

Poverty, Food Security And The Post-2015 Development Goals

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***Abstract**-Poverty and food security are complex food security issues, not only linked to health but also to sustainable economic development, environment, trade and gender equality. Access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food is essential to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle. The persistence of extreme poverty and hunger is related to the subjugation, marginalization and disempowerment of women. Women suffer from hunger and poverty to a great degree and in greater numbers than men. The emerging debate about food security revolves around some arguments like problem of distribution, food availability, food access, food use, food inflation, market liberalization, global trade versus food sovereignty. Despite producing more food than is consumed, the women with their children are finding it increasingly difficult to access nutritious and healthy food at affordable prices. In the developing countries of Global South, women are the primary producers of food and conservers of environment. Yet they are the ones extremely poor and chronically undernourished. With the deadline for the Millennium Development Goal-1 on the horizon and with impact of the global economic and financial crisis, the progress on many fronts still far from satisfactory. The recently enacted National Food Security Act 2013 by India is a step in this direction. Thus, the vision for the post-2015 development agenda should be changing the existing centralized global approach towards a more decentralized global framework based on gender inclusive food security system, sustainable economic development and climate-smart food system.*

Keywords: Poverty, Feminization of agriculture, Food security, Sustainable food security, Sustainable development

The ultimate aim of development is to ensure human well-being through sustained improvement in the quality of life of people, particularly the poor, excluded, vulnerable and deprived sections. Poverty has traditionally been defined as lack of access to material resources and understood in absolute and relative terms. Poverty is a complex problem having multiple dimensions. In '*Development as Freedom*', Amartya Sen defines poverty as the deprivation of basic capabilities that provide a person with the freedom to choose the life he or she has reason to value. These capabilities include good health, education, social networks, command over economic resources, and influence on decision-making that affects one's life. **Extreme poverty, absolute poverty, or abject poverty** is stated as "a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services"¹ [UN declaration at World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995]. The World Bank defined the new international

poverty line as \$1.25 a day for 2005² (equivalent to \$1.00 a day in 1996 US prices). Therefore, fighting poverty and hunger remains at the core of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the post-2015 development agenda.

Poverty and food security are interrelated and multidimensional in nature. Poverty leads to food insecurity by limiting their access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. Poverty also threatens all the dimension of food security like availability of food, accessibility of food, affordability of food, appropriate use of food, stability and sovereignty of food. Food insecurity causes poverty, hunger, undernutrition, vulnerability, livelihood insecurity and low quality of life, but is at the same time also a result of these conditions. In 2013, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that 842 million people are undernourished (12% of the global population)³.

Undernutrition denotes a deprivation or lack of freedom to lead a minimally healthy life. Adequate nutrition attainment is an essential

element of human well-being. However, women's nutrition assumes additional importance for the family welfare, human well-being and sustainable development of society. The manifestation of women's malnutrition for human development are multiple and cumulative. For instance, maternal malnutrition tends to increase the risk of maternal mortality. Also, child malnutrition in terms of stunted growth or underweight, infant mortality and rising incidence of chronic diseases, etc. are related to maternal malnutrition. Due to nutritional deprivation women never reach their full growth potential and suffer anaemia. Women from the disadvantaged social groups suffer the hardest in terms of food insecurity. The women in vulnerable groups includes the scheduled castes and tribes, backward class, religious minorities, disabled, aged, single women and divorced, deserted, separated, female-headed households, migrant workers, women in disturbed areas, trafficked women, women in prison, transgender communities, among others.

Engendering Food Security System

Gender equality is an essential condition for sustainable development and social empowerment. Studies have found that gender equality is the single most important determinant of food security.

With increasing population pressure on land, the land holdings have become small and fragmented. This has led to migration of male members into other sectors, leaving the family farms to be tended largely by women and children⁴. Over 70 percent of India's population currently derives their livelihood from land resources, which includes 84 percent of the economically-active women⁵.

Persistent gender inequalities constrain women's potential for contributing more effectively to agriculture, rural and community development, food and nutrition security, which together undermine the achievement of food security in the long run. On the one hand, agriculture is in crisis and on the other, we are witnessing 'feminization of agriculture' due to the out-migration of male workers to non-agriculture,

while women have remained very substantially in agriculture. The resulting feminization has implications for food security and rural livelihoods.

The persistence of extreme poverty and hunger is related to the subjugation, marginalization and disempowerment of women. Women suffer from hunger and poverty to a great degree and in greater numbers than men. At the same time, it is expected that it is primary responsibility of women to end hunger through vaccination of new born, providing nutritious and healthy food to children, education and family income. Women play an active role in creating the environment of food security such as the food "producers"; "gatekeepers" who dedicate their own time, income and decision-making to maintain food and nutritional security of their households and communities; and "managers" of the stability of food supplies in times of economic hardship. Women also play an important role in food production, processing, distribution, marketing, food preparation, providing childcare within the family and more likely to be spent their income on food and their children's needs. They often work as unpaid family workers, are involved in subsistence farming and represent about 43% of the agricultural labor force in developing countries⁶ (FAO). Despite their dominance of the women in India still face disparity, disadvantage and discrimination in terms of : ownership of, access to and control of livelihood assets like land; shrinking farm size, limited rights to inheritance and that too frequently violated; gender wage gap; credit from formal institutionalised agencies; availability of seeds; approachable market; extension services and technologies; less education and low skills; overwork and invisibility of work; powerlessness; bargaining power in cooperatives; forceful acquisition of land and displacement; majority are small, subsistence farmers and agricultural labourers; intense competition from larger farm operations; work of the female agricultural labourer is limited to less skilled jobs, such as sowing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting, that often fit well within the framework of domestic life and child-rearing. The traditional social norms and

values require women to consume last and least throughout their lives, even when pregnant and lactating. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, thereby perpetuating the cycle. Women's employment in family farms is rarely recognized as economically productive. Any income earned from this work is generally controlled by the men. Women are invariably paid lower wages, despite the fact that they work harder and for longer hours than do men⁷.

Women's rights to inheritance are limited and frequently violated. They seldom enjoy property ownership rights directly in their names. Access to land and property is a major source of income and long-term economic security. Critical resources such as land or common village land (shamlat) are also unevenly distributed by gender. Even with land in their names, they may not have actual decision making power⁸.

Despite feminization of agriculture, even today, women's work is not fully realized. Due to gender relations, their mobility is restricted, they are burdened by domestic responsibilities and engaged, generally, in those non-cultivation processes which are near their households.

The lack of women empowerment often results in negative externalities such as lower educational attainment for their children (particularly girl child) and poor familial health (i.e. adverse Sex ratio, high IMR, MMR, malnutrition level, low hygiene and immunization).

With increasing disproportionate percentages of women among the world's poor, there is feminisation of poverty. The burden of poverty is borne by women (UNIFEM). It includes the poverty of choices and opportunities, such as the ability to lead a long, healthy, and creative life, and enjoy basic rights like equality, freedom, respect, and dignity. Even whatever they can afford is of poor quality. They do not get a balanced diet, nutrition or medicare facilities. Due to insufficient income, the lone or single mothers are usually at the highest risk for extreme poverty. This, in turn, lowers their children's possibilities for nourishment and good education. A large number of poor women work

migrants migrate from the poverty-stricken areas of Odisha, Jharkhand etc. to other economically advanced areas where they are forced to work in poor conditions and at low grade jobs and subject to bonded slavery, clinical tests or even end in forced prostitution.

Women lack power to decide what to eat, when to eat, how much to eat, what quantity and quality of nutritious food to eat, lack of availability of food in the market, lack of ability to buy needed food and the capability to absorb and utilise the food in her body. Thus, food and non-food factors like drinking water, health care and environmental hygiene are involved.

Despite producing more food than is consumed, the women with their children are finding it increasingly difficult to access nutritious and healthy food at affordable prices. In the developing countries of Global South, women are the primary producers of food and conservers of environment. Yet they are the ones extremely poor and chronically undernourished.

The **human cost of the “liberalization”** has been very high in terms of **farm suicides** in India. Due to fault policies pursued by the state a very high portion of rural households got into the **debt cycle**, resulting in a very high number of farm suicides. The policies encouraging farmers to **switch from traditional food crops to cash crops**, has resulted in an extraordinary increase in farm input costs, while the price of the cash crops being determined by market. The increasing influence of market led to shrinking role of the welfare state.

The capitalist framework of neo-liberalism is viewed as an extension of the neoliberal policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank as developmentally favourable to poor and developing countries including India. However, in the long run it is predicted that the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) will not bring gains to the agricultural sector of India. The Multinational Corporations (MNCs) will benefit at the expense of the small Indian agricultural labourers and farmers, majority of which are women. Forceful land acquisition, displacement

and unfair competition may threaten women's and their families' livelihoods and create problems of food security and deepen gender inequality. As foreign investors begin to acquire power over agricultural or natural resources in India, women engaged in subsistence farming will be at risk of losing the basic resources such as water, seeds, traditional ways of farming which is nature-friendly and her decision-making abilities will be further threatened. In the wake of Capitalist mode of production manifested in the form of Green Revolution, it is clear that the widespread usage of chemical pesticides and herbicides is creating a public health problem, which has disproportionately impacted women, e.g. high cancer rates in the Malwa belt of Punjab.

State Initiatives

The concern for food and nutrition security is enshrined in the Directive Principles of the Constitution which establishes India as a Welfare state. The issue of food security includes whole gamut of integrated interplay of macro policy, agricultural and food policy, right to education, access to health, sanitation and potable drinking water, income and employment security, and social security mechanism. The government interventions through food-based programmes include the Public Distribution System (PDS), the Targeted PDS (1997), the Integrated Child Development Scheme (mid-1970s), the Mid-day Meal Scheme, Food-for-Work (FFW), the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (2000), the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (*MGNREGA*) etc. The recently enacted National Food Security Act, 2013 aims to provide subsidized food grains to ensure food security to about two-third of the population. Beneficiaries are to be able to purchase 5 kilograms per eligible person per month of cereals at the following prices: rice at at ₹3 per kg, wheat at ₹2 per kg and coarse grains (millet) at ₹1 per kg. Pregnant women, lactating mothers, and certain categories of children are eligible for daily free meals. The eldest woman in the household, 18 years or above, is the head of the household for the issuance of the ration card⁹. The Act is no doubt a bold initiative to provide gender-inclusive food security, but how long this new comprehensive legislation will itself be sustainable to tackle the

issue of sustainable food security system is still yet to be seen.

With the deadline for the Millennium Development Goal-1 on the horizon and with impact of the global economic and financial crisis, the progress of India on many fronts still far from satisfactory. India constitutes one-third poor of world; 42 per cent of children are underweight; 58 per cent of children are stunted by the age of 24 months¹⁰; ranked 63rd in 2013 Global Hunger Index¹¹; ranked 132 in the Gender Inequality Index 2013 which is second highest in the South Asia region after Afghanistan; *ranked 101 among 136 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2013*; and at 136 among 186 countries in Human Development Index (HDI) 2013¹².

What Should Be The Post-2015 Mdgs Agenda ?

- Food security is a complex sustainable development issue, linked to health through malnutrition, but also to sustainable economic development, environment, and trade.
- There should be sustainable agricultural development for sustainable food security. Sustainable food security means sufficient food for everyone at present alongwith the ability to provide enough food in future as well. In the long-run sustainable food security is very important.
- Balancing human and environmental needs is essential for food security and sustainability. The pattern of resource use should aim to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for future generations.
- Sustainable land management is also necessary for sustainable food security. Rain water harvesting, sprinkle irrigation to reduce excessive irrigation water, change in cropping pattern (i.e. produce food crops which requires less water), using same water for many purposes, water recharge,

controlling water pollution etc. are related with the food security.

- Removing the obstacles women encounter in accessing land rights.
- Climate change could potentially interrupt progress toward a world without hunger, the need is develop a 'climate-smart agriculture and food system' which includes: sustainably increasing agricultural productivity and incomes (food security); adapting and building resilience to climate change (adaptation); reducing and/or removing greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation), where possible.
- A transformation of traditional gender roles to complement gender equality strategies and food security strategies. The urgent need is to recognize of the constraints women face, the adoption of measures that help relieve women of their burdens, and the redistribution of gender roles in the discharging of family responsibilities. Recognition of and compensation for women's often invisible, under-valued and unpaid contributions to the care economy, and their role in maintaining the agricultural workforce. The active engagement of women at all levels of decision making is absolutely necessary to attain food and nutritional security.
- Develop the gender-inclusive food security strategies to improve women's access to childcare, farmer support mechanisms, credit, market, agricultural and extension services. Here the focus should be on small and marginal women farmers and agricultural labourers.
- Without women, there cannot be sustainable food security. So the rural women should be empowered to end poverty and food insecurity.
- Shift from the centralised towards the decentralised interventions by the actors

involved in the development debate. Rather than blindly following the development paradigm of Think globally, Act locally, we should also adopt the paradigm of Think locally, Act globally by taking into account the local realities, needs and priorities of the poorest and most-deprived communities.

- Thus, the vision for the post-2015 development agenda should be changing the existing centralized global approach towards a more decentralized glocal framework based on gender inclusive food security system, sustainable economic development and climate-smart food system. The post-2015 goals should be action-oriented, concise, easy to communicate, aspirational, and based on inclusive and sustainable governance approach.

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