

An opportunity to recast India's food system

Posted at: 21/10/2023

Context:

Earlier this week, we celebrated World Food Day (October 16), but we rarely look at food as a system. No country can better understand the challenges of a food system than India, which feeds the largest population in the world.

The interconnectedness of nutrition security:

1. While the primary goal of a food system is to ensure nutrition security for all, it can only be achieved sustainably if the producers producing the food make reasonable economic returns that are resilient over time.
2. This resilience, in turn, is intricately linked with the resilience of our natural ecosystem because the largest inputs to agriculture — soil, water and climatic conditions — are all but natural resources.
3. Appreciating this interconnectedness of nutrition security with livelihood and environmental security is essential to making our food system truly sustainable.

Nutrition, livelihoods and environment security:

1. On the nutrition front, India faces a double burden of malnutrition. At one end, despite making great progress over the years, a sizable proportion of Indians exhibit nutrient deficiencies.
2. As in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2019-21, 35% of children are stunted, and 57% of women and 25% of men are anaemic. At the other end, due to imbalanced diets and sedentary lifestyles, 24% of adult women and 23% of adult men are now obese.
3. India has been stepping up efforts to reduce malnutrition, which has included even the Prime Minister calling for a mass movement to eradicate it. On the production side, farm incomes are insufficient to meet the ends of marginal and small farmers.
4. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and other forms of casual labour are picking up the slack, indicating a lack of skills or opportunities for income diversification.
5. Further, depleting natural resources and changing climate are making India's food production highly vulnerable. As in the 2023 soil health survey, almost half the cultivable land in India has become deficient in organic carbon, which is an essential indicator of soil health.
6. Groundwater, the largest source of irrigation, is rapidly declining. In States such as Punjab, more than 75% of the groundwater assessment locations are overexploited, threatening the resilience of farm incomes.

Way forward: Adopt a three sided approach

1. To solve these interconnected challenges, we need a triad approach that engages all three sides of the food system: consumers, producers, and middlemen.
2. First, consumer demand needs to be shifted towards healthy and sustainable diets. We need to shift to a food plate that is healthier for people and the planet. The private sector drives the aspirational consumption patterns for India's billion plus population.
3. What corporations have done to mainstream imported oats or quinoa in India, can be done for locally grown millets. Civil society and the health community could partner with social media influencers who can shape healthier and sustainable consumption for millions.
4. Alongside, the public sector, through its innumerable touch points such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), midday meals (MDM), railways catering, urban canteens, and public and institutional procurement, can help improve what at least 70% of Indians are consuming.
5. Second, to ensure resilient incomes, we must support farmers' transition towards remunerative and regenerative agricultural practices. The National Mission on Natural Farming is a step in this direction, but the overall funding for sustainable agriculture is less than 1% of the agricultural budget.
6. We need to broaden and scale up such initiatives to various agroecological practices such as agroforestry, conservation agriculture, precision farming, and much more.
7. Further, agriculture support should move from input subsidies to direct cash support to farmers per hectare of cultivation. It would promote efficient use of inputs, while enabling a level playing field for agroecological practices to thrive.
8. Agricultural research and extension services should also earmark a proportion of their respective budgets to focus on sustainable agricultural practices.
9. Third, shift farm to fork value chains towards more sustainable and inclusive ones. A critical approach to enhance rural (farm) incomes is to enable more value addition of agricultural produce in rural areas.
10. Middlemen, such as corporations supplying raw and processed food to consumers, should prioritise direct procurement from farmers, incentivise procurement of sustainably harvested produce, and implement well established approaches such as fair trade.
11. Various young agritech enterprises such as DeHaat and Ninjacart are enabling such farmtobuyer linkages. Moreover, since all farmer families in a farmer producer organisation (FPO) are consumers of other farming goods, enabling trading of produce between FPOs is another way to ensure a greater value share for farmers, as showcased by a few FPOs in Odisha.

Conclusion:

Shifting an entire food system, however, is no mean feat. But the scale of the challenge must not deter our ambitions. If we act fast, India has a unique opportunity to showcase to the rest of the world how to get its food system right.