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The Need for a National Food-Aid Program
in India

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Abstract

In the light of the Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to the World Food Programme, the author seeks to clarify the void created by a lack of a food-aid program to ensure an increase in the food availability index and thereby food security of the country. This paper has taken into account the supply wise data used to compute consumption in India and talks about the need to publish and use consumption side data to analyse food availability indices. Finally, the need for more paternalistic interventions by the government and other stakeholders than reducing government intervention as was suggested in the Economic Survey, 2019-2020 is the essence of this paper.

Keywords: *Food-aid programme, Food security, Food availability index, Paternalism and Undernourishment.*

1.0 Introduction

The Nobel winning UN World Food Programme (WFP) said that a quarter of the world's undernourished people are in India (India | World Food Programme, 2020). As per the WFP's Hunger map 2020, 21% of our population lives under less than \$1.90 per day and 5-14.9% of the population is undernourished. (Hunger Map 2020, 2020).

The news about India achieving self-sufficiency and of it becoming a food exporter is strewn about in many websites without any citation. The government and international organisations have chosen to remain silent on when or how the sufficiency/surplus was achieved. Through this paper, the author seeks to clarify the need for and the void created by a lack of a food-aid program in India. A well-intentioned food-aid program will ensure an increase in the food availability index and thereby food security of the country.

The current government in the midst of this pandemic (which increased unemployment and thereby poverty indices) vide Chapter 4 of Economic Survey has quoted the following in support of opening up the market to private players :

“Government policies in the food grain markets (have) led to the emergence of Government as the largest procurer and hoarder of foodgrains – adversely affecting competition in these markets. This has led to overflowing of buffer stocks with FCI, burgeoning food subsidy burden,

the divergence between demand and supply of cereals and acted as a disincentive towards crop diversification.” (Ministry of Finance, Government of India, 2020)

2.0 Issues

The aforementioned Food Corporation of India (FCI), set up in 1965 vide the Food Corporations Act, 1964, ensured that remunerative prices were given to producers while safeguarding the consumer interest at affordable prices. The Government supports the FCI by controlling the prices of input materials and output products which they then distribute through the Public Distribution System (PDS). Yet, government websites are silent on the statistics with regard to cereal and pulse production and are only vocal about the production and demand of rice and wheat. The Sustainable Development Goals Target 2.1 has an indicator to measure the proportion of population below the minimum dietary energy consumption (MDG indicator) (Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), 2017). Only if we perform well on this indicator, can India say that it is self-sufficient in food production? Therefore, production statistics of just rice and paddy are not enough, but that of cereals, pulses and other protein requirements to enable a person to carry on a healthy life should be measured.

Worldwide, results of two surveys are adopted by the countries to measure food security levels - Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) surveys and Food and Agriculture Organization Gallup World Poll (FAO-GWP). The government of India conducts the FAO-GWP surveys but does not allow publication of results (Bansal, 2020). Similarly, the National Sample Survey Organization’s consumption expenditure data for 2017-18 release has been shelved (ET Bureau, 2019), which ensured that all the doors to measuring per capita food availability and food security has been done with.

Further research on data shown by FAO said that they resort to supply-wise data for computing per capita food availability/calorie intake (Feeding the World, 2018). But there is a huge disparity caused when supply-side data is analysed to assume the consumption patterns of a population. Naturally, the supply-side data will enlarge the numbers indicating a higher per capita consumption than what was actually consumed.

However, recently with Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's (FSSAI) Eat Right India initiative which seeks to ensure the availability of safe and balanced diets for school children coupled with districts in Odisha and Telangana devising strategies to introduce millet foods to children so that they acquire a taste for them early (Kurmanath, 2020), there is hope to improve food aid with a focus on dietary needs of the population.

3.0 Recommendations

William Edward Deming, the American statistician, professor and engineer who is known for his contribution to Japan after World War II, said "every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets"(n.d.). So, we have to focus on urgent actions and timely reflections to improve the systems in place to rectify the food shortages and distribution issues faced in India. Some of the recommendations are:

3.1 Increasing transparency and thereby accountability

The government should break the information barrier with regard to the publication of key statistics with regard to food security and food availability. This can help in the identification of issues and gaps in food production, procurement and consumption and lead to revamping FCI's methods and Public Distribution Systems in existence. Without these statistics, organizations like the World Food Programme (WFP) can only continue providing technical assistance to the PDS system without addressing the core food availability issue.

Once the results are released, with ample discussions amongst all the stakeholders, the government can import ideas like 'pre-positioning shipments' to areas where per capita food availability is low. Through pre-positioning shipments, governments can allocate extra food grains, cereals and other protein-rich items near these localities by coordinating with FCI warehouses and ensure that it reaches the needy. This will better those regions where markets are inefficient.

3.2 Collaborate with existing institutional frameworks in place

Rather than introduce a 3 month long free grain and chana dal policy during a nationwide lockdown, the existing institutional framework which touches on various aspects of food security should have been geared up to collaborate, for fairer results. Schemes and missions like Pradhan

Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, National Rural Livelihood Mission, National Food Security Mission, FCI and FSSAI should be encouraged to work in tandem to ensure that ground-level consumption and access to food is maintained.

3.3 Strict/Close monitoring

The aforesaid measures should be strictly and closely monitored and statistics of the same should be collected and published bi-annually to ensure that corruption does not pervade the system. Strict penalties should be in-effect levied on these offences as well.

3.4 Exercise to ensure everyone in the rural areas have ration cards

There should be a single-window system for the needy to get their ration cards. This should then be advertised and promoted by the panchayat level institutions. Statistics with regard to the same should also be collected so that necessary changes can be made to ensure that no one sleeps hungry. The panchayat should also sensitise their villages about fake schemes and educate them of the correct methodology.

3.5 Utilise FIES

The government should measure their undernourished population using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) to measure the food security-related issues. FIES is the gold standard in this field. This will take into account the number of meals consumed, diet diversity and food shortages because of lack of resources.

All the aforementioned recommendations are indeed paternalistic and paternalistic policies should be devised to protect our vulnerable population until they are capable of surviving amongst the capitalists. As John Hatch, CEO of FINCA, said “Give poor communities the opportunities and get out of the way” (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012, p 303). The government intervention is necessary and the entry of capitalists or the private sector should be controlled or prevented as their primary goal will be to increase their profit alone. The government should not be a hindrance to their development by making them compete with big corporates in the name of fair competition, until they are equipped to fight with the corporates. If not, India’s tryst with famine which had long ended will come to haunt us again.

As a country which has historically been begging for food aid, it is only great news if we reach self-sufficiency. However, it should not be achieved by hiding figures and skewing facts but earnestly, by respecting our hungry population. As Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo put it in 'Poor Economics', "(let us) join hands with millions of well-intentioned people across the world - elected officials and bureaucrats, teachers and NGO workers, academics and entrepreneurs - in the quest for the many ideas, big and small, that will eventually take us to that world where no one has to live on 99 cents per day".

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Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). (2017, July 6). *2.1 By 2030 end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round – Indicators and a Monitoring Framework.* <https://indicators.report/targets/2-1/>