

Vision of a new currency in rural banking – seed, water and foodgrain and the goal – towards hunger-free India

New approaches are the need of the hour to solve age-old problems faced by India. The conceptualization and weaving of a workable mechanism for achieving the goal of 'Hunger-free India' has been the initiative of M.S. Swaminathan, assisted by his team at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Chennai. Presently it is his vision for achieving an India sans hunger and for an 'Ever-green revolution', the latter being a continuous improvement in biological productivity without associated ecological and social harm.

On 24 April 2001, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee speaking at the Inaugural Session of the Consultation Meeting on 'Towards hunger-free India' jointly organized by the Planning Commission, World Food Programme (WFP) of the United Nations and the MSSRF said 'this challenge was ensuring year-round food security at the household level'. The Prime Minister also released two publications on the occasion. The *Food Insecurity Atlas of Rural India* (prepared jointly by the MSSRF and United Nations, World Food Programme (WFP)) and *Enabling Development: Food Assistance in South Asia* (prepared by WFP). He also pointed out that more needs to be done in respect of distribution of food and to tackle the problem of malnutrition, stressing that 'shortcomings at the implementation level can be overcome by ensuring greater people's participation and monitoring', such as Panchayati Raj institutions. The time limit the Government has set itself for substantially assuring 'Food for all' is 2007.

The 'input in developing an operational blueprint' by the joint efforts of the WFP and MSSRF would be 'useful in the preparation of the Tenth Plan strategy in the area of sustainable food and nutrition security' said Swaminathan in his welcome remarks. Deputy Executive Director of WFP, Namanga Ngongi, in his keynote address added that the *Atlas* 'depicts and analyses food insecurity problems in India' while the other publication, *Food Assistance in*

South Asia, focuses 'on challenges often faced in food assistance programmes and presents recommendations on how such assistance can improve the livelihood of poor people'. A key recommendation in this book is to 'make women the key players', he added. Speaking on malnutrition, he said 'malnutrition among young children in India is among the highest in the world. More than half of all children under the age of five, or some 71 million, are underweight. That means some 35% of the World's malnourished children live in India'.

From the speeches made in the inaugural session, the problems that we still face in India in the area of food, its availability and nutrition could be identified. They are:

- Need to substantially increase our food production and attending to the paradox of surplus food stocks (millions of Indians still go hungry to bed every night), the latter arising from inadequacies in storage, preservation, processing, and proper distribution.
- Malnutrition, especially widespread in women and children.
- High cost of managing food stocks.
- Implementation of mid-day meal schemes.
- Lack of good quality, clean drinking water and a clean environment.
- Need for land and water management.
- Extent of poverty in the country being unacceptably high, the poor have limited access to food.
- Tendency of farmers to diversify to cash crops from foodgrains.

The essentially tripartite Consultation met to develop new models and an action plan to address the above and reach out to India's hungry. As Swaminathan put it 'agriculture determines the livelihood destiny of nearly 66% of our population; hence its pivotal role in ensuring the food and ecological security of our country, and in providing adequate opportunities for jobs and income'. Elaborating on the unique

feature of the *Food Insecurity Atlas of Rural India* he pointed to its holistic approach to the problems of hunger and malnutrition.

Swaminathan reiterated the key points of the *Atlas* which are as follows:

- Information on the 'availability' of food, which is a function of production.
- 'Access' to food, which is a function of purchasing power.
- 'Absorption' of food in the body, which is influenced by the quality of drinking water, environmental hygiene, primary health care and primary education.
- 'Sustainability' of the food production process.
- 'Vulnerability' to transient hunger caused by natural calamities.

Above all, the value of the *Atlas* lies in its 'pathway for action' that it addresses. He further underlined the critical role of non-food factors like livelihood opportunities, sanitation and environment hygiene in determining food security at the level of each individual and 'the *Atlas* indicates that jobs/livelihoods for all should be the bottom-line of our economic and trade policies'.

The Consultation covered discussions on all aspects of the key points of the *Atlas* as described above. The State-wise break-up of investigation into all of the key pointers as shown by the *Atlas* results in interesting observations. For example, take the case of environmental degradation and sustainable food production. Large producers of foodgrains seem to be exploiting natural resources faster as exemplified by Punjab and Haryana, while Assam and Bihar have to enhance utilization of their natural resources. Forest management is of immense importance in the States of Orissa, Assam and Madhya Pradesh where the *Atlas* cautions that if people are not provided with non-agricultural employment, then this vital resource may be depleted. The *Atlas* is concerned with gender discrimination in accessing food, health care, literacy,

livelihoods and wages, and to the reality that women and girl children suffer greater nutritional deprivation.

An approach paper to the Tenth Plan is being finalized and several recommendations have been made in the Discussion Paper for the Workshop. Among them are (1) conserving prime farmland for agriculture and increasing production; (2) productivity through environmentally-friendly technologies and (3) use of precision farming methods and strengthening of food security at the level of individuals and households, and closing present yield gaps in not only crop plants but also livestock and fisheries. It is recommended that the 'Panchayati Raj' institutions can be of help in this activity.

For increasing production in an environment-friendly manner, Swaminathan said we must take immediate action to 'defend the gains' already made, to 'extend the gains' to the areas which have been bypassed by the farm revolution such as dry farming areas, and to 'make new gains' through sustainable intensification, diversification and value addition to primary produce through agro-processing and agri-business. A case in point he said was the rice revolution that began in Assam last year after the installation of over one lakh 'shallow wells'. There is a need for agricultural strategies to be developed at the local rather than the national level to have achievements such as the one in Assam, he added. This implies conservation and enhancement of soil and water resources, forests and biodiversity, through an integrated package of government regulation, education and social mobilization, says the Discussion Paper for the Workshop. In this, wasteland development and the newly initiated Community Land Care movement can be of help. He felt that farmers must be provided information on 'alternative crops to grow' and the State Land Use Board revitalized. What India was facing is not a surplus of food, it is a

surplus of hunger, he said. Hence, community-centred water harvesting, land and water management should be in such a manner 'that every drop yields more crop and income'.

According to the Paper, improving the economic access to food can be helped with measures such as Rural Knowledge Centres owned and run by the farmers to uplink data, converting it to location-specific information. Another, is the biovillage model of sustainable job-led economic growth, developed by MSSRF and shown to be successful in Pondicherry. This model has as its objectives, conservation, enhancement, sustainability and equitable use of land, water and common property resources, poverty eradication through livelihood access and gender equity. Other objectives are: (a) micro-enterprises with micro-credit in the agricultural sector, taking care of sustainability in a form that is decentralized and participatory for success; (b) increasing the income and employment opportunities through increased farm exports and stress on post-harvest technologies and setting up of Agricultural Product Export Parks. To attract and retain manpower in farming, it is recommended that farming becomes both intellectually stimulating and economically rewarding.

A coherent policy framework has been called for enabling development and food assistance. It is felt that anti-poverty measures must link up with agriculture, nutrition and disaster mitigation strategies. Five priority areas are: nutrient-rich foods for women, infants and children; school feeding programmes; asset building through food-for-work, sustainable livelihoods for the food insecure and disaster management.

In decentralized planning for development, establishing Community Food and Water Security Systems would provide for links in the food chain from production to conservation and consumption. Highlights of the recommen-

dations are to assist diversity of economic plants maintained by farm families, i.e. setting up of Field Gene Bank, forming village-level Seed Bank that can be utilized in times of need especially in natural calamity-prone areas, and Water Bank, i.e. promotion of community water harvesting by self-help groups thereby making it a fundamental ethic of both rural and urban communities.

MSSRF has identified some steps that could be started at the local level. They include identification of families suffering from poverty-induced hunger through Gram Sabhas. Such families through 'Household Entitlement Cards' can get information on entitlement and access to Government schemes.

At the national level, food-based safety nets need to be strengthened, says the Paper. The focus of food assistance should shift from appeasing hunger towards enabling development of human faculties. Investments should produce lasting assets that free people from hunger. Globally, industrialized countries must provide greater market access to the farm products of developing countries.

Food assistance in South Asia, according to the WFP book *Enabling Development: Food Assistance in South Asia*, raises awareness of the situation about hunger and malnutrition in South Asia.

If the recommendations of both, the Consultation Meeting and those given in the two books are implemented in a proper framework, it would lead to eradication of hunger and malnutrition in India. Increased regional co-operation would also help in solving similar problems of hunger and malnutrition afflicting South Asia as well.

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