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India Is Wasting Its Demographic Dividend

By Kunal Kumar Kundu



Manan Vatsyayana/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

India is home to 42% of the world's underweight children and ranked a dismal 65 out of 79 countries covered in the Global Hunger Index 2012.

The recently launched Global Hunger Index 2012 paints a grim picture for India.

Progress in reducing the proportion of hungry people in the world has been generally slow, but India has actually regressed while a large number of sub-Saharan countries have made strides, shows the report,

published jointly by the International Food Policy Research Institute, Concern Worldwide, and Welthungerhilfe.

World hunger, according to the 2012 Global Hunger Index, has declined since 1990 but remains “serious.” The global average masks dramatic differences among regions and countries. Regionally, the highest GHI scores (the higher the score, the worse the hunger) are in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

South Asia lowered its GHI score significantly between 1990 and 1996—mainly by reducing the share of underweight children—but could not maintain this progress. Sub-Saharan Africa didn’t fare as well as South Asia in the 1990s, but it has caught up since the turn of the millennium. The region’s 2012 GHI score is below that of South Asia, therefore better.

From the 1990 GHI to the 2012 GHI, 15 countries reduced their scores by 50% or more. In terms of absolute progress in that period, Angola, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, Nicaragua, Niger and Vietnam saw the largest improvements in their scores. Some 20 countries still have levels of hunger that are “extremely alarming” or “alarming.” Most of these are in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

With an index value of 22.9, India’s situation is considered “alarming.” It ranked a dismal 65 out of 79 countries covered in 2012. While India’s index value improved marginally from 24.2 in 2001, it was still worse than the 22.6 recorded in 1996, when India ranked 51 out of 79 countries.

India’s dismal show comes despite its strong economic growth. Between fiscal year 1996 and 2012, the Indian economy (in nominal terms) grew at a compound annual growth rate of about 13%. During the same period, India’s per capita GDP rose from \$400 to \$1,417.

Even so, between 2001 and 2012, 31 out of 40 sub-Saharan countries beat India in GHI scores. And 28 of those 31 countries have improved their score at a faster rate than India.

The GHI is a combined index of three sub-indices: proportion of undernourishment in population as a percentage; prevalence of underweight children aged under five as a percentage; and under-five mortality rate as a percentage.

India scores much better than sub-Saharan countries in terms of the under-five mortality rate, so it has to contend with a proportionately large number of children. However, that only partly explains the poor overall performance.

About 44% of Indian children under five are underweight and 48% are stunted. India is home to 42% of the world’s underweight children and 31% of its stunted children. A child under five in India is almost twice as likely to be chronically underweight than in sub-Saharan Africa, according to Unicef.

The latest estimates by the UN Inter-agency Group for Maternal Mortality Estimates show the maternal mortality ratio for India in 2008 was 230 per 100,000 live births. India’s target under the Millennium Development Goal is to reach an MMR of 108 by 2015. But antenatal care services and skilled delivery care in the country are still inadequate. In addition, about 59% of women have no postnatal check up at all.

Evidence suggests that the relatively low status of women in India contributes to deficient nutrition among children, as a mother's wellbeing is an important factor in a child's development.

According to a study by USAID, one in three women in India aged 15–49 has a Body Mass Index below 18.5, indicating severe nutritional deficiency and under-nutrition.

Research has shown that early nutritional deprivation causes lasting damage to children's physical and cognitive development. This leads to lower educational attainment, thereby impacting their economic productivity at a later stage in life. India is apparently pre-ordained to be an economic super power helping to shoulder the burden of global economic growth while banking tremendously on the potential of its demographic dividend. It clearly has its task cut out.

The findings of a recent study by the International Food Policy Research Institute imply that in the absence of concurrent improvements in health and education, only a modest impact on child under-nutrition in India can be expected from income growth.

The government should be spending an increasingly large share of its financial resources on education and health, but expenditure on these sectors is hardly any different from what it was in 1990-91, when reforms were initiated. Instead, India fritters away money on politically motivated populist schemes that increase the vulnerability of the economy while doing hardly anything meaningful for the future generation.

Clearly India has its priorities wrong. Are the policymakers listening?



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