



Ensuring Nutritional Security: A Three-Pronged Approach

This editorial is based on [“An opportunity to recast India’s food system”](#) which was published in The Hindu Business Line on 20/10/2023. It talks about the challenges and opportunities of India's food system, emphasizing the need for a triad approach involving consumers, producers, and middlemen. The goal is to promote healthy and sustainable diets, enhance farm incomes, and conserve natural resources.

For Prelims: [World Bank](#), [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#), [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#), [Malnutrition](#), [MGNREGA](#), [Public Distribution System](#), [mid-day meals](#), [National Mission on Natural Farming](#), [Farmer producer organizations \(FPOs\)](#)

For Mains: Nutritional Security: Significance, Status, Challenges and Way Forward

Recently, on 16th October, [World Food Day](#) was celebrated, but we rarely look at food as a system. No country can better understand the challenges of a food system than India, which feeds the largest population in the world. While the primary goal of a food system is to ensure [nutrition security](#) for all, it can only be achieved sustainably if the producers producing the food make reasonable economic returns that are resilient over time.

This resilience, in turn, is intricately linked with the resilience of our natural ecosystem because the largest inputs to agriculture — soil, water and climatic conditions — are all but natural resources. Appreciating this interconnectedness of nutrition security with livelihood and environmental security is essential to making our food system truly sustainable.

What is the Significance of Nutritional Security?

- **Health and Nutrition:** [Nutritional security](#) improves the health and well-being of individuals by preventing malnutrition and its associated health problems, such as stunting, cognitive impairment, and disease susceptibility.
 - Around 45% of deaths among children under 5 years of age are linked to undernutrition.
- **Economic Stability: Nutritional security** enhances the economic stability of individuals and nations by enabling them to be more productive, generate income, and participate in trade.
 - A study by the [World Bank](#) **estimated that the global cost of undernutrition in terms of lost productivity and human capital was USD 3.5 trillion per year.**
- **Public Health and Healthcare Cost Reduction:** Nutritional security can lead to reduced healthcare costs by preventing diet-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease. This, in turn, reduces the burden on healthcare systems.
 - The share of [Out-of-Pocket Expenditure \(OOPE\)](#) in total Health Expenditure (THE) is around 47%.
- **Poverty Alleviation:** Ensuring that people have access to nutritious food is a means of poverty alleviation. Lack of **nutritional security can perpetuate a cycle of poverty**, as malnutrition can hinder educational attainment and reduce income-earning potential.

- **Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Protection:** Promoting nutritional security often involves sustainable agricultural practices, which are essential for preserving the environment and ensuring that future generations can also meet their nutritional needs.
- **Realizing Demographic Dividend:** Nutritional security plays a vital role in realizing the demographic dividend, which occurs when a large proportion of a country's population is in the working-age group. **Well-nourished individuals are more likely to be productive and contribute to economic growth**, harnessing the full potential of this demographic advantage.
- **Resilience to Shocks:** Nutritional security helps communities and individuals become more resilient to economic, environmental, and health shocks. **Having a diverse and nutritious diet can help people withstand and recover from various crises**, such as natural disasters or health emergencies.
 - The [Covid-19](#) pandemic has exposed the fragility of food systems and the vulnerability of populations to malnutrition and hunger. Therefore, **ensuring access to healthy food and promoting dietary diversity are essential for building resilience** against such pandemics and its impacts.
- **Human Dignity and Equity:** Nutritional security respects human dignity and equity by recognizing food as a basic human right that should be accessible to all people regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographical location.
 - The **right to food is a legal right that is recognized in the [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#).**

What is the Status of Nutritional Security in India?

- On the nutrition front, India faces a **double burden of malnutrition**.
 - At one end, despite making great progress over the years, a sizable proportion of Indians exhibit nutrient deficiencies.
 - As in the [National Family Health Survey, 2019-21](#), 35% of children are **stunted**, and 57% of women and 25% of men are anaemic.
 - At the other end, due to imbalanced diets and sedentary lifestyles, 24% of adult women and 23% of adult men are now obese.

What are the Challenges faced by Nutritional Security?

- **Less Productive Agriculture:**
 - On the production side, farm incomes are insufficient to meet the ends of marginal and small farmers.
 - According to a report by the **Transforming Rural India Foundation**, more than 68% of marginal farmers supplement their incomes with non-farm activities.
 - The [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act \(MGNREGA\)](#) and other forms of casual labor are picking up the slack, indicating a lack of skills or opportunities for income diversification.
- **Depleting Natural Resources:**
 - Depleting natural resources and changing climate are making India's food production highly vulnerable.
 - As in the 2023 soil health survey, **almost half the cultivable land in India has become deficient in organic carbon**, which is an essential indicator of soil health.
 - Groundwater, the largest source of irrigation, is rapidly declining.
 - In States such as Punjab, **more than 75% of the groundwater assessment locations are over-exploited**, threatening the resilience of farm incomes.
- **Faulty Food Distribution System:**
 - Inadequate food distribution through the Public Distribution System (PDS) contributes to growing food insecurity. **The [Targeted PDS \(TPDS\)](#) excludes deserving candidates** due to faulty criteria, leading to inaccurate categorization as APL or BPL. This results in decreased food grain uptake, worsened by low-quality grains and poor PDS shop service.
- **Unmonitored Nutrition Programmes:**
 - Although a number of programmes with improving nutrition as their main component are planned in the country but these are not properly implemented.
 - For instance, a number of states have failed to effectively implement the [Mid Day Meal](#)

Scheme (MDMS).

▪ **Lack of Intersectoral Coordination:**

- Lack of coherent food and nutrition policies along with the **absence of intersectoral coordination between various ministries** of government such as Ministry of Women and Child Health, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Finance etc have added to the problem.

What can be the Approach to Address Nutritional Security?

▪ **Consumer Engagement and Demand Shifting:**

- Consumer demand needs to be shifted towards healthy and sustainable diets. We need to **shift to a food plate that is healthier** for people and the planet.
- We can make **locally-grown millets popular in India** just like imported oats or quinoa by following the same approach used by corporations.
- Civil society and the health community could **partner with social media influencers** who can shape healthier and sustainable consumption for millions.
- The public sector, through the [Public Distribution System](#), [mid-day meals](#), railways catering, urban canteens, and public and institutional procurement, can help improve what at least 70% of Indians are consuming.
- Religious institutions can also contribute by influencing food choices, as demonstrated by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam.

- Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam, which serves nearly 70,000 people daily, has started procuring naturally-farmed produce.

▪ **Supporting Farmers and Sustainable Agriculture:**

- To ensure resilient incomes, we must support farmers' transition towards remunerative and regenerative agricultural practices.
 - The [National Mission on Natural Farming](#) is a step in this direction, but the **overall funding for sustainable agriculture is less than 1%** of the agricultural budget.
 - We need to broaden and scale up such initiatives to various agro-ecological practices such as agroforestry, conservation agriculture, precision farming, and much more.
- Agriculture support should **move from input subsidies to direct cash support** to farmers per hectare of cultivation.
 - It would **promote efficient use of inputs, while enabling a level playing field** for agroecological practices to thrive.
- Agricultural research and extension services should allocate a portion of their budgets to focus on sustainable agricultural practices, which can provide farmers with the knowledge and tools they need for sustainable farming.

▪ **Building Sustainable Farm-to-Fork Value Chains:**

- Creating **more sustainable and inclusive value chains** is vital for enhancing rural incomes and ensuring that farmers receive a fair share of the value created.
- Encouraging **middlemen and corporations to procure directly from farmers**, especially those who follow sustainable and ethical practices, is crucial.
 - Incentives like **fair trade principles** can be implemented to promote responsible sourcing.
 - Various young agri-tech enterprises such as DeHaat and Ninjacart are enabling such farm-to-buyer linkages.
- Allowing [farmer producer organizations \(FPOs\)](#) to trade their produce with other FPOs can help farmers get more value, because farmer families in a FPO also buy farming products.
 - Some FPOs in Odisha have already demonstrated this approach.
 - The Odisha Organic Farmers' Association (OOFA) is a federation of FPOs that produce organic products. The **OOFA trades organic products with other FPOs in Odisha, as well as with FPOs in other states in India.** This has helped the OOFA to **get a better price for its members' products**, and to reach a wider customer base.

Conclusion

Shifting an entire food system, however, is no mean feat. But the scale of the challenge must not deter our ambitions. If we act fast, India has a unique opportunity to showcase to the rest of the world how to get its food system right.

Drishti Mains Question

Examine the status of nutritional security in India, highlighting the challenges it faces, and propose a comprehensive approach to address these challenges.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q.1 In the context of India's preparation for Climate-Smart Agriculture, consider the following statements: (2021)

1. The 'Climate-Smart Village' approach in India is a part of a project led by the Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS), an international research programme.
2. The project of CCAFS is carried out under Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) headquartered in France.
3. The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in India is one of the CGIAR's research centres.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (d)

Q.2 With reference to the provisions made under the National Food Security Act, 2013, consider the following statements: (2018)

1. The families coming under the category of 'below poverty line (BPL)' only are eligible to receive subsidized food grains.
2. The eldest woman in a household, of age 18 years or above, shall be the head of the household for the purpose of issuance of a ration card.
3. Pregnant women and lactating mothers are entitled to a 'take-home ration' of 1600 calories per day during pregnancy and for six months thereafter.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 3 only

Ans: (b)

Mains

Q.1 In what way could replacement of price subsidy with Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) change the scenario of subsidies in India? Discuss. (2015)

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