

# Focus on millets and pulses, not rice and wheat



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*Views are personal*

India prioritised paddy and wheat, which have been losing nutritive value, for procurement and subsidised distribution. This led to decreased area under the more nutritive coarse cereals and pulses over the decades

**IN THE PAST** three years, the number of people affected by hunger has more than doubled. Globally, a staggering 3 billion people cannot afford a healthy diet, while almost a million people live in famine conditions and fear starvation and death. Moreover, the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) has jumped from 8% to 9.8% between 2019 and 2021, as per data from the Food and Agricultural Organization. With ongoing and lingering conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, and the dramatic rises in the prices of food, feed, fuel, and fertilisers, the alarming reality of more and more people being left behind is becoming even more acute. Against this backdrop, the recently released Global Hunger Index (GHI) offers a reality check to most nations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the fast-approaching deadline.

The GHI ranked India 107th among 121 countries, with a score of 29.1—behind its south Asian neighbours Sri Lanka (64th), Myanmar (71st), Nepal (81st), and Bangladesh (84th). The GHI score is calculated using four broad indicators—undernourishment, child wasting (low weight for height), child stunting (low height for age), and child mortality. The rate of wasting among children in India is reported to be the highest, at 19.3%, compared to any other country in the world. Even the last two National Family Health Sur-

veys (NFHS) paint a dismal picture of the nutritional status of a large section of the Indian population. According to the survey, more than 35.5% of the country's children below the age of five are stunted, and 67% suffer from anaemia. Each of these indicators characterises different aspects of child malnutrition. Stunting is suggestive of prolonged under-nutrition, while wasting signals current nutritional status determined by food consumption and/or illness. The state-wise analysis paints an even more alarming picture for states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. For instance, around 43% and 39.6% of children below the age of 5 years in Bihar and Jharkhand suffer from stunting. While in the state of Maharashtra (25.6%) followed by Gujarat (25.1%), a large number of children suffer from wasting.

The problem is aggravated by the fact that a vast majority of the population does not have access to food, and even when they have adequate food, the quality is poor. With an increase in the focus on food security and to make the country self-sufficient in the production of food grain, the policies during the Green Revolution were cen-

tered on rapidly increasing the production of two crops—wheat and rice. Additionally, procuring these crops for maintaining the buffer stock and distribution at a highly subsidised rate to a vast section of the population through the Targeted Public Distribution System further strengthened the rice-wheat based cropping system. According to the latest NSSO report (2018-19), around 24% of paddy and 21% of wheat is procured by designated agencies, while procurement of coarse cereals was less than 5% of the total output. Procurement also remained limited for pulses (8% for gram and 3% for arhar). So, higher price realisation for paddy and wheat led to an increase in the cultivation of these crops.

As a result, the gross cropped area under coarse cereal, such as millets, declined from 30% to 11% of gross cropped area, and the area under pulses remained stagnant at around 14% between 1950-51 and 2019-20.

Low proportion of area under coarse grains and pulses also results in lower consumption. Take the case of pulses, where their availability declined from 25.2 kg/capita to 17.5 kg/capita during 1961-2020. It has resulted in a decrease in the pro-

tein intake of the average Indian population. On the other hand, widely-consumed grains like rice and wheat are rapidly losing their nutritional value, as reported by a study conducted by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). The zinc and iron content in rice declined by 24% and 28%, respectively, between the 1960s and 2000s. So, the nutrition intake of an average Indian diet is severely compromised, leading to the prevalence of widespread hidden hunger. The report released by UNICEF in 2019 also reported that over 80% of adolescents in India suffered from hidden hunger arising from the deficiency of one or more micronutrients.

The urgency of leaving no one behind and ensuring that every citizen of the nation has access to adequate nutritious food should be the central priority of the government. Initiatives must be taken to include pulses, millets, oilseeds, as well as fruits and vegetables to the beneficiaries of the government welfare schemes, such as the mid-day meal and public distribution system. Besides, adequate incentives must be given to farmers to diversify away from the rice-wheat cropping pattern and shift to the cultivation of pulses, oilseeds, and millets. Concerted efforts through a multi-stakeholder approach are the need of the hour to make a transition toward building a healthier nation.

**To fight 'hunger', the govt must push coarse grains and pulses in its welfare schemes, and incentivise farmers to diversify away from rice & wheat**