

Sustainable Food Security: Challenges and Way Forward

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Abstract

Food Security has attracted serious international attention for the past few decades, especially since the 1970s. The conceptualization of food security underwent various changes to emerge as a comprehensive definition because it is a multifaceted problem including different interlinked facets. The World Food Crisis of 1972-74 period played a serious role in gaining more world attention towards Food Security issues. The evolution of food security conceptualization in the post-1980 period was very strong and fast. One of the most comprehensive definitions of food security was given by FAO in 2002, which says - "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for active and healthy life" (FAO 2002). The Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition (UDEHM) declares that "every man, woman, and child have an inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition" (UDEHM 1974). The definition given by the World Food Program was, "Food security is a condition that exists when all people, at all times, are free from hunger". (WFP, 2009, p. 170). Thus, food security ultimately means a situation free of hunger.

Research Problem and Research Area: Even though food security got much importance in the seventeen sustainable development goals, and attracted much attention while framing economic and social policies, food security especially sustainable food security, is still facing various challenges. United Nations estimates in 2023, projected that more than 600 million people will face hunger, and if the current trend continues, 575 million people will still be living in extreme poverty and only one-third of the countries will halve their national poverty levels by 2030 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2023). This paper aims to address some of the important challenges facing sustainable food security worldwide, especially during the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, and suggest ways to reduce food insecurity prevailing all around the globe.

Methodology of the Study: Since the study requires authentic global data, the author used authentic secondary data published by international institutions for the study.

Major findings of the study: More than 4 billion people remain unprotected without being included in any social safety net against food insecurity, and it is about half of the total world population of 8.03 billion. 2.2 billion people lacked safely managed drinking water. Children below the age of 5 show that stunting, wasting and overweight issues are common with respective numbers of 148 million, 45 million, and 38 million in 2022.

Keywords: Sustainable Food Security, Sustainable Development Goals, Food Insecurity, Right to Food, Malnutrition

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 gave extreme importance to a sustainable food system and paved the way for various

transformations in agricultural activities to end hunger, and achieve food and more nutritional security for the present generation by 2030. It also aims to ensure a food-secure future for the coming generations. After extensive research on famines across the globe, Prof. Amartya Sen has made many original contributions to developing the food security concept. An important observation made by him was that in most cases of famines, the main problem was not the lack of food but the lack of access of poor people to a minimum quantity of food. To ensure food security, people should be entitled to adequate means under the prevailing social and legal systems in different countries. Thus, in Sen's view, the most basic condition for ensuring food security is the creation of 'capability' through 'entitlement'.

The World Health Organisation identified three facets of food security such as 'food availability, food access, and food use'. Food availability means the consistent availability of adequate quantities of food. Food access means the economical and physical access of sufficient resources, to attain suitable food for a nutritious diet. Food use means the use based on appropriate knowledge of nutrition and care, as well as sufficient water and sanitation. FAO adds a fourth facet to the above: 'the stability of the first three dimensions *over time*'. Right to Food is basically an Individual that protects the rights of all human beings to exist in dignity, without starvation, food insecurity, and undernourishment.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the major challenges that threaten the food security targets envisaged in the sustainable development goals.
2. To find out the possible solutions to fight against food insecurity in the world.

Methodology of the Study

This paper address some of the important challenges facing sustainable food security worldwide, especially during the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, and suggest ways to reduce food insecurity prevailing all around the globe. Since the study requires authentic global data, the author used secondary data for the study. A major part of the factual information was taken from various UN, FAO, WFP, and WHO databases and reports. The author synthesizes information from various authentic global sources to find out and include the maximum number of challenges and possible way forward to ensure sustainable food security to the world.

The term Sustainable food security has more dimensions than mere food security conceptualization. Sustainable food security refers to the ability of a population to consistently access a sufficient quantity of nutritious and safe food over the long term, without compromising the integrity of the environment or the ability of future generations to meet their own food needs. It involves meeting present food needs while ensuring that resources are managed in a way that maintains their availability for future generations. This includes promoting environmentally sustainable agricultural practices, equitable distribution of food resources, economic viability for food producers, and social justice in access to food. Sustainable food security addresses not only immediate hunger and malnutrition but also the underlying causes of food insecurity, such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation etc. The right to food ensures that all people can feed themselves in dignity. The right to food has been documented in Article 25 of the 'Universal Declaration on Human Rights' and Article 11 of the 'International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights' (ICESCR). Three types of state obligations are associated with the right to food – the obligations to

respect, protect, and realize. This typology of a country's obligations is mentioned in General Comment 12 by the 'Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' and approved by different nations, when the FAO Council accepted the 'Right to Food Guidelines' in November 2004.

According to the Food and Agricultural Organization, a "*food system encompasses the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food product that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and parties of the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded*" (FAO 2018). A food system that can provide food and nutritional security to all without adversely affecting the food and nutritional security of the future generation can be called a sustainable food system (FAO 2018).

The world is now facing a large number of challenges to achieve sustainable food security. The common challenges can be seen as climate change, depletion of natural resources, population growth, land degradation, food loss and waste, water scarcity, a decline of marine resources, food safety and quality-related challenges, urbanization and changing diets, pesticide, and chemical dependency, gender inequality, poverty, energy deficiency, food sovereignty and trade policies and socio-economic and political factors. Challenges other than socio-economic and political can be addressed by investing in sustainable agriculture, climate-resilient farming practices, promoting agricultural biodiversity, improving access to resources, enhancing food safety and quality, empowering small holder farmers, invest for research and innovation in the agricultural sector, promoting sustainable fisheries management, strengthening land tenure and rights, encouraging sustainable consumption patterns, enhancing trade policies, address gender inequality, building a more resilient food systems etc.

Among the various challenges stated above, socio-economic and political factors are the most dynamic factor which in most case will have some sudden impact on the food security of the world masses. Challenges facing sustainable food security at this point are going to consider the effects of two unpredicted shocks that arose in the world's socio-economic and political environments after 2019. One such major shock was the COVID-19 Pandemic created tensions and helplessness and the second which affected food security at the macro level was the shock created by the Russia-Ukraine war.

Findings of the Study

Despite the increase in social protection programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic, more than 4 billion people remain unprotected without being included in any social safety net against food insecurity, and it is about half of the total world population of 8.03 billion (as per the U.S. and World Population Clock 29/02/2024). The data shows that 2.2 billion people lacked safely managed drinking water. Statistics of children below the age of 5 show that stunting, wasting and overweight issues are common with respective numbers of 148 million, 45 million, and 38 million in 2022. Malnutrition persisting worldwide will jeopardize children's well-being and adversely affect future development (Sustainable Development Goal Report, 2023). The World Hunger Project (WHP) based on the 'State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World' (SOFI) report 2023, says, 783 million people lived in hunger in the year 2022 (WHP 2023). In 2022, global hunger, measured through the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) (SDG Indicator 2.1.1), exhibited little variation compared to 2021. However, it continues significantly above pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels, impacting nearly 9.2 percent of the world population in 2022, a rise from 7.9 percent recorded in 2019 (SOFI Report 2023). It is estimated that 691 to 783 million people worldwide encountered hunger in 2022.

Within this range, if we take the average number, 737 million people faced hunger, marking an increase of 120 million compared to 2019, before the onset of the pandemic. In 2021, an economic recovery was visible after the slowdown due to the pandemic declined in 2022 because of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The war caused a sudden increase in prices of food, energy, and agricultural inputs. All these hampered the retrieval of employment opportunities and income all around the globe and adversely affected the efforts to reduce hunger and malnutrition. Prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) increased to 19.7 percent in 2022 from 19.4 percent in 2021. The total number of people facing hunger surged by 57 million since the onset of the pandemic (SOFI Report 2023). Compared to other regions world, Africa has a higher proportion of the population facing hunger. It has nearly 20 percent affected people, in contrast to 8.5 percent of people in Asia, 6.5 percent of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 7.0 percent of people in Oceania. Compared to men women are disproportionately affected by food insecurity worldwide. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global gender gap in food insecurity widened. In Asia and Latin America, the gender gap decreased significantly but it expanded in Africa, Northern America, and Europe. Again, food insecurity among urban populations is comparatively less than the increasing food insecurity trends among rural and peri-urban populations (SOFI Report 2023).

Suggestions to Reduce Food Insecurity Issues

Food insecurity issues caused by socio-economic and political reasons can be corrected by emergency food assistance, strengthening social safety nets, supporting smallholder farmers, promoting resilient food systems, addressing supply chain disruptions, preventing or mitigating price increases, long-term recovery, and resilience building, promoting world peace and stability, etc. During the time of COVID-19 and other natural calamities, we saw emergency food assistance extended by governments, NGOs, and various other agencies. Strengthening social safety nets Public Distribution System (PDS) by providing subsidies, and enhancing procurement storage and distribution. Converting PDS as a leak-free mechanism itself will enhance the food security of the masses. The establishment of fair-price shops will also be beneficial to enhance economic and physical access to food. Supporting smallholder farmers is essential not only to continue production but also to protect product diversity and nutritional security. Production of many local varieties of millets and pulses will be benefited by the support of small and marginal farmers. Promoting resilient food systems is necessary to ensure food security during adversities caused especially by natural calamities. Long-term recovery and resilience building will strengthen the agricultural sector to systematically address the probable supply shocks due to unexpected situations. Promoting world peace and stability can be done by addressing the root causes of conflicts in the affected regions. It will be helpful for a stable supply of food items from one region or country to the other.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the drive to achieve sustainable food security is not easy because it is multi-faceted in nature, presenting many complex challenges that too require innovative solutions and collective efforts from many walks of the society especially governments, NGOs, activists and from each individual participant. By identifying the interconnectedness among food production, environmental preservation, distribution and social equity, we have to pave the way forward towards a more resilient and egalitarian food system. Promoting sustainable agricultural practices, encouraging

biodiversity, reducing food wastage, and introduction of inclusive policies are important in ensuring food and nutritional security for present and future generations. Through the desirable alliance among governments, non-governmental organizations, various communities, firms, farmers, and people, we have the opportunity and responsibility to transform our food systems in such a way that which sufficiently nourish both people and the planet. Let us try together to build a better future where everyone has the access to safe, nutritious, and sustainably produced food, to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for creating a world of equality for all in terms of physical, social and economic access to food for an active and healthy life.

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