



## **Food and Nutrition Security in India: Building Back**

### **Better from the Covid-19 Pandemic**

#### *Background Note*

In light of the alarming rise in hunger and malnutrition around the world and especially in India on account of the Covid 19 pandemic, the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya University is organizing a webinar titled '*Food and Nutrition Security in India: Building Back Better from the Covid-19 Pandemic*'. The webinar seeks to gain deeper insights into the complex and multidimensional challenges related to the availability, access and absorption of food in India, the questions of food diversity and nutritional value and to the profound changes at the level of development thought, policies and action that will be needed to address this most fundamental of human needs.

Across the world, the Covid pandemic has pushed hundreds of millions of people into a deeper state of hunger and malnutrition with India being one of the most gravely affected countries. Even prior to the pandemic, India had close to one billion people who could not afford or access a healthy diet. In the months following the government-imposed lockdown in late March 2020, field surveys showed a massive increase in food insecurity and worrying decline in various crucial nutritional indicators.

The immediate cause of this crisis has been traced to the pandemic-induced loss of incomes and livelihoods, the breakdown of food supply chains and disruptions in the implementation of government schemes promoting food and nutritional security.

However, while the pandemic did aggravate food and nutritional insecurity, the underlying causes of the crisis can be traced to conditions created by the prevalent social and economic order. On the one hand, although the modernization of agriculture in India with the Green Revolution brought about a tremendous increase in food production, the capacity of farmers to sustain production on this scale has been increasingly threatened by the underlying economic and ecological fragility of the system as a whole. This system of food production that the Green Revolution brought about is based on mono-cropping, emphasis on cash cropping rather than growing for local food needs, farm mechanization which requires expensive inputs, the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and heavy reliance on subsidized water and electricity. This resulted in soil degradation, pollution of the environment, the loss of agrobiodiversity and the depletion of ground water tables.

On the other hand, although the Green Revolution and later the Gene Revolution greatly increased crop yield, farmers in India, the bulk of whom cultivate on small and marginal-sized plots, have become economically more insecure with increased exposure to risks and loss of control over factors of production. Farmers today incur high input costs, the price they get for their produce is not remunerative, farm labour is in short supply, anywhere between 10 to 30 percent of their produce is wasted due to lack of storage facilities, they are poorly linked to markets and they are increasingly exposed to the vagaries of global market forces. In addition to this, climate change has brought erratic changes in weather patterns leading to cyclones, floods and to pest and locust attacks.

These forces have impacted the food production system both directly and indirectly with the result that food prices have risen and there is an increase in food price volatility both of which most adversely impact the food and nutrition security of the poor. The fact that policies promoting the mass production of food through mono-cropping have focused on a few staple cereals such as rice and wheat to the exclusion of the immense diversity of edible plants native to each region and traditionally part of the region's diet, has compounded to the nutritional crisis. Diets based on these cereals might meet basic calorific needs through carbohydrates but a healthy diet must include diverse sources of micro-nutrients, minerals, proteins and fats. Foods that provide these sources of macro and micro nutrients which were earlier locally grown and easily available have now become expensive and less accessible for the masses. Indeed, focus on a few crops for mass consumption have led to the disappearance of numerous crop varieties<sup>1</sup>.

India's Public Distribution System (PDS) provides the most basic food security net for those categorized below the poverty line through dispensing highly subsidized food (mainly sources of carbohydrates) that would meet the calorific needs of a subsistence diet. Yet, the scheme remains mired in a bog of outdated and inaccurate data and red tape, due to which more than a 100 million eligible people in the country remain deprived of the PDS.

Beyond economic and ecological factors, gender disparity is one of the most persistent and entrenched causes of hunger and malnutrition in the country. Women face disparities in the form of educational neglect, lack of reproductive choice and inadequate nutrition from childhood which perpetuates an intergenerational cycle of malnutrition. Almost a third of women in the country marry under age. Under-nourished women, in all likelihood, become under-nourished mothers with a greater chance of giving birth to low birth-weight babies more prone to infections and growth failure.

Another factor determining nutrition security is freedom from diseases such as diarrhea which interfere with the body's absorption of nutrients. This calls for strengthening the public health system in the country with a focus on sanitation and access to safe drinking water.

A move towards greater food and nutrition security would thus clearly require a coherent, multisectoral approach. Systems of producing food that are sound, resilient and viable for the environment, the farmer and the local community will need to be increasingly developed and promoted. Some of the most heartening initiatives in this field have emerged in India through creative efforts to bring together sound practices from indigenous knowledge systems with

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), worldwide over the last 100 years more than 90 per cent of crop varieties have disappeared.

modern scientific knowledge in the effort to find agroecological solutions that harmonize the economic, social, ecological and spiritual considerations of people in a region. Much has also been learned about initiating and supporting food processing ventures at the community level which ensure food security by reducing wastage and contributing to diversity of diets. Experience has shown that innovative community-level endeavours to undertake food processing through collectives, often using traditional methods, can provide an effective means to address specific nutritional needs in communities.

The role of the State in ensuring food and nutrition security is crucial through enhancing financial outlays for its various schemes that address these challenges and improving the implementation and monitoring of them. In India, there are many helpful and promising government schemes of this kind such as Poshan Abhiyaan, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the midday meal scheme.

Experts have also pointed out to the need for targeted gender-specific interventions through nutritional education especially among women, providing targeted scholarships for girls, shortening the distance between schools and households to reduce the number of female drop-outs and the enhanced provision of maternal health and child care practices. Similarly, strengthening key areas of public health has been a vital strategy in addressing these challenges.

Eventually, long lasting food and nutrition security for the present and future generations will be more than a mere function of improved agronomic practices, more effective food and nutrition related policies with better implementation, important as these steps are. It will require a fundamental reordering of existing economic and social structures at global, national and local levels to bring them into greater alignment with principles of justice and environmental stewardship. After all, the billions of people who suffer malnutrition and hunger are part of the same world that encourages immense excess and waste for those at the other end of the wealth spectrum. Yet, structural changes that seek to redistribute resources more equitably can only bear enduring results when supplemented by capacity building at the local level within individuals, institutions and communities to take charge of their own food and nutritional destiny. This would call for the capacity to read the reality on the ground with accuracy and to find workable solutions by drawing on diverse sources of knowledge, with sensitivity to context and to environmental and moral principles.