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Q17

How far do you agree with the view that the focus on lack of availability of food as the main cause of hunger takes the attention away from ineffective human development policies in India? (15).

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2018 · GS II · 15 marks · Poverty and Hunger

Issues relating to poverty and hunger.

Core demand of the question

- How far do you agree with the view that the focus on lack of availability of food as the main cause of hunger takes the attention away from ineffective human development policies in India?

Revision summary

India often has enough grain in the aggregate while child malnutrition stays high.

Sen's entitlement approach and FAO's four pillars show that access and utilisation drive most hunger here.

Health, sanitation, women's education, ICDS, MDM and wages are the weak human-development links.

NFSA is a cereal right, not a complete nutrition policy.

Availability still matters as drought insurance, but it should not dominate the hunger diagnosis.

Introduction

India can hold large public foodgrain stocks and still record high child stunting, wasting and anaemia. **Amartya Sen's** point was that famine and hunger are often failures of entitlement, not empty fields. A policy that talks only of production and godowns therefore misses health, sanitation, women's education, wages and the last-mile public distribution system. The view is largely right, with one limit: availability still matters in drought, conflict and price spikes.

Body

Availability is not the same as nutrition

- FAO speaks of availability, access, utilisation and stability. Hunger in India after the Green Revolution is mainly access and utilisation, not a national calorie drought.
- FCI warehouses and record procurement can coexist with a household that has no ration card, no cash, or no fuel and water to cook a diverse diet.
- NFHS rounds have shown stubborn stunting and anaemia even in years of comfortable grain output. That is hidden hunger and poor care, not a missing wheat mountain.
- If debate stops at "grow more rice and wheat", millets, pulses, milk, eggs and fruit stay outside the hunger file, and so do mothers' anaemia and children's gut infections.

Human development policies that decide whether food becomes nourishment

- **Health:** public-health spending has long been low as a share of GDP; untreated diarrhoea and worms waste the calories that PDS rice provides.
- **Sanitation and water:** open defecation and dirty water (the utilisation pillar) convert food into disease. **Swachh Bharat** and Jal Jeevan are hunger policies in this sense, not only amenity policies.
- Women's education, age at marriage, and antenatal care shape birth weight and feeding. Gender-blind food policy is ineffective human development.
- **Livelihoods:** MGNREGA, minimum wages and diversification decide whether a household can buy food when the fair-price shop fails. Sen's entitlement is a wage and a price, not only a tonne.
- ICDS, Mid-Day Meal, and the National Health Mission are the actual nutrition machines. Leakage, vacancy of anganwadi workers, and poor protein menus are HD failures with a food label.
- NFSA, 2013, shifted the legal frame from welfare gift to a right to foodgrain, but it is still cereal-heavy. A right to grain is not a full human-development nutrition policy.

How far to agree

- **Agree to a large extent:** India's main hunger story is no longer "we do not grow enough", it is "we do not convert growth into capabilities". Focusing on availability as the main cause is an old scarcity script that protects weak health, education and sanitation budgets.
- Do not agree to the extreme that availability is irrelevant. Climate shocks, groundwater stress, and regional drought still need buffers, MSP and open-market operations. A nutrition policy without grain stability is also incomplete.
- **The honest ranking for most districts is:** entitlements and HD first, production as insurance. Pulse and millet production still need a push because availability of those foods is weaker than of rice and wheat.

What a corrected focus looks like

- Measure success by NFHS nutrition and by dietary diversity, not only by FCI stocks.
- Tie PDS to fortified staples, pulses and oils where fiscally possible, and fix exclusion errors with Aadhaar only if the authentic poor are not struck off.
- Treat POSHAN, health workers, toilets and girls' schooling as one hunger strategy under the National Food Security and human-development umbrella.

Flow diagram

Hunger -> Availability grain stocks
 Hunger -> Access entitlements wages PDS
 Hunger -> Utilisation health WASH care
 Access entitlements wages PDS -> Human development policies
 Utilisation health WASH care -> Human development policies
 Availability grain stocks -> Necessary buffer not main cause

Conclusion

- **The view is largely correct:** treating lack of availability as the main cause of hunger hides India's real gap, which is ineffective human-development policy on health, sanitation, women's status, wages and a narrow PDS. Availability remains a necessary buffer, not the main explanation of everyday hunger. Hunger policy is therefore HD policy with a food-security floor, not a harvest speech.

Facts & figures

Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines

Showed that starvation can occur without a fall in total food availability, through failed entitlements.

National Food Security Act, 2013

Legal entitlement to subsidised grain for priority households; still cereal-centred.

NFHS nutrition indicators

Stunting, wasting and anaemia remain high relative to India's foodgrain output.

ICDS and Mid-Day Meal

Core human-development feeding programmes; quality and worker vacancies decide outcomes.

FAO food-security pillars

Availability, access, utilisation and stability; India is weakest on access and utilisation for the poor.

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