Global Hunger Index (GHI) - India's Position

What is the issue?

India's low rank on the Global Hunger Index (GHI) calls for a relook and revision of the policies and interventions made in this regard.

What is the GHI?

- The GHI has been brought out every year by Welthungerhilfe (lately in partnerships with Concern Worldwide) since 2000.
- A low score gives a country a higher ranking which implies a better performance (low hunger).
- The reason for mapping hunger is to ensure that the world achieves "Zero Hunger by 2030" - a Sustainable Development Goal of the UN.
- This is why GHI is not calculated for certain high-income countries.

Where does Indian stand in the GHI 2021?

> India ranks 101 out of 116 countries for which reliable and comparable data exist.
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> India is also far below some of its neighbouring countries. Pakistan was placed at rank 92, Nepal and Bangladesh both at 76.

- Barring 2020's rank of 94 out of 107 countries, India's rank has been between 100 and 103 since 2017.
- This year's slide in the rank assumes significance especially in the context of COVID-19.
- The Indian government has questioned the methodology and claimed that the ranking did not represent the ground reality.

How is the GHI arrived at?

Four components

1. **Undernourishment** - Share of the population that is undernourished i.e., whose caloric intake is insufficient
2. **Child wasting** - Share of children under the age of 5 who are wasted (low weight for their height), reflecting acute under-nutrition
3. **Child stunting** - Share of children under the age of 5 who are stunted (low height for their age), reflecting chronic under-nutrition
4. **Child mortality** - Mortality rate of children under the age of 5 (partly, a reflection of mix of inadequate nutrition and unhealthy environments)

Sources of data

- Deficiency in calorie intake (33% weight) - Food and Agriculture Organization's Suite of Food Security Indicators (2021).
- Child wasting and stunting (2016-2020) (each accounting for 16.6% of weight) - WHO, UNICEF and World Bank, complemented with the latest data from the Demographic and Health Surveys.
- Child mortality data are for 2019 from the UN Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation.

What are the inadequacies?

- Using a uniform calorie norm to arrive at deficiency prevalence for a diverse country as India fails to recognise the regional imbalances.
- There is higher emphasis on undernutrition than on hunger and its hidden forms, including micronutrient deficiencies.
- Recent analysis establishes that 'physical disease environment' at the State level also significantly influences the calorie intake.
- So, the lower calorie intake may also stem from reduced physical activity, better social infrastructure and access to energy-saving appliances, among others and not necessarily mean only deficiency.
- Most in Kerala and Tamil Nadu may get counted as calorie deficient despite them being better in nutritional outcome indicators.
- Conversely, there are States that have a higher average level of calorie intake, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.
- But, their needs may even be higher than the earmarked level of required calories for India as a whole.
- Because these States have high prevalence of communicable diseases and low level of mechanisation in the economy.
- So, it is likely that the existing methodology might underestimate the prevalence of calorie deficiency in these States.
- All this raises questions on the appropriateness of the calorie component of the index.

How about wasting and stunting?

India's wasting prevalence (17.3%) is one among the highest in the world.

- Child stunting in India declined from 54.2% in 1998–2002 to 34.7% in 2016-2020.
- But child wasting remains around 17% throughout the two decades of the 21st century.

- Child wasting is an acute, short-term measure. It can manifest as a result of an immediate lack of nutritional intake and sudden exposure to an infectious atmosphere.
- Possibly, several episodes of wasting without much time to recoup can translate into stunting.
- But, more focus was given to stunting, both in research and policy, as it is a chronic, long-term measure of undernutrition and is a stable indicator.
- However, addressing the episodes of wasting is crucial and it should guide the relative emphasis of policy attention.

What is the picture with child mortality?

- Generally, child undernutrition plays an important facilitating role in child mortality.
- But despite under-nutrition, with the availability of and access to better health facilities, India has kept the mortality rates lower.
- India’s child mortality rate has been lower compared to Sub-Saharan African countries despite it having higher levels of stunting.

What is to be done?

- Addressing wasting is inevitable to addressing stunting.
- To this, India should adopt a regional approach by effectively monitoring regions that are more vulnerable to socioeconomic and environmental crises.
- The ranking should guide the policy focus and interventions, especially against the pandemic-induced nutrition insecurity.

Source: The Hindu

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