



UNDERNUTRITION REMAINS A SILENT EMERGENCY

SUMMARY

India's impressive economic growth in the post-liberalisation era has been accompanied by a much slower decline in the numbers of undernourished people and has failed to elevate the condition of millions of poor, vulnerable and marginalised people across the country. Vulnerability remains high, new sources of vulnerability have emerged and the needs of those living in poverty have diversified. Despite this scenario, overall social protection spending is low, and remains focused on programmes to alleviate chronic poverty, with an overwhelming concentration on rural areas.

Various reviews of different social protection programmes reveal that enormous gaps and challenges remain. Two striking cross-cutting challenges across all social protection programmes are: targeting, coverage and performance; and implementation, coordination and design.

Social protection has the potential to address the underlying causes of undernutrition – eg, poverty, exclusion and livelihood insecurity. Social protection schemes therefore need to include food security. The focus of reforms must now shift to more efficient delivery systems of public services. Better governance is very important for effective functioning of food-based programmes. Social mobilisation, community participation and a decentralised approach are necessary in this context. A rights-based approach also plays an important role in improving implementation of development programmes.

THE CONTEXT

India's impressive economic growth in the post-liberalisation era has been accompanied by a much slower decline in the numbers of undernourished people and has failed to elevate the conditions of millions of poor, vulnerable and marginalised people across the country.

According to the controversial newly revised official poverty line, over one-quarter of the country's population (about 410 million people) are living in poverty, with 60% of these living in the seven lowest-income states.¹ The Government of India's Labour Bureau Survey found 40 million unemployed people and an unemployment rate of 9.4% in 2010.² More than 90% of India's workforce is employed in the unorganised sector under precarious labour conditions.³ Poverty and vulnerable living situations such as these are recognised as an important underlying cause of undernutrition.

Undernutrition remains a silent emergency. One-third of children are born with low birthweight, 43% of children under five are underweight, 48% are stunted, 20% are wasted, 70% are anaemic and 57% vitamin A deficient⁴ – with wide disparities across states and economic groups. Since the mid-1990s, 30 million people have been added to the ranks of the hungry.⁵

The findings of the government's High-Level Committee on Long-Term Grain Policy highlight the worrying levels of food insecurity among the poorest people. The energy intake of more than 70% of the population is less than 2,100 calories; and among the bottom 80% of rural and bottom 40% of urban households, food expenditure accounts for over 60% of total household expenditure.⁶ This makes their food security particularly susceptible to rising food prices. Because they spend a large proportion of their income on food, poor people have little capacity to adapt as prices rise and wages fail to adjust accordingly. Thus, the current situation of inflation in India can pose a threat to the country's food and nutrition security.

India achieved a record foodgrain production of 241 million tonnes in the 2010/11 crop year, but that foodgrain has not been getting to those who need it most. This shows that the gap between those eating more and those eating less is growing. It also tells us how catastrophic the policy of 'targeting' through the Public Distribution System (PDS) has been: poor people have not gained the intended benefits. The highly debated Right to Food Bill is still under review by the parliamentary committee. Other factors such as declining agricultural growth, the high rate of farmer suicides, and deteriorating labour rights have contributed to poverty and malnutrition.⁷ In such a context, the role of social protection for food and nutrition security is of immense importance.

CREATING NUTRITION SECURITY

Nutrition security is dependent on: basic security of food, shelter, education and health; economic security with regard to income, capital (if self-employed) and demand; and legal recognition. The role of social protection is of enormous significance, as it has the potential to address the underlying causes of undernutrition – eg, poverty, exclusion and livelihood insecurity. The ways in which social protection can impact on malnutrition include: countering deprivation and improving poor people's lives; reducing vulnerability and providing safety nets against shocks; providing livelihood support, promoting productive opportunities and alleviating poverty; and, addressing exclusion, abuse and exploitation.⁸

Social protection programmes need to respond to the multiple needs and vulnerabilities of populations under rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions. India's transition in social protection has been visibly lacking in this regard. There was a period when around half the population was chronically poor; the country was in aggregate food deficit and importing grains, and growth was consistently low. Through a mix of social protection interventions, poverty has gradually reduced in recent decades, but not enough. Vulnerability remains high, new sources of vulnerability have emerged and the needs of poor people have diversified. Despite this scenario, overall social protection spending is low, and remains focused on programmes to alleviate chronic poverty, with an overwhelming concentration on rural areas.

Given the unimpressive record of social protection initiatives in India, mobilisation by social movements since 2005 has brought social protection back onto the political agenda. The major social protection schemes include:

- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)
- Sampoorna Grammen Swarozgar Yojana
- targeted Public Distribution Scheme (PDS)
- Integrated Childcare Development Scheme (ICDS)
- Mid-day Meal Scheme
- Antyodaya Anna Scheme
- Annapurna Scheme
- health programmes: eg, National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), Rashtriya Swasthya Bhima Yojana, Reproductive and Child Health, Janani Suraksha Yojana, various immunisation projects
- education programmes: eg, Sarva Siksha Abhijan, National Literacy Mission, Free Education for the Single Girl Child
- Indira Awas Yojana
- National Social Assistance Programme, which has three components: National Old Age Pension Scheme, National Family Benefit Scheme and National Maternity Benefit Scheme.

To mitigate trade-based imbalances and shocks, there is food procurement through Minimum Support Price (MSP), building of buffer stock of foodgrains, and food price regulation through pricing policies.

In addition, the state runs certain subsidy schemes for the procurement of inputs such as fertilisers, fuel, tractors and irrigation facilities, and supports community grain banks, horticulture projects, etc. Legislation with respect to labour rights, land reform, tenancy registration and minimum wage in both the formal and informal sector also constitute significant social protection measures.

The various social protection programmes in India and their relevance for nutrition can be classified as shown in the table below.

UNDERNUTRITION CAUSES	RELEVANT SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMES
IMMEDIATE Inadequate dietary intake Disease	Annapurna Yojana, Antyodaya Anna Scheme, Mid-Day Meal Scheme Rashtriya Swasthya Bhima Yojana
UNDERLYING Household food insecurity Inadequate care Unhealthy household environment and lack of health services Income poverty	Targeted PDS ICDS, Reproductive and Child Health National Rural Health Mission, immunisation projects, Janani Suraksha Yojana MGNREGA, National Social Assistance Programme, MSP
BASIC Lack of capital Socioeconomic-political context	Subsidy schemes for the procurement of inputs such as fertilisers, fuel, tractors and irrigation facilities, support for community grain banks, horticulture projects, etc Food price regulation through pricing policies, legislation with respect to labour rights, land reform, tenancy registration, minimum wage, affirmative action and right to information

It is important to mention here the emerging paradigm of social protection that MGNREGA represents. It is an entirely demand-driven approach, in contrast to previous initiatives that were largely supply driven. MGNREGA also marks an encouraging move towards rights-based transformative social protection, where 'beneficiaries' are transformed into 'claimants' proactively participating in citizenship processes and challenging inequity and social injustice.⁹ Since its inception, the Act has generated 1112.03 crore (more than 1 billion) persondays, with Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes and women's participation at 51–61% and 40–48% respectively in the last five years. In the financial year 2011/12, MGNREGA has provided employment to 4.99 crore (nearly 50 million) households,¹⁰ generating 120.88 crore (1.2 billion) persondays,¹¹ and is now being officially implemented across all districts. An evaluation study of 20 districts in 2006/07 found a shift in MGNREGA workers' family expenditure pattern on food and non-food items. The survey revealed a drastic reduction in the number of families spending less on food, whereas a rising number of families were spending more on food and non-food items.¹²

GAPS AND CHALLENGES

Despite a wide variety of social protection measures, various evaluations and evidence reviews of different programmes reveal that enormous gaps and challenges remain. Two striking cross-cutting challenges across all social protection programmes are:

- targeting, coverage and performance
- implementation, coordination and design.

Targeting, coverage and performance

Targeting is a formidable challenge across all social protection programmes. The Below Poverty Line (BPL) targeting model in some schemes, especially in the Public Distribution Scheme (PDS) has not proved very effective. There are huge exclusion and inclusion errors in the BPL system and it does not encompass a large percentage of poor people due to opaque bureaucratic procedures of enrolment, inadequate selection criteria, and non-attention to the seasonality of poverty.¹³ The most vulnerable and marginalised groups – such as Dalits, Adivasis, landless or displaced rural poor, migrant workers in the unorganised sector, urban slum-dwellers and homeless, displaced, single women-headed households, disabled, etc – are still largely remain excluded.¹⁴ Moreover, as observed by the High-Level Committee on Long-Term Food Grain Policy, the magnitude of food insecurity by the calorie intake/food share criterion was greater than the incidence of poverty. Therefore, it concluded that any attempt to target a social protection measure, eg, the PDS, only at the poorest people would ultimately end up penalising the non-poor but food insecure.¹⁵ India is yet to resolve the ongoing debate on the PDS in the context of the Food Security Bill.¹⁶

In addition, many of the social protection programmes have very limited coverage and impact. ICDS and other nutrition interventions like NRHM have very limited impact on children's nutritional status; ICDS, for instance, reaches only one-quarter of children in need, and the poorest states have minimal coverage and funding. Rough estimates show that less than 3% of informal sector workers are covered by any social security measures.¹⁷ The performance of different programmes across states has varied, depending on institutions, governance, political will and innovation. For instance, despite its significant progress in the more developed southern states, progress of the MGNREGA is unsatisfactory in some very poor eastern states like Bihar.¹⁸ The needs of the growing number of urban poor remain inadequately addressed, particularly their health and nutrition needs. Similarly, the scheme is largely unprepared to address the needs of mobile populations, a group which is likely to continue to grow as economic reforms deepen.¹⁹

Design, implementation and co-ordination

Implementation is an enormous challenge across all programmes and schemes. There are massive leakages, corruption, misappropriation, underutilisation and capture of funds by local elites. For instance, as per Planning Commission estimates in 2008, more than 54% of grain meant for the PDS disappeared before it reached buyers in fair-price shops.²⁰ The Department of Fertilisers estimated the fertiliser subsidy leakage to be as high as Rs 12,000–15,000 crore in 2008/09. In MGNREGA, although outcomes vary between states, preliminary evaluations show that on average only 40 days of work is being provided instead of 100 days.²¹ There are also major anomalies in the distribution of job-cards, wage payments, non-payment of statutory minimum wages and provision of crèche facilities (despite high numbers of women workers).²² Public services in sectors such as education, health and food transfers suffer many drawbacks in terms of design, infrastructure, access, capacity, quality and delivery mechanisms. It is also a matter for concern that most grassroots frontline workers involved in social protection programmes (eg, grassroots health workers, including anganwadi workers, primary schoolteachers) are overburdened, underpaid, under-trained and ill-equipped. Given

the importance of large-scale coverage and effective delivery of social transfer schemes for child nutrition and wellbeing, such leakages are extremely problematic and must be addressed.

With regard to implementation, there is heated ongoing debate on the issue of conditional cash transfers replacing certain social transfer schemes, particularly the PDS system. It is being argued that cash transfers would reduce waste, leakages, divergence, large exclusion errors and operational costs while having a progressive impact on income distribution.²³ However, in a context of volatile and rising commodity prices in largely deregulated markets and under slow inadequate mechanisms of price indexation, the real value of cash transfers could be very challenging to achieve. Also, across various studies, vulnerable populations have largely expressed their preference for provision in kind for a variety of reasons; women especially see the money being used by male members for purposes other than food security.²⁴ Cash transfers have a positive redistributive impact not when they replace public provision of essential goods and services, but when they serve as a supplement to them. In such a scenario, cash transfers can support health, education and nutrition by tackling the financial barriers, including opportunity costs, that undermine access.

There is a stark lack of cross-sector links and coordination between different ministries and various central and state schemes. This inhibits a holistic approach to the complex issues of social protection and nutrition security. The design of most programmes does not take multi-sector links into account. For instance, the objectives and design of most social protection initiatives do not include targets on nutrition. There are also critical design questions with regard to transfer size (both in-kind and cash) in programmes such as the PDS and National Social Assistance Programme, with regard to impact on food and nutrition security. It is crucial that the cost of a nutritious diet and the household's size and purchasing power is considered in determining appropriate transfer size.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Comprehensive social protection programmes are required to address the problems of access to food and malnutrition. This last section presents important policy recommendations to improve the effectiveness of social protection measures, especially in the context of its impact on nutrition security.

Decentralised collaborative governance and quality universalisation of service delivery

It is imperative that any scheme that involves people, and especially in a large, populous country like India, is implemented in a decentralised and participatory fashion. It is impossible for a centralised authority to plan, manage and execute schemes of such magnitude successfully. People's involvement is critical for the success of the scheme, as is the involvement of various institutions. A scheme that relies solely on central government is highly unlikely to sustain itself. Decentralised, committed and collaborative mechanisms of governance and universalisation of service²⁵ delivery make a significant difference to the provision of social protection. For instance, reforms to the PDS system by the Chattisgarh government focused on extending coverage, improving delivery and increasing transparency, which led to an impressive revival of the PDS system.²⁶ There is also a demand for decentralised local procurement of food entitlements in PDS, which has already been adopted for ICDS and the Mid-day Meal Scheme, to improve income security for farmers through assured MSPs.²⁷

The very concept of social protection is based on the principle of universality – ie, provision of protection to everyone, particularly those who are marginalised. Currently, the various programmes and schemes run by the government are lacking in this fundamental aspect –

their reach is not universal and does not cover all vulnerable people. Therefore, we must move towards a system of inclusive, universal social protection. Increasing coverage is a crucial need across all social protection programmes.

Integrated approach

One of the biggest problems with current social protection schemes is lack of a uniform, consistent approach in planning. Most of these schemes were launched when their immediate need was felt, and were more like 'emergency responses' than well-thought out, planned initiatives. Going forward, what is needed is a planned, integrated approach in the conceptualisation, design and development of these social protection schemes. A long-term and life-cycle approach to social protection is essential for building resilience and nutrition security. The life-cycle approach in the UN Social Protection Floor Initiative embodies four essential guarantees:

- basic healthcare service provision
- income security at childhood
- minimum income security at active age groups
- income security at old age.²⁸

This approach, complemented with risk and vulnerability analyses at specific points, especially with regard to access, availability and absorption of nutrition must be integrated into social protection programmes. In the context of nutrition security, it is also essential to understand the diverse macro- and micronutrient needs of vulnerable populations in India, with special focus on high-level deficiencies of vitamin A, iodine and iron. This also relates to the demand for diversification of food entitlements provided through the PDS to include pulses, milk, egg and edible oils and for indigenous production and provision of therapeutic food.²⁹ Also, an integrated approach needs to focus on the specific needs of the migrant working poor in urban areas, who have been largely neglected in the social protection agenda.

Equity and rights-based social protection

A rights-based approach to social protection – where social protection is not discretionary but constitutes legal entitlements – is integral to its transformative potential of equity and social justice. Such an approach can facilitate active citizen participation towards community ownership of implementation and management processes.³⁰ The incorporation of social accountability mechanisms (eg, social audits, grievance redressal, right to information, etc) into the design of social protection measures provides such a space. Grassroots awareness, mobilisation and collectivisation is key to enhancing the success of different schemes and programmes. Linked to this is implementation of protective and rights-based legislation and affirmative action for providing a voice to marginalised groups.³¹

Gender sensitivity

A focus on gender is of crucial importance to social protection and nutrition security. That focus needs to be wide enough to address the socioeconomic and patriarchal barriers that inhibit women's empowerment. For example:

- the Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana should provide maternity entitlements of Rs 1,000/month for six months to women in the informal sector, without any exclusionary criteria such as age or number of children³²
- the scope and nature of MGNREGA projects should be expanded to address gender-sensitive vulnerabilities, such as building social care and healthcare facilities, creating infrastructures for easier access to water and developing horticultural nurseries, which would result in increased opportunities for paid employment for women at both construction stage and after

- consideration should be given to transferring the ownership and management of newly created assets under public works to women's groups.³³

Scale up successful models

The success lessons from various social protection programmes and from the experience of states should form the basis of more fundamental transformation of social protection programmes in terms of their relevance, efficiency and welfare impacts. Scale-up models should be flexible, to allow for adjustment according to the specific contexts in various states.

Stabilising food prices as social protection

Rapidly rising food prices and increased food price volatility are major threats to food security. While price volatility often has domestic and international causes, downward spikes or excessively low food commodity prices can have seriously damaging consequences to poor farmers. MSP should be made into a legally tenable right. Price Policy for agricultural commodities seeks to ensure fair prices to growers with a view to encouraging higher investment and production, and at the same time, safeguarding the interest of consumers by making supplies available at reasonable prices.

Monitoring

It is extremely important to monitor the efficiency and success of programmes and schemes. Strict and effective frameworks need to be put in place to ensure that schemes are producing the intended results, as millions of rupees are being spent every year on them. Some recent developments in this regard have been encouraging; for example, schemes like MGNREGA are being subjected to participatory monitoring mechanisms such as social audits. Such arrangements also need to be put in place for social protection schemes, to empower marginalised groups to ensure that these schemes actually benefit them.

Coordination

The various parties involved in social protection are government, non-governmental organisations, social movements, labour unions and other civil society actors. For social protection to be strong and effective, all parties must work together. Currently, there have been efforts made in this regard but they need to be co-ordinated and intensified.

Political will

The active role of political leaders is important for putting nutrition on the development agenda and making it a national priority, as well as for ensuring the commitment of funding and other resources necessary for effective programme implementation. Political will needs to be built and demonstrated on the following issues:

- place nutrition security as a top priority on the development agenda of the country
- give one ministry overall responsibility for improving nutrition, with a coordination mechanism for working with other sectors
- institute nutrition missions at central and state levels
- ensure that all programmes reach priority target groups (children under two years of age, adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating women) and work to engage and empower women and vulnerable communities
- strengthen links between social protection policies and nutrition security, and introduce complementary programmes with social protection initiatives to enhance impact on nutrition
- fast-track recommendations from the Prime Minister's Nutrition Council and the Ministry of Women and Child Development

- address governance issues: reform the delivery system of nutrition support schemes like ICDS, school programme, Annapoorna, etc, on a life-cycle basis, beginning with pregnant women and extending to old and infirm people. Mainstream nutritional goals and criteria in ongoing schemes like the National Horticulture Mission, the National Food Security Mission and Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana. Implement the National Horticulture Mission in such a manner that for every nutritional malady, an appropriate horticultural remedy is introduced. Introduce nutrition support programmes at sites where large numbers of people are employed under the MGNREGA
- table a National Nutrition Security Bill: a Food Security Bill is not enough to achieve nutrition security. It can provide food (cereals) at low prices to the BPL population to reduce hunger; but without the other components of micronutrients deficiencies, feeding practices, safe drinking water, environmental sanitation and healthcare it may not affect nutrition.

CONCLUSION

India has many policies and programmes. However, food insecurity and malnutrition continue to be high. The problem is with both design and implementation of the programmes. The focus of reforms can now be shifted to more efficient delivery systems of public services. Better governance is very important for effective functioning of food-based programmes and this requires social mobilisation, community participation and decentralisation, and a rights-based approach.

NOTES

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Photo: Madhuri Dass/Save the Children

Muni, who is severely malnourished, drinks water
from her sister's glass in Melghat Mharashtra, India,
where tribal communities are being linked to
government-run safety net programmes and
services such as healthcare and education

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