Cereal indiscertions

MALNUTRITION remains one of the biggest challenges facing India. In the largest survey, the National Family Health Survey of 2005-06, about 42 percent children under the age of five were underweight. Economic growth has failed to redress this problem. Recently released estimates from the District Level Health Survey for selected states continue to be observed among poorer and the best performing states, like Karnataka and Haryana, the proportion of children who are underweight declined by 7 to 8 percent points between 2006-07 and 2012; in the worst — Maharashtra and West Bengal — there is virtually no improvement. At this rate, it is unlikely that we can achieve the Millenium Development Goal of 28 percent children being underweight by 2015. Not only is this a blow to India’s core values, it has vast economic consequences. According to a study by the internationa non-profit, Save the Children, this cost is expected to be between 1.5 to 2.5 percent of the GDP per annum to 2030. In spite of the urgency of the problem, the only solution at hand, the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, appears inadequate to the task of addressing the problem for a number of reasons.

First, the primary focus of the NFSA is to expand access to cheap cereals, although dietary composition is relevant to Indian malnutrition as hunger or calorie deficiency. The NFSA’s focus on hunger is bolstered by the observation that successive rounds of the National Sample Survey (NSS) and the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau surveys document declining calorie consumption among the Indian population. However, as Jean De Lee and Angus Deaton note, most of this decline is observed among lower income groups, particularly in rural areas. These groups are increasingly moving away from manual labour and hence may need fewer calories.

But malnutrition is not limited to the poor. The National Family Health Survey shows that although 57 percent of the children in the households with the lowest level of wealth are underweight, even when compared to other children in wealthier households, about 30 percent of the children are underweight. So it is not simply a question of income or access to foodgrains, but rather of the nature of household food consumption. The India Human Development Survey (IHDS), organised by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the University of Maryland, documents that when households consume a diet of cereals, coarse grains, pulses, milk, vegetables, fruits and tea, the percentage of children who are underweight goes down by greater consumption of cereals but lower consumption of fruit and vegetables. When the age of five is the cut-off, met with cheap cereals, households may not choose to spend money on a diverse food basket. This concern is validated by an excellent analysis of NSS data by Professor Raghubir Ghai and colleagues, in which they document declining dietary diversity between 1993 and 2009.

Third, the NFSA relies on existing programmes like the PDS and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), whose operation is fraught with inefficiencies in leakages. While much has been written about the leakages in the PDS, little attention is directed towards the challenge of production bottlenecks in storage for cereals. Thus, at the moment, it is unlikely that millets can be a major component of food supplied under the NFSA.

Both the NFSA contains no mechanisms for measuring success in reducing malnutrition. Social audits focus on process and not outcomes, and do not replace standardised data on malnutrition and food intake. It is amazing that in spite of the staggering incremental costs of the NFSA, estimated by Prachi Mishra of the International Monetary Fund at between Rs 44,000 and Rs 77,000 crore per annum, we have no plans for monitoring its outcomes in terms of nutrition statistics. Government data on malnutrition is sporadic, at best; the last nationwide survey was done in 2005-06. Also, there is no nationwide data available. If transparent data collection took place predictably every two years, immediate course correction could be undertaken.

These observations suggest that if we are serious about eliminating undernutrition, we must focus on developing policy design, effective implementation and increased monitoring and accountability. The BJP manifesto calls for addressing malnutrition in the medium term. Disappearing statistics from the District Level Health Survey suggest a need for urgent action.

The food security act is inadequate to meeting the malnutrition challenge

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