

6. Diversification of Food Production – Economy

India needs to invest more in accelerating diversification of food production – FAO Chief Economist. Despite significant progress, 40% of Indians still can't afford a healthy diet due to a cereal-centric food policy and supply-chain issues. Experts are urging a shift towards agricultural diversification to improve nutrition, boost farmer incomes, and achieve the global Zero Hunger goal.

Defining Food Security and the Indian Context

Core Definition – Food security is achieved when all people have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food at all times.

What is a "Healthy Diet?" – It is a diet that includes a diverse range of food groups, such as fruits, vegetables, proteins, and cereals, to meet nutritional needs.

Global Tracking – The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) annual State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) Report is the primary source for tracking the global affordability of healthy diets.

Key Statistic for India (2024) – A significant 40.4% of the Indian population (approximately 60 crore people) could not afford a healthy meal.

Notable Progress – This figure, while high, marks a substantial improvement from 74.1% in 2021. The change is based on a revised estimation methodology by the FAO.

Why This is in the News

FAO Chief Economist's Statement – In a recent interview, Maximo Torero Cullen highlighted that while India has improved its food security numbers, the level of insecurity remains high.

Call for Diversification – He specifically urged India to diversify its agricultural production beyond cereals to improve the availability and affordability of nutritious food.

India's Global Role – The statement emphasized India's critical role in achieving the global Sustainable Development Goal-2 (SDG-2 – Zero Hunger) by 2030, given its large population.

A Multi-Dimensional Overview of Food Security in India

Polity and Legal Framework – The Right to Food is judicially interpreted as an intrinsic part of the Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution. This right is legally enforced through the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. The Supreme Court's landmark judgment in the *PUCL vs Union of India* case (2001) significantly expanded the scope and recognition of food rights.

Governance and Administrative Measures – The NFSA provides subsidized cereals to approximately 81 crore people, making it one of the largest food safety nets in the world. However, its primary limitation is its lack of focus on protein-rich and nutrient-dense foods like pulses and vegetables. There is a pressing need for better convergence and integration with nutrition-focused schemes like Poshan Abhiyaan, ICDS, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (now PM POSHAN).

Economic Factors – The high cost of a diverse and healthy diet is driven by supply-chain bottlenecks, significant post-harvest storage losses, and import/export tariffs. The government's cereal-centric Minimum Support Price (MSP) procurement system distorts cropping patterns, disincentivizing farmers from growing other essential crops. Diversifying into pulses and horticulture can not only improve nutrition but also boost farmers' incomes and reduce overall dietary costs for consumers.

Societal Impact – Despite progress, malnutrition persists at alarming levels. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) –

1. 35.5% of children under 5 are stunted (low height for age).
2. 19.3% of children under 5 are wasted (low weight for height).

There is a clear gender dimension to this crisis, with women and children being disproportionately affected by malnutrition.

Environment, Science & Technology – Agricultural diversification aligns perfectly with the principles of climate-smart agriculture, water conservation, and improving soil health. For example, growing more pulses helps fix atmospheric nitrogen in the soil, which naturally improves fertility and reduces the need for chemical fertilizers.

International Implications – Due to its sheer scale, India's success is central to the world achieving SDG-2 (Zero Hunger). Global tariff wars and protectionist policies risk fragmenting the global food trade, leading to inefficiencies and price uncertainties. India's domestic policies, such as export bans on rice, have a direct and significant impact on global food markets, sometimes increasing food insecurity in other nations.

Key Challenges to Achieving Food Security – The persistence of high rates of malnutrition despite the wide coverage of the NFSA. The prohibitively high prices of fruits, vegetables, and pulses for a large section of the population. A deep-rooted policy bias that overwhelmingly favors the production and procurement of cereals (wheat and rice). Massive post-harvest losses due to inadequate cold storage facilities and weak supply chains. Trade uncertainties and price volatility created by global tariff wars and protectionist measures.

The Way Forward – Recommendations and Best Practices

Diversify Agriculture – The government should shift its procurement focus from being cereal-heavy to include pulses, oilseeds, and horticultural products, as recommended by the Shanta Kumar Committee.

Adopt Nutrition-Sensitive Policies – The goal of dietary diversity must be integrated into the framework of the NFSA and other welfare schemes.

Invest in Infrastructure – There is an urgent need for greater investment in cold chains, modern logistics, and strengthening Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs).

Implement Market Reforms – India should work towards rationalizing tariffs and stabilizing its food trade policies to reduce market volatility.

Learn from Best Practices – Brazil's "Zero Hunger" programme is a successful model that directly linked agricultural support with national nutritional goals. Policies must be aligned with the SDGs, focusing on affordability and sustainability simultaneously.

Conclusion

India has made commendable progress in reducing food insecurity, but the challenge remains immense. With 40% of its people still unable to afford a healthy diet, the country must take urgent and decisive steps in agricultural diversification, improving affordability, and implementing nutrition-sensitive governance. Successfully addressing these issues is crucial for meeting SDG-2 and cementing India's role as a global leader in the fight against hunger.

Source – <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-needs-to-invest-more-in-accelerating-diversification-of-food-production-fao-chief-economist/article70046528.ece>