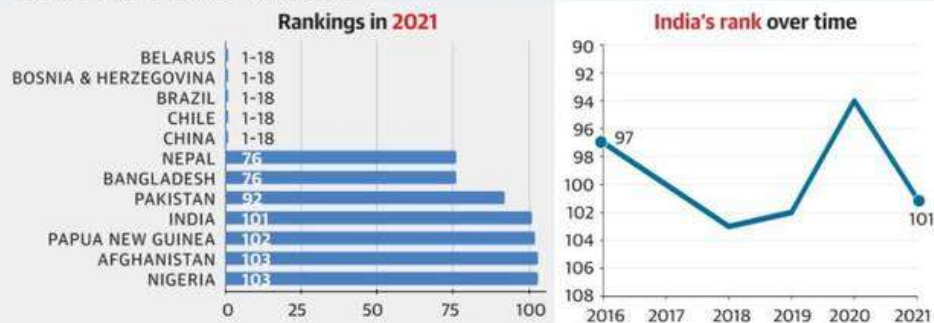




A reminder that India still trails in the hunger fight

- The Global Hunger Report (GHR) has once again made headlines in India for the country's poor ranking in terms of the Global Hunger Index (GHI). The report ranks India at 101 out of 116 countries, with the country falling in the category of having a 'serious' hunger situation.

Alarming levels | The Global Hunger Index (GHI) tracks hunger and malnutrition across countries using four indicators - undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting and child mortality. Based on this, GHI determines hunger on a 100-point scale, where 0 is the best possible score (no hunger) and 100 is the worst. In 2021, India was classified in the "serious category" on the GHI severity scale



- The ranks are not comparable across years because of various methodological issues and so it is wrong to say that India's standing has fallen from 94 (out of 107) in 2020.

- However, it is true that year after year, India ranks at the lower end — below a number of other countries that are poorer in terms of per capita incomes. This in itself is cause for concern.

Composition of Global Hunger Index



The indicators

1. The Government of India, through a press release, refuted the GHI, claiming that it is 'devoid of ground reality and based on 'unscientific' methodology.
2. The GHI is 'based on four indicators — the percentage of undernourished in the population (PoU); percentage of children under five years who suffer from wasting (low weight-for-height); percentage of children under five years who suffer from stunting (low height-for-age), and percentage of children who die before the age of five (child mortality)'.
3. The first and the last indicators have a weight of one-third each and the two-child malnutrition indicators account for one-sixth weightage each in the final GHI, where each indicator is standardised based on thresholds set slightly above the highest country-level values.
4. Looking at each of these indicators separately, India shows a worsening in PoU and childhood wasting in comparison with 2012. It is the PoU figure of 15.3% for 2018-20 that the Government is contesting.



From official data sources

1. The Government's objection to the methodology, that "They have based their assessment on the results of a 'four question' opinion poll, which was conducted telephonically by Gallup", is not based on facts.

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2. The report is not based on the Gallup poll; rather, it is on the PoU data that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) puts out regularly (as has also been clarified by the publishing agencies).
3. PoU, according to the FAO, 'is an estimate of the proportion of the population whose habitual food consumption is insufficient to provide the dietary energy levels that are required to maintain a normally active and healthy life.
4. PoU is estimated taking into account a number of factors such as food availability, food consumption patterns, income levels and distribution, population structure, etc. All the data used are from official data sources of respective national governments.
5. In the absence of food consumption data in most countries, this indicator is an estimate based on a modelling exercise using available data; therefore, there is some margin of error. Most of the criticism of the FAO's PoU data has been about how it underestimates hunger rather than over.
6. Therefore, while there is scope for a valid discussion on the GHI methodology and its limitations, this objection by the Government is not warranted.

The slow rate of progress

1. The main message that the GHR gives is to once again remind us that India has not been very successful in tackling the issue of hunger and that the rate of progress is very slow.
2. Comparable values of the index have been given in the report for four years, i.e., 2000, 2006, 2012 and 2021. While the GHI improved from 37.4 to 28.8 during 2006-12, the improvement is only from 28.8 to 27.5 between 2012-21.
3. The PoU data show that the proportion of the undernourished population showed a declining trend up to 2016-18 when it reached the lowest level of 13.8%, after which there is an increase to 14% for 2017-19 and 15.3% for 2018-20.
4. Other data also broadly validate these findings. The partial results of the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-20) also show that stunting and wasting indicators have stagnated or declined for most States for which data is available.
5. The leaked report of the consumption expenditure survey (2017-18) also showed that rural consumption had fallen between 2012-18 and urban consumption showed a very slight increase.

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A period before the pandemic

1. It must also be remembered that all the data are for the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. There were many indications based on nationally representative data — such as from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy and various field surveys conducted by research organisations, academics and civil society groups — that the situation of food insecurity at the end of the year 2020 was concerning, and things are most likely to have become worse after the second wave.
2. Many of these surveys find that over 60% of the respondents say that they are eating less than before the national lockdown in 2020. Services such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and school mid-day meals continue to be disrupted in most areas, denying crores of children the one nutritious meal a day they earlier had access to.
3. It would, therefore, not be surprising if national surveys (hopefully conducted soon) show a further slowdown in improvement in malnutrition.
4. The response cannot be one of denial; rather, what is needed are measures to ensure rapid recovery. It has been pointed out by many that the relief measures of the Government, so far, have been inadequate in comparison to the scale of the problem.

Cuts for schemes

1. The only substantial measure has been the provision of additional free foodgrains through the Public Distribution System (PDS), and even this has been lacking. It leaves out about 40% of the population, many of whom are in need and includes only cereals. Also, as of now, it ends in November 2021.
2. At the same time, inflation in other foods, especially edible oils, has also been very high affecting people's ability to afford healthy diets.
3. On the one hand, while we need additional investments and greater priority for food, nutrition and social protection schemes, Budget 2021 saw cuts in real terms for schemes such as the ICDS and the mid-day meal.

The argument that the GHI is an indicator of undernutrition and not hunger, is only diverting attention away from more substantial issues. Of course, malnutrition is affected by a number of factors (such as health, sanitation, etc.) other than food consumption alone, but that in no way means that healthy diets are not central. There is no denying that diverse nutritious diets for all Indians still remain a distant dream.