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POVERTY AND FOOD SECURITY NEXUS IN INDIA

PARVAZE AHMAD LONE
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
S.S.L. JAIN P.G. COLLEGE
VIDISHA

NASEER AHMAD RATHER
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
S.S.L. JAIN P.G. COLLEGE
VIDISHA

ABSTRACT

The prevalence of mal-nutrition in India is among the major issues of current period. Drawing on qualitative studies and quantitative evidence from different surveys and analysis, this paper explores the various aspects of food problem in India and examines the effectiveness of government intervention in addressing it. Today more than one billion are very poor and suffering from hunger, India is home to more than one-fourth (238 million) of the world's total (850 million) of under-nourished people, which is 21 percent of the national population. Every six million children under the age of five die due to mal-nutrition and related preventable disease. The sad fact today is that despite a conveniently low notion of poverty adopted by the government, one in every four Indian is poor. This is abysmal, but the truth is that the situation is much worse. When we develop a poverty line based on all basic needs, we will find two-thirds of the Indian population is poverty-stricken. A recent study of Arjun Sengupta states that, in India 903 million people are living below the poverty line. Yet, we do not have a uniform, universally acceptable measure of poverty. India has reduced income poverty, which has fallen significantly in recent years. Besides this improvement food insecurity remains a challenge. In India the stock of food grains available is above the level of buffer stock norms prescribed by the government. Thus, the problem today on the food front is not one of scarcity but that of security.

KEYWORDS

Food security, Government intervention, Mal-nutrition, Poverty.

INTRODUCTION

The close historical nexus has been seen between the improvement in food security and reduction of poverty as a result of government efforts - to link market-led economic growth to interventions that improve the food security at both the household and national levels. Poverty encompasses different dimensions of deprivation that relate to human capabilities including consumption and food security, health, education, rights, voice, security, dignity and decent work (OECD, 2001, P. 8). No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable (Adam Smith, 1776). Optimal, physical, cognitive and emotional development and function in humans requires access to food of adequate quantity and quality at all stages of the life span (Cook & Frank, 2008).

Although, the poverty is the sum total of a number of factors that include not just income but also access to land and credit, nutrition, health, literacy, education, safe drinking water, sanitation and other infrastructural facilities in India, poverty is conventionally defined in terms of income poverty that is related to hunger and measured in different ways. As per latest data of the Planning Commission - available till 2009-10, India has 32% people living below the poverty line. These estimates are based on the formula suggested by the Tendulkar Committee for computing the number of poor in the country. The formula estimates poverty on the basis on consumption based on cost of living index. If this data is to be believed, the country has seen reduction of poverty from 37.2% in 2004-05 to 32% in 2009-10.

Mounting food grain stocks with the Food Corporation of India on the one hand and recurring starvation deaths in different part of India show that the food security policies being followed in this country are not bearing fruit. From this it is clear that though India has achieved food security at the national level, it has not achieved food security at the household level (Venugopal, 1992). Many individuals have suggested that poverty fell considerably during 1990s due to 'trickle down effects' (Lal, Mohan, and Natrajan 2001).

A 1962 Planning Committee first attempted to define an official poverty line for India. India measures a poverty line using a calorie-based approach, utilized in many countries around the world. Such line operates under the assumption that there is a strong correlation between mal-nutrition and other notions of poverty such as low income (Ray 1998).

CHANGING CRITERIA OF POVERTY IN INDIA

The idea of defining poverty in terms of a poverty line was first proposed during the Indian Labour Conference in 1957. The criteria for measuring the poverty line has been changed many times over the last nearly 40 years but only with minor variations. A Working Group under the Planning Commission then stipulated a calorie based poverty line of Rs. 20 per person per month. But it was only during the sixth five-year plan that the Planning Commission started estimating the incidence of poverty at National and State level (both in rural and urban areas) on the basis of the recommendations of the Task Force set-up in 1979 - on projections of minimum needs and effective consumption demand. Using this methodology the Planning Commission, in the past, released poverty estimates for the year 1973-74, 1977-78, 1983, 1987-88 and 1993-94, 1999-2000 and 2004-05.

A variety of descriptive indices are used to measure poverty, but the most common are the Head Count Index (HCI), Poverty Gap Index (PGI), and Squared Poverty Gap Index (SPGI). The Head Count Index, also called the Head Count Ratio (HCR), is most widely used index. The HCR is defined as the proportion of the national population whose expenditure is below the official threshold (or thresholds) set by the national government. By construction therefore, HCR is a useful yardstick which allows for the monitoring of the proportion of the national population that is considered to be poor based on a national standard. If a household spends below a pre-defined level, then it is considered to be poor. The index measures the portion of families below the poverty line. The HCI is useful since it allows one to calculate the marginal impact of additional spending, output, etc. on the number of people lifted out of poverty. The HCI is specified by,

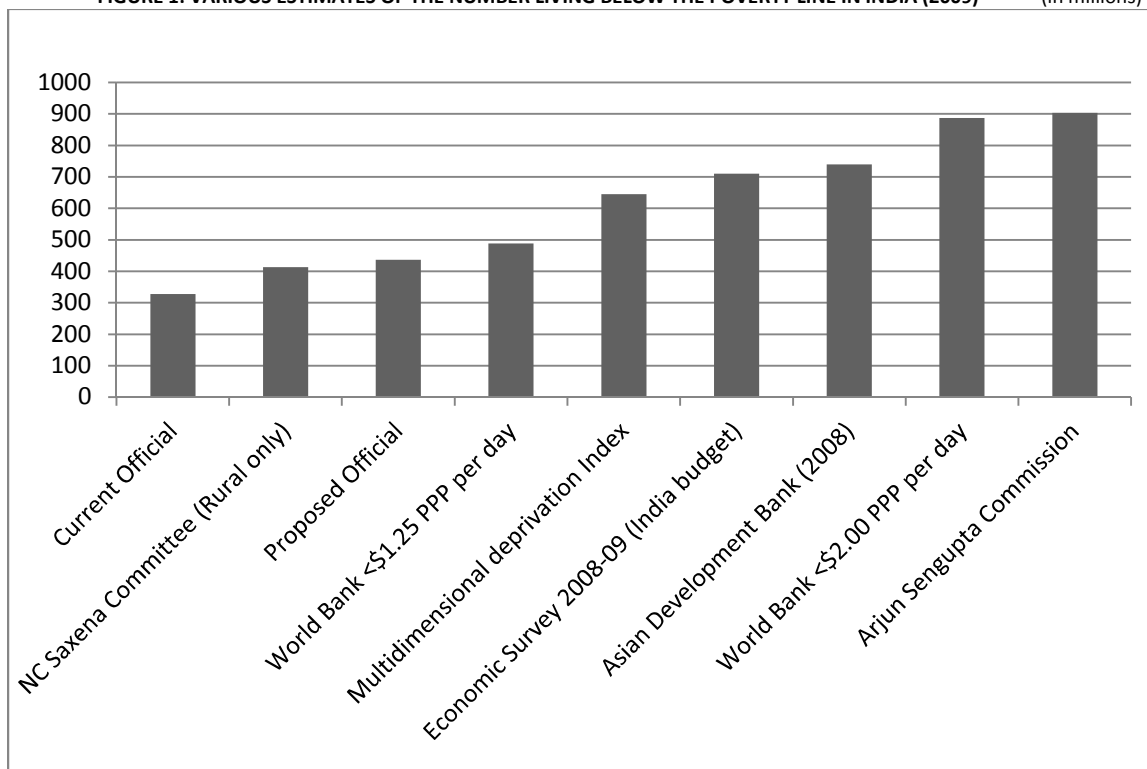
$$HCI = \frac{HC}{n}$$

Where n is the total population and HC is the number of households that satisfy the condition $y_i < p$, where i define p to be the poverty line and y_i to be the expenditure level of an individual or household.

In India government support for food security is broad. The national government has about 20 schemes in place to tackle food insecurity and malnutrition. These are related to various government sectors, since they seek to support agricultural production, distribution, purchase and use, as well as to ensure the provision of health and nutritional services, sanitation and others. Initiatives include subsidized food sales, school meals, healthcare services, and pensions for targeted vulnerable citizens. In India, major food security programs are the TPDS, whose budget is estimated to exceed US\$ 5.4 billion a year with the aim of reaching 160

million households (Saxena, 2011) and NREGA of 2005, which offers rural households a minimum of 100 days of guaranteed employment per year, with an annual budget of more than US\$ 8.7 billion and 45 million beneficiary families (Pullarao, 2010). Other large initiatives are the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) and the Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS).

FIGURE 1: VARIOUS ESTIMATES OF THE NUMBER LIVING BELOW THE POVERTY LINE IN INDIA (2009) (in millions)



Source: PRB, based on different recent estimates of the percent below poverty

STRATEGIC APPROACH OF FOOD SECURITY

The term ‘food Security’ is of rather recent origin. It was ‘The World Food Conference’ convened by FAO in 1974, which for the first time drew attention of the world community to the urgent need of devising ways and means of assuring Food Security to the hungry millions of the world. This conference gave the call that no child, woman and man should go to bed hungry and the physical and mental capabilities of none should be stunted by malnutrition.

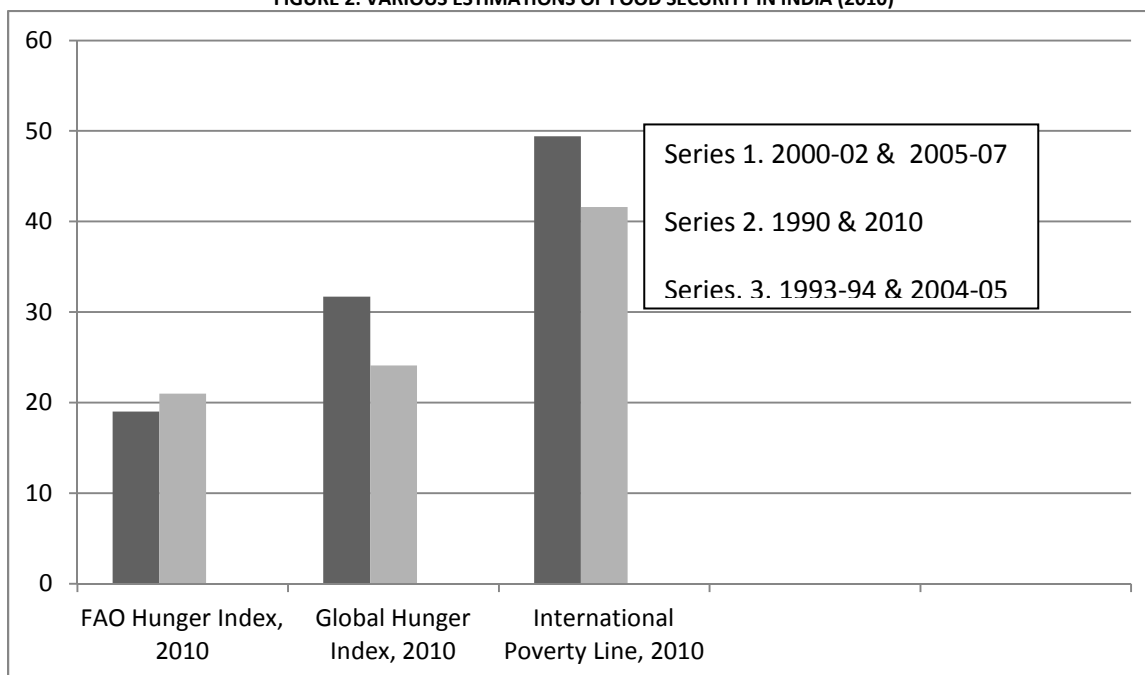
The World Bank defined Food Security as ‘access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life’. However, FAO defined Food Security as ‘ensuring that all people at all times have, both physical and economic access to basic food they need’. World Food Summit 1996 in World Food Summit plan of action stated that “Food Security exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (Taimni, 2001). Food Security has four main dimensions: physical availability of food; economic, social and physical access to food; food utilization; and the stability of the other three dimensions over time. The definition is the result of important advances in the meaning and common understanding of Food Security (FAO, 2008).

Engel’s Law ensures that success in generating rapid economic growth that includes the poor is the long-run solution to food security. In the language of Dreze and Sen (1989), such economic growth provides ‘growth mediated security’. Rapid economic growth has been the main vehicle by which most Asian countries have reduced poverty and enhanced food security (World Bank 1993).

A recent study in eight countries estimates that the rise in food prices between 2005 and 2007 increased poverty by 3 percentage points on average. Extrapolating these results globally suggests that, as a result of the rise in food prices, total world poverty may have increased by 73-105 million people (World Bank 2008). FAO’s food insecurity numbers in 2007 show that 75 million more people were added to the total number of undernourished relative to 2003-05. The rising prices have increased 41 million hungry in Asia and 24 million hungry in sub-Saharan Africa. India has around 238 undernourished population.

In order to offer a picture of the food security situation in India, a set of international measures are presented in figure 2. A widely used related criterion is the international poverty line at purchasing power parity (PPP). International poverty lines were recently revised and new extreme poverty line is set at US\$ 1.25 a day in 2005 PPP terms, which represents the mean of the poverty lines found in the poorest 15 countries ranked by per capita consumption (World Bank, 2010).

FIGURE 2: VARIOUS ESTIMATIONS OF FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA (2010)



Source: FAO (2010), IFPRI (2010), World Bank (2010).

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) uses a hunger measure based on undernourished, which refers to the proportion of the population whose dietary energy consumption is less than a pre-determined threshold. FAO shows that India has worsened since 1995 and the country's substantial levels of undernourishment stands at 21 percent in 2005-07 as shown in figure 2. Another widely used and more complex tool is the Global Hunger Index (GHI) to measure and track global hunger. The GHI shows in figure 2 that from 1990 to 2010 India moved from a situation of extremely alarming hunger (31.7 %) to one of alarming hunger (24.1 %). It is important to add that India is among the four countries in the world with the highest prevalence of underweight in children below five years of age (43.5 per cent).

Fan and Hazell (1999) estimated the returns of various public investments in different regions of India using district level data. The districts were classified into three categories: irrigated, high-potential rainfed, and low potential rainfed. Using district level data for 1970-95, an econometric model was estimated to measure the impact of different types of public investments on agricultural production and rural poverty in each of these three types of areas. In terms of poverty reduction, every additional kilometer of roads would lift 1.57 poor people out of poverty in irrigated areas, but would lift 3.5 and 9.51 people out of poverty in high and low potential rainfed areas, respectively. In the past the Indian government has biased its investments towards the irrigated and better rainfed areas. Some correction in favor of the poorer would now be win-win for growth and poverty reduction. Agricultural growth reduces poverty more strongly than growth in other sectors (Timmer, 1988).

FOOD MANAGEMENT

The main objective of food management is maintenance of food buffers for food security and price stability. Food Security stands as a fundamental need, basic to all human needs and the organization of social. It is the assurance of access to adequate nutrition, either through direct effort or exchange at acceptable prices. Access to necessary nutrients is fundamental not only to life per se, but also to stable and enduring social order. Since the fifteenth century the major responsibility for food security has shifted from households toward national governments. In the twentieth century some responsibility has also shifted to the international level. However, food security, or lack of it is still thought of as essentially a concern of individual, families or localities (Hopkins, 1986).

The stock position of food grains in the central pool as on 1 October, 2010 was 46.2 million tonnes comprising 18.4 million tonnes of rice and 27.8 million tonnes of wheat. This was adequate for meeting the requirements under the TPDS and welfare schemes during that year.

TABLE 1: BUFFER STOCK NORMS AND ACTUAL STOCKS OF INDIA (2011)

As on	Wheat		Rice		Total (Lakh Tonnes)	
	Minimum Buffer Norms	Actual Stock	Minimum Buffer Norms	Actual Stock	Minimum Buffer Norms	Actual Stock
January 2008	82	77.12	118	114.75	200	191.87
April	40	58.03	122	138.35	162	196.38
July*	201	249.12	98	112.49	299	361.61
October	140	220.25	52	78.63	192	298.88
January 2009*	112	182.12	138	175.76	250	357.88
April	70	134.29	142	216.04	212	350.33
July	201	329.22	118	196.16	319	525.38
October	140	284.57	72	153.49	212	438.06
January 2010	112	230.92	138	243.53	250	474.45
April	70	161.25	142	267.13	212	428.38
July	201	335.83	118	242.66	319	578.50
October	140	277.77	72	184.44	212	462.21

Notes: * Buffer Norms include Food Security Reserve of 30 lakh tones of wheat from 1 July 2008 and 20 lakh tones of Rice from 1 January 2009 onwards.

Source: Planning Commission.

CONCLUSION

The problem of food security is clearly not purely a problem of production but one of access/entitlements although in itself, increased food production is still an important element of the food security equation. In absolute numbers, India still has 302.7 million poor persons with a significant percentage of them being substantially or severely poor. India is also facing the adverse impact of global financial crisis since the 3rd quarter of 2008. However, the crisis has adverse impact on liquidity situation and the economic growth in India. This in turn can have adverse impact on the poor, food security and can undermine the poverty

alleviation programs of the country. In India, the proportion of people living below the poverty line declines from 2004-05 to 2009-10 and stood at 32 percent, and in contrast, inequality has risen.

There is a north-south divide in the performance of poverty alleviation. The southern states have performed well whereas the performance is poor in central and eastern states. Nevertheless, the different sets of data all point to the same conclusion: that Indian poverty reduction has been relatively slow, and certainly much below what would be expected given the rapidity of income growth in the past fifteen years.

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