



Alarming hunger or statistical artefact?

The low rank on the Global Hunger Index should push India to look again at its policies and interventions

The GHI

This year's Global Hunger Index (GHI) did not go down well with the government. This was expected given that it ranks India 101 out of 116 countries for which reliable and comparable data exist. To add insult to injury, the GHI puts India far below some of its neighbouring countries. Barring last year'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 methodology underscan

- The government has questioned the methodology and claimed that the ranking does not represent the ground reality. This calls for careful scrutiny of the methodology, especially of the GHI's components.
- The GHI has four components. The first — insufficient calorie intake — is applicable for all age groups, whereas the remaining three — wasting (low weight for height), stunting (low height for age) and mortality — are confined to children under five years.

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Mortality Estimation. Contrary to what is being claimed by the government, the assessment of the situation of hunger is not based on the results of a four-question 'minimum diet', as claimed ideologically by Gallego. However, this does not mean that the GHI is free from inadequacies.

A problematic component
Conceptually, the GHI is largely child-specific, with a higher weight given undernutrition than on hunger and its hidden faces, including micronutrient deficiencies. The first component — calorie insufficiency — is problematic for many reasons. The lower calorie intake, which does not necessarily mean malnutrition, may be a result of reduced physical activity, better social infrastructure (roads, transport and health centres) and access to energy-saving appliances at home, among others. Recent analysis estimates that physical distance, road network and air quality level significantly influence the calorie intake. Peru was an outlier country like India, being a southern nation with very arid conditions. It also had a high population density and a high level of urbanisation at the state level. From this linkage point, a large proportion of the population in rural and semi-rural areas may get involved in calorie-deficient diets than being better in nutritional status indicators. So, the prevalence of calorie deficiency in these states may be overestimated.

Conceptually, there are states that have a higher average level of calorie intake, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, but their results may even be higher than the national level of undernourished calories for India as a whole because these states have high prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies. This is likely due to the high prevalence of undernourished calories for India as a whole because these states have high prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies. This is likely due to the high prevalence of undernourished calories for India as a whole because these states have high prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies.

If India can tackle wasting by effectively removing regions that are more vulnerable to malnutrition and environmental crises, it can possibly improve wasting and stunting statistically. There needs to be an official cut-off for reporting wasting without addressing wasting. Additionally, states like Uttar Pradesh are likely to have a higher prevalence of undernourished calories for India as a whole because these states have high prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies. This is likely due to the high prevalence of undernourished calories for India as a whole because these states have high prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies.

Tackling wasting and stunting
The GHI highlights India's child undernourishment, which is child undernourishment. India's wasting government (17.3%) is not among the highest in the world. Its performance in stunting, when compared to stunting, is not that good, though. Child stunting in India declined from 64.2% in 1999-2002 to 34.7% in 2016-2020, whereas child wasting, which averaged 17% throughout the two decades of the 21st century.

Stunting is a chronic, long-term condition of undernutrition, while wasting is an acute, short-term condition. Child wasting can manifest as a result of an immediate lack of nutrients, inadequate food intake, or a combination of both. Stunting is a chronic condition that results from long-term malnutrition, while wasting is an acute condition that results from short-term malnutrition. Stunting is a chronic condition that results from long-term malnutrition, while wasting is an acute condition that results from short-term malnutrition.





Undernourishment:

1. The data on deficiency in calorie intake, accorded 33% weight, is sourced from the Food and Agriculture Organization's Suite of Food Security Indicators (2021).
2. Had the GHI been estimated using the latest data on calorie intake, usually provided by the National Sample Survey Office, things might have looked even worse given that the leaked report of 2019 indicated that consumption expenditure in India declined between 2011-12 and 2017-18 by 4%. In rural India, it was worse at about 10% per annum.

Wasting, Stunting and under 5 mortality:

1. The data on child wasting and stunting (2016-2020), each accounting for 16.6% of weight, is from the World Health Organization, UNICEF and World Bank, complemented with the latest data from the Demographic and Health Surveys.
2. Under-five mortality data are for 2019 from the UN Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation.
3. Contrary to what is being claimed by the government, the assessment of the situation of hunger is not based on the results of a 'four question' opinion poll, conducted telephonically by Gallup. However, this does not mean that the GHI is free from inadequacies.

A problematic component

1. Conceptually, the GHI is largely children-oriented with a higher emphasis on undernutrition than on hunger and its hidden forms, including micronutrient deficiencies.
2. The first component — calorie insufficiency — is problematic for many reasons. The lower calorie intake, which does not necessarily mean deficiency, may also stem from reduced physical activity, better social infrastructure (road, transport and healthcare) and access to energy-saving appliances at home, among others.
3. Recent analysis establishes that the 'physical disease environment' at the State level also significantly influences calorie intake.
4. For a vast and diverse country like India, using a uniform calorie norm to arrive at deficiency prevalence means failing to recognise the huge regional imbalances in factors that may lead to differentiated calorie requirements at the State level.

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5. From this vantage point, a large proportion of the population in Kerala and Tamil Nadu may get counted as calorie deficient despite them being better in nutritional outcome indicators. So, the prevalence of calorie deficiency in these States may be overestimated.
6. Conversely, there are States that have a higher average level of calorie intakes, 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 a high prevalence of communicable diseases and low level of mechanisation in the economy.
7. Thus, it is likely that the existing methodology might underestimate the prevalence of calorie deficiency in these States.
8. All this raises questions on the appropriateness of the calorie component of the index. India's own official estimates of the prevalence of calorie deficiency are not free from this anomaly.

Tackling wasting and stunting

1. The GHI highlights India's dismal record in a domain that it can hardly defend, which is child undernutrition.
2. India's wasting prevalence (17.3%) is one among the highest in the world. Its performance in stunting, when compared to wasting, is not that dismal, though.
3. Child stunting in India declined from 54.2% in 1998-2002 to 34.7% in 2016-2020, whereas child wasting remains around 17% throughout the two decades of the 21st century.
4. Stunting is a chronic, long-term measure of undernutrition, while wasting is an acute, short-term measure. Child wasting can manifest as a result of an immediate lack of nutritional intake and sudden exposure to an infectious atmosphere. Quite possibly, several episodes of wasting without much time to recoup can translate into stunting.
5. However, a higher order of priority was accorded to stunting, both in research and policy, for the right reasons as it is a stable indicator and does not oscillate with minor changes in circumstances, while wasting does.
6. Sporadic emergent circumstances in different regions may increase wasting prevalence. Effectively countering episodes of wasting resulting from such sporadic adversities is key to making sustained and quick progress in child nutrition.

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7. Thus, variations in wasting prevalence across the region should guide the relative emphasis of policy attention. If India can tackle wasting by effectively monitoring regions that are more vulnerable to socioeconomic and environmental crises, it can possibly improve wasting and stunting simultaneously.
8. There seems to be no short-cut way of improving stunting without addressing wasting. Additionally, studies say that COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate child undernutrition in general and child wasting in particular.
9. Such insights should have driven social policy to counter the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on food and nutrition insecurity. Unfortunately, India lost this opportunity as Integrated Child Development Scheme services were either non-functional or severely disrupted — partly because the staff and services were utilised to attend to the COVID-19 emergency.

An exception

1. India's relatively better performance in the other component of GHI — child mortality — merits a mention. Studies suggest that child undernutrition and mortality are usually closely related, as child undernutrition plays an important facilitating role in child mortality. However, India appears to be an exception in this regard.
2. India's child mortality rate has been lower compared to Sub-Saharan African countries despite it having higher levels of stunting. This implies that though India was not able to ensure better nutritional security for all children under five years, it was able to save many lives due to the availability of and access to better health facilities.

The low ranking does not mean that India fares uniformly poor in every aspect. This ranking should prompt us to look at our policy focus and interventions and ensure that they can effectively address the concerns raised by the GHI, especially against pandemic-induced nutrition insecurity.

Powering the energy sector

In an energy-dependent country like India, the availability of energy supplies at affordable rates is pivotal for fulfilling developmental priorities. But the energy sector is beset with problems.

1. The distribution sector has for long been the bane of the power sector, consistently making huge losses owing to problems such as expensive long-

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term power purchase agreements, poor infrastructure, inefficient operations, and leakages and weaknesses in State-level tariff policies.

2. Most discoms are deep into the red as high aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) losses are chipping into their revenues.

CENTRE, STATE IN 'POWER' TUSSLE

➤ The draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2020, was released on April 17

➤ It proposes to privatise discoms by way of sub-licensing and franchisee models

➤ Sub-licensing will allow states to choose private companies on the lines of Mumbai and Delhi

➤ The new Bill also proposes to set up an Electricity Contract Enforcement Authority (ECEA) to deal with issues of non-performance of contracts



Dismantling state monopoly

1. Against this backdrop, the Electricity (Amendment) Bill of 2020 is a game-changing reform. The wide-ranging provisions of the Bill will set the process of de-licensing power distribution after the monopoly of the state is dismantled.
2. In fact, the privatisation of discoms in Delhi has reduced AT&C losses significantly from 55% in 2002 to 9% in 2020.
3. Open access for purchasing power from the open market should be implemented across States and barriers in the form of cross-subsidy surcharge, additional surcharge and electricity duty being applied by States should be reviewed.

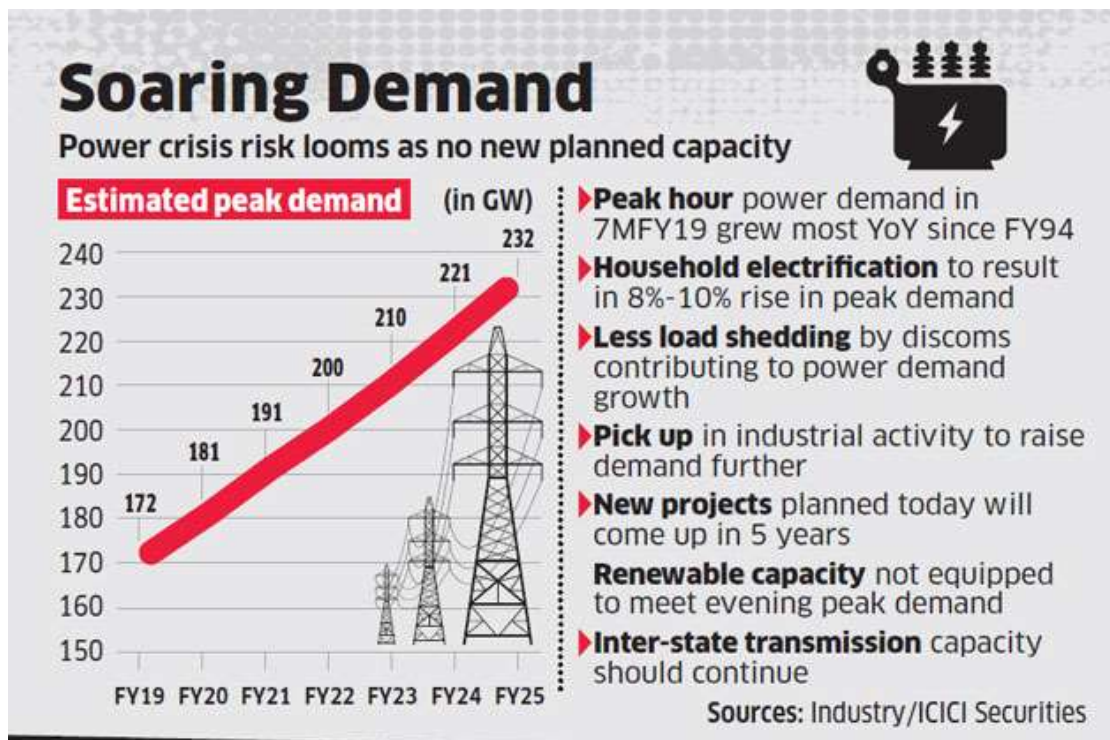
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4. The question of tariffs needs to be revisited if the power sector is to be strengthened.
5. All this will happen when discoms are made autonomous and are allowed by regulatory authorities to revise tariffs without interference from the States.
6. Electrical energy should be covered under GST, with a lower rate of GST, as this will make it possible for power generator/transmission/distribution utilities to get a refund of input credit, which in turn will reduce the cost of power.
7. Other antidotes to the problem include the use of technology solutions such as the installation of smart meters and smart grids which will reduce AT&C losses and restore the financial viability of the sector.



Push for renewable energy and other reforms:

1. The impetus to renewable energy in the bill, which will help us mitigate the impact of climate change, is much needed.
2. One option is to encourage roof-top solar plants. Despite its inherent benefits, the segment has shown relatively slow progress with an estimated installed capacity of 5-6 GW as of date, well short of the 2022 target.

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3. Another welcome feature of the Bill is the strengthening of the regulatory architecture of the sector.
4. This will be done by appointing a member with a legal background in every electricity regulatory commission and strengthening the Appellate Tribunal for Electricity. This will ensure faster resolution of long-pending issues and reduce legal hassles.
5. The Bill also underpins the importance of green energy by proposing a penalty for non-compliance with the renewable energy purchase obligations which mandate States and power distribution companies to purchase a specified quantity of electricity from renewable and hydro sources.
6. This will ensure that India gradually moves towards non-fossil fuels thereby helping it meet its global climate change commitments.
7. Some other significant features of the Bill such as the creation of an Electricity Contract Enforcement Authority to supervise the fulfilment of contractual obligations under the power purchase agreement, cost-reflective tariffs and provision of subsidy through DBT are commendable.

Early passage of the Bill is critical as it will help unleash a path-breaking reform for bringing efficiency and profitability to the distribution sector.