



## India and Food Insecurity



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This article is based upon “State of Food Insecurity” which was published in the Indian Express on 06/08/2021. It addresses the issue of unavailability of food to the people of India despite no lack in availability of food resources and the impact of Covid-19 that further deteriorated the status of food security in India.

India was home to the largest number of undernourished people in the world even before the **Covid-19 pandemic**. However, the irony is that the government had an unprecedented 100 million tonnes of food grains in its godowns — larger than the food stocks of any country.

The **latest edition of the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) report (2021)**, released jointly by five UN organisations, reveals that the pandemic and failure on the part of the state to combat its effects, has led to a significant increase in the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity in the country.

India, as a country with the largest food stock in the world (as of July, 2021), there is no need for the government to ensure additional food stocks but an effective implementation of the already existing policies that facilitate food distribution among the needy ones.

### India's Food Insecurity as per SOFI

- **SOFI Report 2021:** According to the data presented in the report, the prevalence of **moderate to severe food insecurity in India rose by about 6.8 percentage points** in 2018-20.
  - **Increase in Food Security:** In absolute terms, the number of persons facing moderate to severe food insecurity has increased by about 9.7 crore since the outbreak of Covid.
  - **Parameters of Estimation:** Estimates on food insecurity presented in the SOFI report are based on two globally-accepted indicators of food insecurity:
    - **Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU)**
    - **Prevalence of Moderate and Severe Food Insecurity (PMSFI)**

- **India and Food Insecurity:** India, the country with the largest stock of grain in the world; 120 million tonnes (as of July 1, 2021) **accounts for a quarter of the world's food-insecure population.**
  - Estimates show that, in 2020, over 237 crore people were grappling with food insecurity globally, an increase of about 32 crore from 2019.
  - South Asia alone accounts for 36% of global food insecurity.

## Food Insecurity and Associated Issues

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- **Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU):** The Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU) estimates are based on national consumption surveys of the countries showing per-capita supply of food.
  - However, these consumption surveys are not available every year and updated only once in a few years.
  - Hence, PoU is not sensitive enough to adequately capture recent disruptions such as those caused by the pandemic.
- **No Recent Consumption Surveys by India** The overall food supply was resilient despite the pandemic, hence, consumption surveys were not conducted by most countries.
  - Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the Indian government has not undertaken any official assessment of food insecurity in the country.
  - The increase in prevalence of hunger captured by PoU from 14% in 2019 to 15.3% in 2020 for India is likely to be an underestimate.
  - In this situation, the PMFSI estimates are the only national-level valid and reliable estimates available on the impact of the pandemic on food insecurity in India.
- **Denial of Situation by the Government:** The Government of India has not only avoided its own assessment of consumption/food security surveys, but also it does not approve the publication of results based on the Gallup World Poll.
- **Socio-Economic Distress:** Despite being self-sufficient in the production of major food commodities, problems of hunger and food insecurity are grave in India because of widespread economic distress, high unemployment and high levels of inequality.
  - A large proportion of the poor is dependent on the informal economy in which incomes are too low and uncertain.
 

Unemployment rates have also risen sharply over the last few years.
  - High (and fluctuating) food prices, shrinking public investment and the economic slowdown have compounded the distress among working classes and the peasantry.
 

With low and uncertain incomes, families dependent on the informal economy do not have assured access to adequate and nutritious food.

- **Impact of Pandemic:** PMSFI estimates thus derived show that there were about 43 crore of moderate to severe food-insecure people in India in 2019 which increase to 52 crore by 2020 as a result of the pandemic-related disruptions
  - In terms of prevalence rates, this food insecurity increased from about 31.6% in 2019 to 38.4% in 2021.
  - The long standing problems of unemployment, inflation, informal sector employment and economic slowdown were aggravated in 2020 due to lack of preparation to deal with the pandemic.
- **Inadequate Distribution of Food through PDS:** Deserving beneficiaries of the subsidy are excluded on the basis of non-ownership of below poverty line (BPL) status, as the criterion for identifying a household as BPL is arbitrary and varies from state to state.

## Way Forward

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- **Regular Monitoring of Food Security:** The sharp increase in food insecurity points to an urgent need for the government to establish systems for regular monitoring of the food security situation in the country.
- **Enlarging the Scope of Food Security Schemes:** Universalising the access to the Public Distribution System and One Nation One Ration Card scheme (ONORC), at least during the pandemic.
  - The PDS should be strengthened and the food basket can be enlarged to include millets, pulses and oil.
 

This may certainly help in addressing the issue of hidden hunger.
  - Everyone, irrespective of whether they have a ration card or not, should be allowed to take subsidised grain from ration shops.
 

With almost 120 million tonnes of grain currently lying with the government, it requires almost no additional resources but better implementation of schemes.
- **Bringing Development and Humanitarian Policies Together:** Integrating humanitarian, development and peacebuilding policies in required areas to prevent families from selling meagre assets in exchange for food.
- **Lowering the Cost of Nutritious Food:** Intervening along supply chains to lower the cost of nutritious foods such as by encouraging the production of biofortified crops or making it easier for fruit and vegetable growers to access markets.

## Conclusion

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- Right to food is not only a statutory right but also a human right. As a state party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, India has the obligation to ensure the right to be free from hunger and the right to adequate food for all of its citizens.

- Due to the disruption caused by Covid-19, there is a need to incorporate a broader definition of food security.

The resources to end or at least minimise food insecurity, exist with the government already. All that is needed is to utilise them up to their maximum advantage.

### ***Drishti Mains Question***

“A number of welfare schemes and availability of numerous resources have no significance if they are not brought into effective implementation and proper utilisation. The condition is completely satisfied in the case of Food Security in India.” Discuss.

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