micronutrient deficiencies. Programs like the Mid-Day Meal Scheme in schools, which provides nutritious meals to children, play a vital role in this regard.
4. **Reducing Post-Harvest Losses:** Investing in better storage facilities, improving transportation infrastructure, and developing food processing industries can help reduce post-harvest losses. The government's Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sampada Yojana (PMKSY) is a step in this direction, aiming to create modern infrastructure for the food processing sector.



5. **Combating Climate Change:** Adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change is critical for food security. This includes developing climate-resilient crops, promoting water conservation practices, and investing in renewable energy for agriculture.
6. **Empowering Women:** Women play a crucial role in food production and nutrition within households. Empowering women through education, access to resources, and involvement in decision-making can have a positive impact on food security and nutrition.

Conclusion: Towards a Food and Nutritional Secure India

Achieving food and nutritional security in India is a complex challenge that requires coordinated efforts from the government, private sector, and civil society. While significant progress has been made, much work remains to be done to ensure that all Indians have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. By addressing the root causes of food insecurity, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, and enhancing the efficiency of food distribution systems, India can move closer to achieving the goal of food and nutritional security for all its citizens.