



EDITORIAL

Covid-19, Food Insecurity and the Need for Government Action

According to the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, 2019*, there were 822 million undernourished persons in the world and 194 million undernourished persons in India before the pandemic. The FAO Report warned of the need to be watchful, because food insecurity had risen in countries that experienced economic slowdown.

The pandemic has brought the global economy to a standstill. While the extent of decline in GDP is still being debated, there is little doubt of a worldwide rise in poverty and food insecurity. A conservative estimate by Chris Hoy and Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez for the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) indicates that, using an international poverty line of 1.90 dollar a day, a 20 per cent contraction in GDP will result in an additional 419 million poor people. This estimate is a lower bound as it assumes a fall in mean income and no change in distribution, while in fact there is likely to be a rise in inequality after the pandemic. The World Food Programme (WFP) issued a report in March, with an amendment in April, the latter stating that the number of people in acute food insecurity would almost double, from 135 million to 265 million in 2020. The WFP has a five-level classification of food insecurity and these numbers pertain to the three highest levels of insecurity (crisis, emergency, or catastrophe/famine). Acute food insecurity is a situation in which lives and livelihoods are at risk.

In India, there was a total lockdown and consequent collapse of employment from March 24 to May 31, 2020. As the large majority of workers in India are in the informal sector, and employed on casual or precarious employment contracts, most of them have no job-related benefits to cushion unemployment. Livelihoods have collapsed for hundreds of millions of households, with no unemployment or social security benefits, and no certainty of re-employment or new employment.

A useful measure of food insecurity is the food share or share of household monthly expenditure spent on food. In rural India, in 2011, the average food share was above

50 per cent, that is, over one-half the population spent more than one-half of their family budget on food. The food share falls as level of incomes or expenditure rise. Data from the consumer expenditure survey of 2017-18 have not been released, but an early leak suggested that total monthly consumption had actually declined between 2011 and 2017, which would have resulted in a higher average food share.

In such a situation, a steep reduction in family income will immediately result in sharp cutbacks in food expenditure. We can assume there has been a big rise in food insecurity in rural India during the lockdown on account of worsening economic access (collapse in incomes, rise in price of essential food items) and physical access (stores closed or open for limited hours with selected goods) to food, but the former is going to be a constraint for a longer time. In a rapid rural survey three weeks after the lockdown (reported in this issue), many respondents, particularly respondents from manual worker and poor peasant households, reported a decline in food intake and worsening dietary diversity (with very few vegetables, fruit, and almost no eggs or animal protein consumed).

While State Governments have stepped up the provision of food (dry rations and cooked meals) in varying degrees, food provision has been inadequate and remains a short-term measure. In the medium term, in about six months to a year, people will slowly recover their livelihoods, but will not be able to return to earlier consumption patterns. All children, the very young in particular, are likely to face the long-term effects of the cutbacks in food intake over these several months.

It is time to act to ensure that every household and every person in the country is assured of minimum food security. We need a universal social safety net that ensures minimum income and consumption to all. The public distribution system (PDS) should be made universal again: with *all* households eligible for a basic basket of food commodities. Existing ration entitlements should be expanded immediately in quantity and diversity. Cereal rations should be doubled to ensure the minimum daily intake as per the norms set by the Indian Council of Medical Research. While some State Governments provide pulses and oil as part of the ration package, the Central Government must expand the PDS basket to include pulses, oil, and salt for all, and bear the cost of procurement and distribution of the additional items. All school-going children must get a nutritious hot meal, and elderly and other vulnerable people in a village must be given access to the same kind of meal.

Across countries, a commitment must be made to ensure that a post-Covid world will be a food-secure world.