

A misleading hunger index

Per capita food production in India has increased by 26% (2004-05 to 2013-14), while it has doubled in the last 50 years. While this kind of growth rate in food production is expected to reduce hunger significantly over time, the Global Hunger Index (GHI) prepared by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), shows India's hunger level in very poor light.

The 2017 GHI score has India ranked 100 out of the 119 countries listed. While a casual reading would create the impression of India being among the worst performers and underachievers in addressing food and nutrition security, closer scrutiny shows that it should not be taken at face value as it is neither appropriate nor representative of hunger prevalent in a country. However, despite improvements, India still faces a problem of undernourishment and poor child health.

The GHI for 2017 is calculated as a weighted average of four standardised indicators, i.e. the percentage of population that is undernourished; percentage of children under five years who suffer from wasting; percentage of children under five who suffer from stunting, and child mortality. Undernourishment and child mortality each make up a third of the GHI score, while child stunting and child wasting make up a sixth of the score, and together make up a third of the score. Three of the four indicators, refer only to children below five who constitute only 11.5% of India's population. Further, the percentage of the undernourished population is inclusive of undernutrition among children. This way, the GHI assigns 70.5% weightage to children below five who constitute only a minor population share and 29.5% weightage to the population above five, which constitutes 81.5% of the total population. Therefore, the term "Hunger Index" is highly biased towards undernutrition of children rather than representing the status of hunger in the overall population. It would be more appropriate to term the conceptualisation and composition of this composite index as a "Global Hunger and Child Health Index" than as a "Global Hunger Index".

Evidence shows that weight and height of children are not solely determined by food intake but are an outcome of a complex interaction of factors related to genetics, the environment, sanitation and utilisation of food intake. The IFPRI acknowledges that only 45% of child mortality is due to hunger or undernutrition.

Without undermining the need for improvement in reducing wasting, stunting and mortality of children, our calculations show that if child health indicators are not included in the GHI, India will move to the 77th spot. India's ranking in terms of child mortality, child stunting and child wasting is 80, 106 and 117, respectively.

The incidence of hunger is taken as the proportion of the population whose food intake provides less than its minimum energy requirements. The figure of the incidence of hunger depends on energy norms and the methodological approach used in its estimation.

There is still inconclusive debate on the cut-off for minimum energy requirement calculation. At a global level, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) has an average norm of 1,800 kcal, while the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN) specified average norm of 2,400 kcal for rural areas and 2,100 kcal for urban areas in India, varies across age, gender and activity-level. There is a strong case to revise the ICMR-NIN norms as the actual requirement of energy is decreasing due to a shift towards mechanisation and more congenial work conditions and environment.

There is a large difference in the incidence of undernourishment (hunger) reported by the FAO and estimates prepared by various experts. It follows from the large variation in the choice of norm and methodology and data used for such an estimation. The unit-level National Sample Survey

Office (NSSO) data on Household Consumption Expenditure for the latest year (2011-12) indicate that 72% of India's population consumed less food than required to meet the calorie norm specified by ICMR-NIN. Applying the ICMR-NIN norm, a significant percentage of the population even in rich income households is undernourished. This shows that either the ICMR-NIN norm is on the higher side or these people voluntarily chose to eat less than what the ICMR-NIN considers normative. If we apply the FAO norm to the household consumption data of the NSSO, the proportion of the population with calorific deficit was 37.32% in 2004-05 and 29.55% in 2011-12. On the other hand, the FAO's State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report has placed the incidence of undernourishment in India at 20.9% for 2004-06 and 17.5% for 2010-12. The much lower estimate here is because it overestimates the proportion of food crops used as food and underestimates the share going for non-food uses such as feed and industrial use. The FAO approach underestimates hunger and undernutrition in those countries where exact and up-to-date estimates of food output diverted to non-food uses are not available.

The FAO norm applied to NSSO data on Household Consumer Expenditure indicates that in 2011-12, about 30% of India was undernourished or suffered from hunger, as per the UN definition of hunger.

To avoid confusion about the status of hunger and undernourishment, India should regularly prepare and publish official estimates of hunger, like that of poverty. It will also help in tackling hunger.

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The views expressed are personal

The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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