



“Role of ICT in Forging Linkages between Food (Agriculture) and Nutrition”
An Open Debate in - e Agriculture 2009
27 August 2009, Hyderabad

The Proposition

India's Tenth Five Year Plan clearly articulated focused comprehensive strategies for intervention by all concerned sectors – agriculture, public distribution, health and nutrition - to improve the nutritional and health status of individuals. The present focus on ensuring self-sufficiency in food production, improvement in per capita income or reduction in poverty ratio does not necessarily translate into reduction in undernutrition or micronutrient deficiencies¹.

At the national level, there is absence of an integrated approach to food and nutrition security, with different departments - agriculture, food, public distribution, and health - dealing with the issues independent of one another. The Government of India's initiatives like the National Horticultural Mission and National Food Security Mission that seek to address the production side, and the National Rural Health Mission that seeks to focus on nutrition as an element essential for primary health care. The Ministry of Women and Child Development's emphasis on convergence between the health care and food supplementation programmes on the one hand and that between the mid-day meal and school health programmes on the other, are attempts to mainstream food and nutrition, but still a long way to go.

Agriculture is primarily regarded as an economic activity for improving the livelihood of farmers, where the choice of food stuffs produced, processed and provided to the population or the issues concerning health and nutrition receive much less attention.

The 11th Five Year plan also emphasizes on convergence and coordination of poverty, food, nutrition and employment programmes and greater integration of poverty reduction initiatives with food and nutritional programmes. The need of the hour is to develop proper understanding of the importance of mainstreaming food and nutrition security, contribution of different stakeholders, and identifying required communication strategies.

The Rationale and Recommended Response:

The issues to food and nutrition security are inter-sectoral and inter-woven. Dichotomy of food and nutrition sector further complicates this. Some of the dimensions to household food and nutrition security which may require attention are -

- *Economic*: poor purchasing power, poverty, livelihood insecurity, major inequities in asset distribution and control, gender inequities
- *Agricultural*: failure to include nutrition concerns in major cropping and farming systems, leading to limited availability of nutrient rich foods, seasonal food shortages, inequities in food distribution, conversion to cash crops, and decreases in home gardening
- *Cultural*: inadequate knowledge of nutrition, lack of integration at the education systems cultural shifts to prefer less micronutrient rich foods, discriminatory intra-familial food distribution, high workload for women
- *Political and Administrative*: many vertical programmes that are not coordinated, lack of a central coordinating mechanism for nutrition extending from the local to national level

However the question remains -

- How to bring in convergence between the food and nutrition security sectors in India – with special reference to institutional collaboration, policies, research and education and extension.

¹ Undernourished people in India 231 million in 2003-05. (FAO, 2008)



- Can knowledge management in these two sectors bring in better interface, understanding and collaboration? What is the role of ICT?
- What are the grassroots level issues, challenges and learning in this regard?
- How nutrition issues can be mainstreamed in agriculture extension? Can there be convergence between nutrition programmes and agriculture extension system in rural India?
- How greater awareness at producer and consumer level can be generated for nutrition? What is the role of ICT?

The solutions towards mainstreaming of food and nutrition sector may evolve around following -

- Integrate household food and nutrition security concerns into the design of cropping and farming systems (with leadership from Ministry of Agriculture).
- Promote agricultural and horticultural programmes and policies to increase the supply and consumption of safe, nutritious foods and to promote food based remedies for nutritional maladies
- Expand availability of low cost nutritious foods in rural areas through the Universal Public Distribution System, public-private partnerships, women's self help groups and other mechanisms (including high quality complementary foods for children ages 6-24 months)
- Review and revise existing programmes, such as the Mid Day Meal Scheme to improve the quality of foods provided and the nutrition education elements of the programmes
- The need to widen the food basket by creating the demand to include a wide range of millets like *ragi*, legumes, vegetables and tubers.
- National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) sites, where mostly illiterate women and men work on unskilled jobs, could have a nutrition clinic operated by a knowledgeable person, and a PDS facility.
- The National Rural Health Mission, supported by a large number of ASHAs, offers an uncommon opportunity for strengthening health and nutrition security. It is worthwhile to consider methods of adding a nutrition component to this Mission and thereby launching an Integrated National Rural Health and Nutrition Mission. Obviously such an integrated mission is equally important for urban areas.
- Promote the use of information technology platforms and innovations for nutrition education and monitoring efforts; Establish Village Nutrition Literacy Centres Harmonise nutrition communication guidelines and core messages across ministries and programmes *Gyan Chaupals* can run adult nutrition literacy programmes based on computer aided learning technology.

Panelists:

- Dr. Prema Ramachandran, Director, Nutrition Foundation of India
- Dr. Shankar Datta, Managing Director, BASIX
- Dr Geethakutty, Professor and Head, Centre for Gender Studies, National Institute of Rural Development
- Dr. V P Sharma, Manage
- Mr. Michael Riggs, FAO, Rome

Moderator of the discussion: Dr. Gopi Ghosh, Assistant FAO Representative, New Delhi

Discussion Format will be an open moderated debate with view points of panelist and participants taken in a flow addressing each concerns and taking forward to a possible strategies, approaches for consideration by various stakeholders.