

FOOD SECURITY, A SLIPPERY SLOPE

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Grain of truth Policies must endorse the poor's right to food

There's no Malthusian problem right now, but without sustainable farming the world will be in serious trouble

Food security, a seemingly innocuous phrase, is fast becoming one of the most widely discussed topics of our time. A lot of us would associate 'food security' as a challenge for the impoverished but it could potentially become a much more widespread problem straddling across geographic and economic divides.

The issue of food security was brought to the fore at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, organised by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The summit adopted a declaration on World Food Security with all the member states pledging to "achieving food security for all and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015".

Just another commodity

The challenges associated with food security are multi-fold. Food production is tightly linked to the availability of natural resources. Any imbalance in these resources will impact food availability.



One of the problems today is the rampant over-exploitation of natural resources. An FAO study indicates that almost 80 per cent of the world's fisheries are depleted, overexploited or fully exploited. 29 per cent of fish and seafood species have collapsed.

Similarly, intensive or aggressive agriculture techniques such as monoculture, high fertiliser/pesticide use lead to unsustainable productivity and degradation of environmental resources.

Food has to compete with other commodities for access to above natural resources. Large areas of agricultural land are used to grow commodities such as cotton, sisal, tea, tobacco, sugarcane and cocoa which are non-food or marginally nutritious but for which there is a huge demand in the market. In this context, food becomes just another commodity in the market economy.

Depletion of energy resources and the increase in demand for alternate energy sources such as biofuels is leading to the diversion of agriculture land for the cultivation of crops that will be used to generate biofuels.

Millions of acres of productive farmland are used to pasture cattle and more than half the grain grown in the US is fed to livestock. This grain could feed far more people than would the livestock to which it is fed.

Tracking food

Globalisation has redefined the boundaries of food production and consumption. A few decades ago, food production and consumption tended to be a local affair. But globalisation has caused food created in one country to be exported to a faraway country at the cost of the locals.

Governments now have to intervene to manage shortages and higher prices in that country due to the better gains from export. A case in point is the government of India raising the minimum export price for onions to shore up supplies within the country during last year.

For an objective measure of food security across the world, a Global Food Security Index was defined. This index uses a qualitative and quantitative model using 28 unique indicators across the three categories of affordability, availability and quality and safety to assess how countries are vulnerable to food insecurity.

On a positive note, the index indicates that overall food security has improved in 2014. According to the FAO, there is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone — at least 1.5 times the current demand. In fact, over the past 20 years, food production has risen steadily at over 2 per cent a year, while the rate of population growth has dropped to 1.14 per cent a year. Population is not outstripping food supply.

India ranks 69th out of 109 countries on the Food Security Index. On availability of food, there is good news as well as bad news. The good news is after remaining a food deficit country for about two decades after independence, India became largely self-sufficient in foodgrain production at the macro level. There have hardly been any foodgrain imports after the mid-1970s.

In the agriculture sector, the growth rates of production and yield for foodgrain and some key crop groups have been on a steady decline for the past three decades. Due to increasing population, the per capita availability of land which was already limited is shrinking further.

Added to this, soil overuse and over extraction of groundwater are leading to severely degraded lands. This chronic slowdown in yield has turned farming into a non-viable activity. These factors, coupled with the fact that our population is growing by more than 15 million each year, have cast a shadow over India's future as a food secure nation.



Apart from availability, 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. Adequate purchasing power for the poor to buy food can be ensured in two ways.

One is to have an employment-intensive pattern of growth which can provide remunerative work to the poor and enhance their power to purchase food. Another way is to subsidise food through social protection programmes like the public distribution system (PDS).

The main problem with regard to PDS is its inability to reach the target groups. PDS food grain purchase constituted only 11 per cent of the total per capita monthly food grain consumption in 2005.

There are more problem areas for the poor. Even if there is availability as well as access to food, there is no guarantee of adequate absorption or nutrition. Nutrition depends on many factors: hygiene, drinking water, sanitation.

India passed the National Food Security Act, 2013, with an aim to provide subsidised food grain to nearly two thirds of its 1.2 billion people. The Act shifts from a welfare-based approach to a rights-based one, and entitles the poor, pregnant women and children to receive subsidised food grain.

Managing resources

But many more issues need to be addressed before India can confidently claim that the 'Right to Food' enjoyed by its people is genuine, meaningful and sustainable. We need to ensure sustainable management of land and natural resources and stress on low carbon footprint practices. Policies should strive towards achieving a balanced economy. Industrial growth and agriculture have to be encouraged simultaneously lest the two get out of balance.

Research and innovation are urgently needed to fortify India's food stock, and to strengthen its position as a provider for the burgeoning millions. Improving crop productivity, keeping pests, diseases and weeds at bay, and promoting sustainable livestock farming are some areas that would benefit immensely from this. Exploring new technologies such as nanotechnologies, genomics and micro-electronics must also be included in the agenda.

We, as individuals, too have a part to play. We have to learn that food is a valued resource. Our elders have chided us when we would waste food as kids. We have to inculcate these habits within ourselves and pass them on to the next generation. And all of us, government, industry and individuals have to work together to ensure that the plate never goes empty for the many generations to come.

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