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FOOD & NUTRITION SECURITY: CHALLENGES IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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The issue of food security is back on the agenda for developed countries but more so for developing countries. The recent spells of global food price inflation have once again exposed the vulnerability of the population in developing countries, particularly the poor. Among the most affected are the countries in South Asia, which remains the geographical region with the highest level of malnutrition. Within Asia, India is home to the largest number of malnourished persons in the world. While the high levels of malnutrition are worrying, the fact that there has not been any significant reduction in malnutrition in the recent past despite India being the second-fastest growing economy of the world is intriguing. On the other hand, there has been concern about the deterioration in the food security situation in recent years because of a continuous spell of inflation which has remained above 10% for the last 3 years. The fact that this episode of slow improvement in most nutritional indicators—and even the worsening of some, including intake indicators—has coincided with the period of the highest-ever growth of the Indian economy is puzzling. It is puzzling also because the most recent period between 2004–2005 and 2009–2010 shows a significant decline in poverty. While at the aggregate level, this may suggest that the growth of the economy has also led to improvements in the incomes of the poor; this is not true when disaggregated at the state level. This shows that there is a very poor correlation not only between the growth rates of state domestic product (SDP) and poverty reduction, but also with relative food prices and agricultural growth at the state level.

However, further examination suggests that the extent of poverty reduction as well as nutritional improvements may have more to do with policies at the state level, particularly redistributive policies and the governance of public services, including the primary channel of ensuring food security, the Public Distribution System (PDS). Thus the causes of existing food insecurity can be better viewed under three concepts namely the: ‘traditional concept’ which includes factors such as unavailability of food and poor purchasing capacity; ‘socio-demographic concept’ which includes illiteracy, unemployment, overcrowding, poor environmental conditions and gender bias; ‘politico-developmental concept’ comprising of factors such as lack of intersectoral coordination and political will, poorly monitored nutritional programmes and inadequate public food distribution system. As the problem is multi-factorial, so the solution needs to be multi-sectoral. Some of the measures which could be suggested to tackle the situation includes implementing measures to improve agricultural productivity and food storage, Ensuring food availability and accessibility to below poverty line (BPL) candidates, Improving purchasing power through employment generating

schemes, Crop diversification, establishing food grain banks and promoting household gardening, Community awareness through IEC activities and social marketing, Monitoring and timely evaluation of nutritional programmes, Community participation and intersectoral coordination.

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