

Assessing India's Journey Towards Food Security: Mapping Progress in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction

One out of every nine individuals worldwide currently is grappled with the scourge of hunger, despite an abundance of available food resources. This crisis is particularly acute in Asia, where two-thirds of the vulnerable population resides. Without a profound re-evaluation of global food and agricultural systems, projections indicate that the global tally of hungry people could soar to a staggering two billion by 2050. While strides have been made in reducing undernourishment, with the proportion dropping nearly by half from 23.3% in 1990-1992 to 12.9% in 2014-2016, a staggering 795 million individuals still face the grim reality of undernourishment. The World Food Summit in the year 1996 defined food security as “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”¹

Food security can be bifurcated into three main dimensions:

Availability: Food is considered to be available when there is food production domestically as well as import of food

Accessibility: Accessibility refers to making food available to everyone

Affordability: Affordability entails the ability to have the resources to buy food

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¹ Edward Clay, Overseas Development Institute, London, UK, paper presented at the FAO Expert Consultation on Trade and Food Security: Conceptualizing the Linkages, Rome, July 11–12, 2002 at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4671e/y4671e06.htm#fn21> accessed on December 10, 2018.

The imperative to enhance food security and agricultural sustainability extends beyond mere humanitarian concerns. It stands as a linchpin in achieving the broader spectrum of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals². The revitalization of food and agriculture sectors not only combat climate change, but also serves as a catalyst for economic growth, fostering peace and stability in societies worldwide. Presently, critical natural resources—soil, freshwater, oceans, forests, and biodiversity are facing rapid degradation. Concurrently, the looming threat of climate change exacerbates the strain on these resources, intensifying the risks associated with natural calamities. The displacement of rural populations, compelled to seek livelihoods in urban centers due to the inability to sustain themselves on their land, is a stark consequence of this crisis. In this context, fortifying resilience against natural disasters assumes paramount importance in the global battle against hunger, given their tendency to aggravate food insecurity in affected nations.

Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter *referred to as* SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015 during the 70th United Nations General Assembly wherein all member countries agreed to achieve 17 SDGs with the objective of transforming the world into a better place, is to ‘End Hunger, achieve food security and attain improved nutrition outcomes while promote sustainable agriculture’ which is to be achieved by 2030. Primary agenda of this SDG is to ensure that markets across the world have access to food that is nutritious which can be achieved through international cooperation and cross-border trade³.

² The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

³ AMARTYA SEN, POVERTY AND FAMINES (2003).

The G20 Summit is held annually with a rotating presidency and India held the presidency in the year 2023, wherein India convened the G20 Leaders' Summit for the first time in 2023 as 43 Heads of Delegations (largest ever in the G20) participated in the final New Delhi Summit, from 9-10th September, 2023 under the theme 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'. Taking stock of 2030 projections, it is being noticed that the global progress on SDG's is not on track as only about 12% of the targets have been achieved globally. The aim of the G20 meet held in New Delhi, was to collectively resolve and efficiently work towards realizing Agenda 2030 targets within the desired time frame to improve the future of the world. Amongst other agendas, one of them was the enhancement of global food security and nutrition standards across the globe.

Understanding Poverty, Food Security and Nutrition

The continuing evolution of food security as an operational concept reflects the complexities of issues with regards to defining food security. The concept originated in the mid-1970s in the discussions centering on the international food crisis. While the initial set of problems revolved around ensuring the availability of food along with maintaining the volume and stability of food supplies, this eventually led to solving a larger problem looming around the issues of famine, hunger and food crisis. The result of such global level discussions led to a new set of institutional arrangements to be made with regards to information centering around resources, promoting food security and engaging in dialogue and discussions on formulation of policy matters relating to food security.

Food Security was, hence, defined in the year 1974 at the World Food Summit as "availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs

to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices”⁴

In 1983, the Food and Agriculture (FAO) expanded the above-said definition in order to include aspects of food security concerning access to the vulnerable groups thereby retaining a balance between the demand and supply of food.

Another attempt at defining food security was made in the year 1996 by the World Food Summit by adopting a rather complex definition of food, stating that “Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] 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”⁵

Further in the year 2001, the definition was refined again, in The State of Food Insecurity, 2001 as “Food security [is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”⁶

While on the International front, there were ongoing efforts to define food security into a strait jacket formula on the practical front, the efforts to be undertaken by the states had to be put down into a narrower mold with simpler objectives in order to ensure that there is elimination of poverty and reduction

⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations., Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action :: World Food Summit, 13-17 November 1996, Rome, Italy., 43 (1996), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/195568> (last visited Oct 3, 2023).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS; INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT; WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME., *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, (2014).

of hunger by making food available to all. The focus must be to ensure that there is nutritious food available to every individual household member. Therefore, food security is a rather complex term to define, but, food insecurity on the other hand “exists when people do not have adequate physical, social or economic access to food”⁷ Food Insecurity is created because of problems in food distribution, not food production.⁸

As far as the Sustainable Development Goals are concerned, ‘Sustainable Development Goals 2021 report findings indicate a rise in poverty by 7%, child malnutrition, halted or reversed progress in health, and shortened life expectancy. India is off track on three of the global maternal, infant, and young children nutrition (MIYCN) targets to address stunting, wasting, anemia, low birth weight, breastfeeding, and childhood obesity as per the 2021 Global Nutrition Report’⁹.

Sustainable Development Goal - End all forms of hunger and malnutrition by 2030

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a successor to the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) which were successful in lifting people out of poverty and hunger. Such SDGs were adopted by the United Nations in the year 2015 is a global call for action to end poverty and hunger, to protect the planet and to ensure that by the year 2030 people enjoy peace and prosperity.

⁷ Edward Clay, Overseas Development Institute, London, UK., paper presented at the FAO Expert Consultation on Trade and Food Security: Conceptualizing the Linkages, Rome, July 11–12, 2002 at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4671e/y4671e06.htm#fn21> accessed on December 10, 2018| *supra* note 2.

⁸ SEN, *supra* note 3.

⁹ Zero-hunger target for India: A far-off goal | ORF, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/zero-hunger-target-for-india-a-far-off-goal/> (last visited Oct 5, 2023).

The 17 SDGs aim at balancing the various social, economic and environmental factors in order to ensure sustainability. The SDGs therefore, were considered to be ambitious, looking into various aspects of development including climate change, poverty, social justice, peace and harmony etc.¹⁰ The aim of SDG 2 is to end hunger and achieve food security and improved nutrition outcomes, in a country like India where a significant proportion of the population still remains undernourished. This involves promoting sustainable agriculture, supporting small-scale farmers and equal access to land, technology and markets. Further, this is not possible to achieve without international co-operation in order to make investments in infrastructure and technology in order to improve agricultural productivity.

The targets laid down by the 2030 SDG-2¹¹ are as follows:

- To end all forms of malnutrition by 2030 including achieving the targets regarding stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age by 2025 and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons.
- To double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment by 2030.

¹⁰ Chinduluri Harika, *Every Tide Hath It's Ebb: India's Tenacious Thrive Towards Sustainable Development Goal 2*, 10 2320–2882 (2022), www.ijert.org (last visited Oct 5, 2023).

¹¹ Goal 2- Zero Hunger| UNDP, <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals/zero-hunger/> (last visited Oct 2, 2023).

- To ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality by 2030.
- By way of increased international cooperation, a major aim is to increase investment in this sector especially for the benefit of rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development and plant and livestock gene banks so that agricultural productive capacity in developing and developed countries, in particular least developed countries
- Complying with the mandates laid down in the Doha Development Round, one of the aims is to prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets.
- To ensure that there is timely access to market information and also to ensure that the food commodity markets are functioning properly and to adopt all necessary measures for it.

Tracking India's Progress on Nutrition

It is the primary responsibility of the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its citizens. In India, providing healthy and nutritious food is provided under Article 47 which places a direct obligation on the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living and to improve public

health.¹² Further, Article 21 to the Constitution of India¹³ which provides for right to life and personal liberty can also be interpreted to include the right to food¹⁴.

Government Initiatives

A variety of initiatives have been launched by the Government of India in order to address problems of hunger and nutrition.

- **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme**, began in the year 1975 and remains the flagship programme of the Government of India. It is one of the world's largest and the most innovative early childhood care and development program which aims at providing nutritious food and other services, including pre-school education to children under 6 years of age and dietary support to them and their mothers, along with all pregnant and breastfeeding women enrolled in the Aanganwadi Centres implementing the scheme under the aegis of the Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- **Food for Work (FFW)** was introduced in the year 1977-78 and aims at making food accessible to the weaker sections of the society as against providing them wages for providing their professional services. This was later structured into the **National Food for Work** program in 2004. The primary goal of the NFW is to save the lives of the poor by providing them food while including them in the nation building process through activities such as construction of roads etc.

¹² Article 47, Constitution of India, 1949.

¹³ No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law, nor shall any person be denied equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.

¹⁴ *Consumer Education and Resource Centre v. Union of India* AIR 1955 SC 636

This program was later subsumed under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act which guarantees a minimum of 100 days of work to every rural household wherein members can provide manual labor for gaining employment.

- In 1993, the **National Nutrition Strategy** was adopted with a view to ensure that every child, adolescent girl and woman achieve the optimum nutritional outcomes. Furthermore, looking into the improvements seen in the overall nutritional standard of India as a result of the strategy, the *Poshan Abhiyan* Programme (National Nutrition Mission) was launched aiming to set up an information and communications monitoring system titled the Common Application System (CAS) in which the nutritional status of beneficiaries enrolled in Aanganwaadis could be monitored effectively and efficiently and on a daily basis in real time to identify the gaps in hindering the growth of nutritional indicators, and curate intervention strategies to resolve them. However, in a vast country like India, despite such robust and sound policies, implementation often becomes a huge challenge to overcome.
- **Public Distribution System** is a system wherein the food is procured by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and is circulated among the weaker sections of the society for the purpose of which ration shops were opened in villages, towns and different regions of the country. Foodgrains from these shops are sold at a relatively lower price to any family who possesses a ration card.
- **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)** was launched in the year 2000, under which 1 Crore of the poorest amongst the BPL families covered under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TDPS) were

identified by the State Rural Development Department and were being provided food grains at a subsidized rate.

Keeping in view the above-mentioned initiatives by the Government of India, finally in the year 2013 the National Food Security Act, 2013 was enacted which aimed at providing subsidized food grains to over 800 million people. “The Act aims to provide food and nutritional security through a life cycle approach by ensuring access to adequate quantities of quality food at affordable prices to enable people to live with dignity.”¹⁵

Challenges faced by India

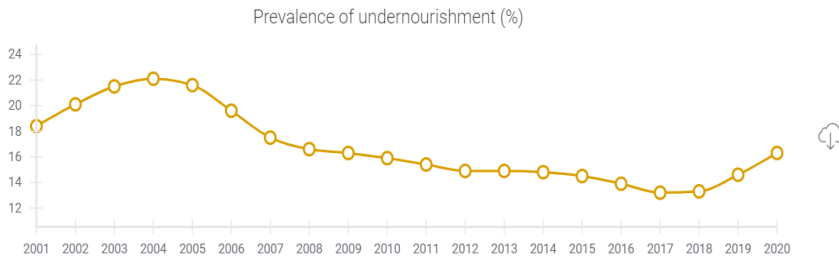
Despite substantial gains in food production in India, the region is home to the largest number of undernourished people in the world.¹⁶ Continuous efforts to curb the menace of malnutrition, undernutrition still persists as a looming issue in the country. One of the largest challenges in the Indian context is the growing population in India. By the year 2050, India is expected to have a population of over 1.6 billion which will put a strain on the food resources of the country. Despite 10 years since the passing of NFSA and food security being a legal right, nearly 189 million (19 crores approx.) people, i.e 14% of the Indian population suffers from hunger. According to the Global Hunger Index of 2022, India ranks 107th out of 121 countries having a hunger score of 28.2. thereby implying that 224.3 million people in India remain undernourished. The problem of stunting among children under 5 years of age is also high at 31.7%, which is a chronic form of malnutrition

¹⁵ Hunger and Malnutrition in India after a Decade of the National Food Security Act, 2013 - National Law School of India University, <https://www.nls.ac.in/blog/hunger-and-malnutrition-in-india-after-a-decade-of-the-national-food-security-act-2013/> (last visited Oct 5, 2023).

¹⁶ Shriya Anand et al., *Urban food insecurity and its determinants: a baseline study of Bengaluru*, 31 421–442 (2019), www.sagepublications.com (last visited Oct 4, 2023).

which can have irreversible consequences for a child's physical and cognitive development.

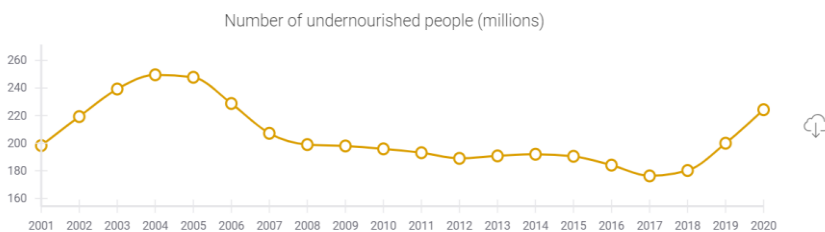
The proportion of population suffering from hunger was reduced from **18.4%** in **2001** to **16.3%** in **2020**.



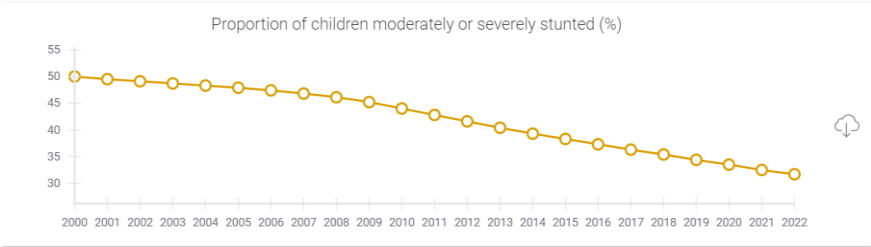
Number of children who were moderately or severely wasted reduced from **26,320.5** thousand in **2006** to **21,880.5** thousand in **2020**.



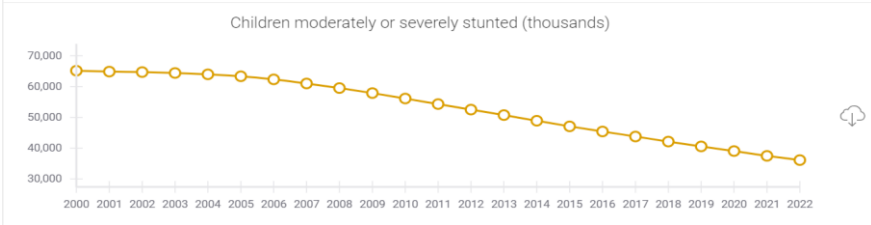
The number of undernourished people in the country increased from **198.3** million in **2001** to **224.3** million in **2020**.



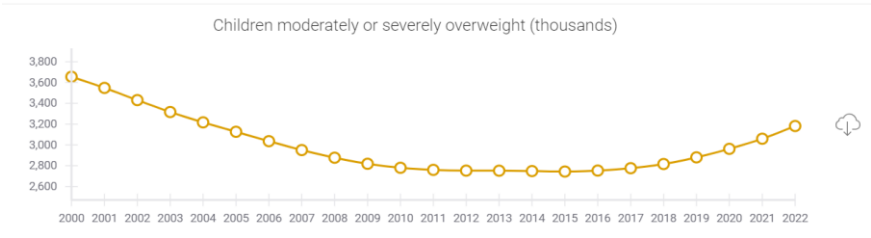
The proportion of children under 5 years of age with stunted growth reduced from **50.0%** in **2000** to **31.7%** in **2022**.



Number of children who were moderately or severely stunted reduced from **65,152.7** thousand in **2000** to **36,138.1** thousand in **2022**.



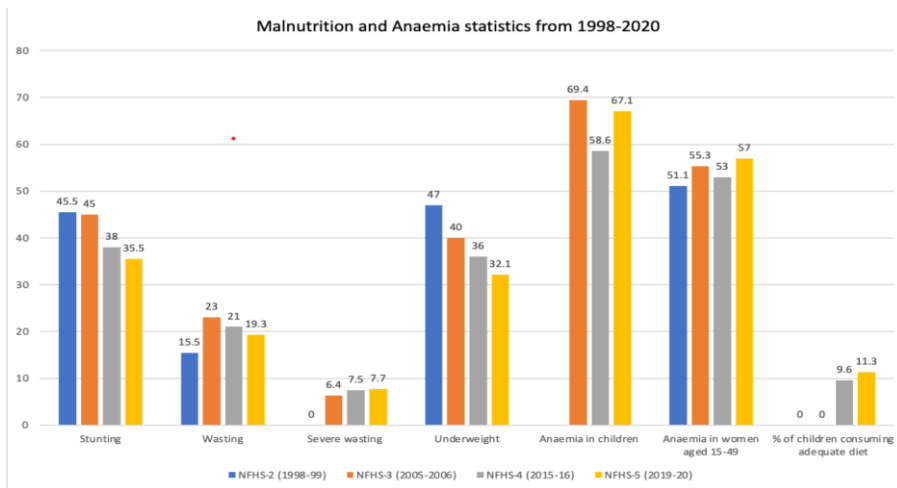
Number of children who were moderately or severely overweight reduced from **3,655.8** thousand children moderately or severely overweight in **2000** to **3,181.9** thousand children moderately or severely overweight in **2022**.



*Sourced from UN-DESA, United Nations, India available at <https://india.un.org/en/sdgs/2/progress#sdg-tab-content>

Secondly, climate change by itself has a negative implication on agricultural production which is only expected to grow manifold in the coming years. As per the Global Nutrition Report, 2021 India is battling issues like stunting, wasting, anemia, low birth weight and child obesity within maternal health,

infant and young children nutrition. Within the Family Health Survey 2015-16 (NFHS-4) and 2019-21 (NFHS-5), anemia has increased by 1.8% among pregnant women, 3.9% within women in the reproductive age category and 5% among adolescent women¹⁷. The progress in India has been slower than expected, coupled with the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the little progress made by the National Nutrition Mission.



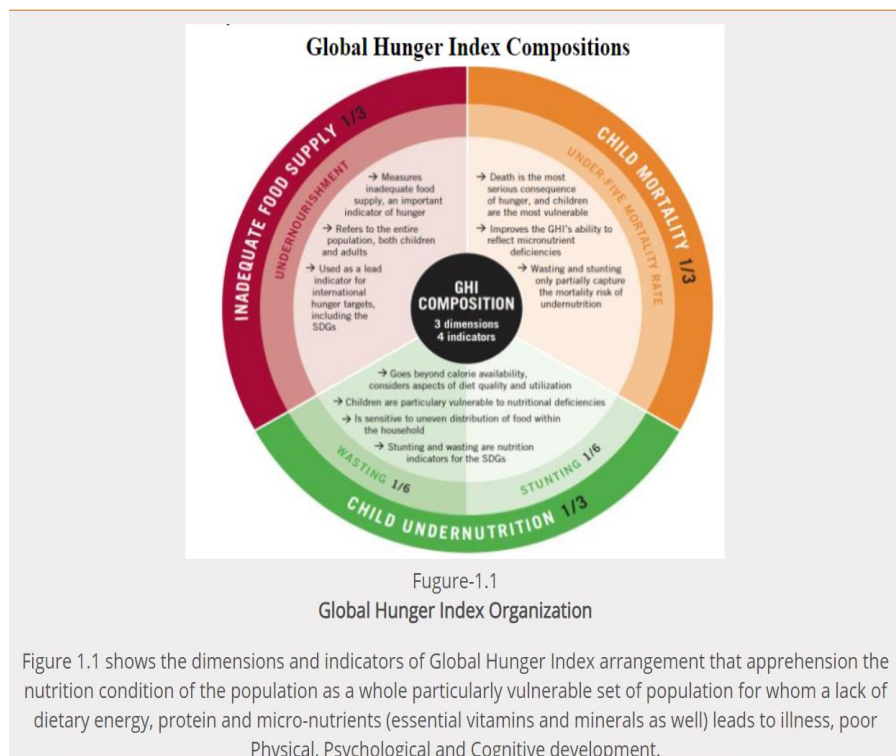
*Hunger and Malnutrition in India after a Decade of the National Food Security Act, 2013 - National Law School of India University.

Global Hunger Index

Global Hunger Index is a tool, measured by International Food Policy Research (IFPRI) which aims at measuring hunger levels at a global level as well as at country level and regional level. Such an index is calculated yearly and reports are generated annually in order to assess the progress in fighting hunger.

¹⁷ Hunger and Malnutrition in India after a Decade of the National Food Security Act, 2013 - National Law School of India University, *supra* note 15.

In the year 2019, India ranked 102 out of a total 117 countries with a score of 30.3%, reflecting that India suffers from a serious level of hunger.



“As per the [2021 Global Hunger Index](#), India is ranked 101 out of 116 countries and falls into the *serious* category of hunger. [India](#) has a 27.9% intensity and 45.9% incidence of multidimensional poverty with large numbers facing overlying deficiencies in health, nutrition, education, and living standards. Malnutrition has been prevalent for decades in India and is the primary cause of poverty and economic fallout.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Zero-hunger target for India: A far-off goal | ORF, *supra* note 9.

Furthermore, the Global Hunger Index, 2022 has ranked India 107th out of 121 countries¹⁹ with a score of 29.1, which retains India into the *serious* category of hunger.



*Sourced from GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX-INDIA available at

<https://www.globalhungerindex.org/india.html>

G20 Summit, 2023

Days ahead of the G20 Summit scheduled to be held from 9-10 September, 2023 in New Delhi, India, India claimed to have brought food safety net programmes to the fore stating that the agriculture working group has come up with a “historic consensus” on two aspects relating to the Deccan G20 High-Level principles on food security and nutrition and the millet initiative-MAHARISHI.

‘Such High-Level principles are a set of seven principles i.e.

- Humanitarian Assistance
- Increasing Food Production and Food Security Net Programmes
- Climate-smart approach
- Inclusivity of agriculture food system
- One health approach
- Digitalization of agriculture sector

¹⁹ India - Global Hunger Index (GHI) - peer-reviewed annual publication designed to comprehensively measure and track hunger at the global, regional, and country levels, <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/india.html> (last visited Oct 5, 2023).

- Scaling responsible public and private investment in agriculture²⁰

The members of the G20 Summit wrote a defining moment in history by stating during the Summit that:

“We commit to enhance global food security and nutrition for all in line with the G20 Deccan High-Level Principles on Food Security and Nutrition 2023.

To achieve this, we:

- i. We encourage efforts to strengthen research cooperation on climate-resilient and nutritious grains such as millets, quinoa, sorghum, and other traditional crops including rice, wheat and maize. We welcome the outcomes from the G20 members engagement in the 12th G20 Meeting of Agriculture Chief Scientists (MACS).
- ii. Emphasize the importance of increasing access to, availability, and efficient use of fertilizer and agricultural inputs, including through strengthening local fertilizer production, and to improve soil health.
- iii. Commit to accelerating innovations and investment focused on increasing agricultural productivity, reducing food loss and waste across the value chain, and improving marketing and storage, to build more sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture and food systems.
- iv. Commit to support developing countries’ efforts and capacities to address their food security challenges, and work together to enable access to affordable, safe, nutritious and healthy diets, and to foster the progressive realization of the right to adequate food.

²⁰ “India brings food safety net programmes to forefront even more effectively under G20 presidency,” <https://yourstory.com/2023/09/india-brings-food-safety-net-programs-to-forefront-g20-presidency> (last visited Oct 5, 2023).

- v. Commit to facilitate open, fair, predictable, and rules-based agriculture, food and fertilizer trade, not impose export prohibitions or restrictions and reduce market distortions, in accordance with relevant WTO rules.
- vi. Commit to strengthening the Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS) and the Group on Earth Observations Global Agricultural Monitoring (GEOGLAM), for greater transparency to avoid food price volatility, supporting AMIS's work on fertilizers, its expansion to include vegetable oils, and for enhancing collaboration with early warning systems.”²¹

The G20 leaders further also affirmed their support towards developing nations in order to meet their food security goals and to guarantee the right to adequate food for all²². The leaders have made a commitment to support the developing countries in addressing issues with regards to food security, ensuring safe and nutritious and healthy food diets and to foster the realization of the right to adequate food.

Conclusion

Food security is a multidimensional phenomenon which primarily requires national and international efforts to identify gaps and thereby set targets to reduce food insecurity. “Since food insecurity is about risks and uncertainty, the formal analysis should include both chronic sub-nutrition and transitory, acute insecurity that reflects economic and food system volatility.”²³

²¹ G20 Leader's Declaration (INDIA)

²² G20 leaders commit to boost global food security, eliminate hunger | Mint, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/g20-leaders-commit-to-boost-global-food-security-eliminate-hunger-11694269477416.html#lndbwa6g8a3s6xf126> (last visited Oct 5, 2023).

²³ Edward Clay, Overseas Development Institute, London, UK., paper presented at the FAO Expert Consultation on Trade and Food Security: Conceptualizing the Linkages, Rome, July 11–12, 2002 at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4671e/y4671e06.htm#fn21> accessed on December 10, 2018.

The need of the hour, therefore, is to ensure diet diversity and adequate amount of protein intake which is to be made available to all communities through various social and food security net schemes.

The problem, in the Indian context, lies with the lack in reducing stunting and wasting amongst children. India needs to focus its efforts in making effective its food procurement program and food assistance program.

Despite a four-decade old Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme, the mid-day meal scheme since 1995 and the very recent POSHAN Abhiyaan in the year 2018, the biggest challenge to deal with undernutrition issue is the absence of a holistic approach and an inter-sectoral strategy, which is why there lies a need for effective monitoring and implementation strategies.

Some specific actions need to be taken in order to accelerate the progress towards SDG 2 in India:

- Increase investment in agriculture and rural development which will boost agricultural production and to create rural jobs.
- Improve access to nutritious food for vulnerable populations, which can be done through programs such as the NFSA and the PMMVY.
- Reducing food waste and loss which is a major problem in India, accounting for upto 40% of the food production, because of which food will be available for people to consume.
- Promote sustainable agricultural practices, which will help to ensure that India's food production is resilient to climate change and other shocks.
- Educate people about the importance of nutrition, it will help people to make informed choices about the food they eat.

Goal 2 of the 2030 Sustainable Development agenda articulates an ambitious aim: to eradicate hunger and all forms of malnutrition while simultaneously doubling agricultural productivity within the next 15 years. Achieving this formidable objective necessitates the adoption and implementation of sustainable food production practices and agricultural methodologies on a universal scale. This will entail a multifaceted legal approach, encompassing international cooperation, policy frameworks, and regulatory mechanisms. The need to address global hunger and fortify agricultural sustainability transcends humanitarian considerations. It is an indispensable component of the broader effort to attain the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Through a legal lens, concerted global action is required to reconfigure food and agricultural systems, ensuring equitable access to nutritious sustenance for all. The path forward lies in the integration of sustainable practices, international collaboration, and effective policy frameworks to build a world where hunger is but a distant memory.