

Hunger Worldwide

India is below Bangladesh and African Rwanda in the global hunger rankings

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India continues to have serious levels of widespread hunger forcing it to be ranked a lowly 97 among 118 developing countries, of which the Global Hunger Index (GHI) was calculated in 2016. Countries worse than India include extremely poor African countries such as Niger, Chad, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone, besides two of India's neighbours: Afghanistan and Pakistan. Other neighbours Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and China are all ranked above India.

The GHI is calculated by taking into account four key parameters : shares of undernourished population, wasted and stunted children aged under 5, and infant mortality rate of the same age group. Of the 131 countries studied, data was available for 118 countries. This year, for the first time, two measures of child hunger—wasting and stunting—have been used to give a more complete picture. Wasting refers to low weight in relation to a child's height, reflecting acute malnutrition. Stunting refers to the deficiency in height in relation to age, reflecting chronic undernutrition.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) makes the annual calculation of GHI. Basing its readings on the most recent data, the 2016 GHI for India was derived from the fact that an estimated 15% population is undernourished—lacking in adequate food intake, both in quantity and quality.

The share of under-5 children who are 'wasted' is about 15% while the share of children who are 'stunted' is a staggering 39%. This reflects widespread and chronic lack of balanced food. The under-5 mortality rate is 4.8% in India, partially reflecting the fatal synergy of inadequate nutrition and unhealthy environments.

Endemic poverty, unemployment, lack of sanitation and safe drinking water, and lack of effective healthcare are main factors for the sorry state.

Compared with previous years, marked improvement has taken place in child stunting and under-5 mortality rates, but the proportion of undernourished people has declined only marginally from 17% in 2000 to the current 15%. The share of wasted children has inched down similarly.

India was ranked 83 in 2000 and 102 in 2008 with GHI scores of 38.2 and 36 respectively. This implies that, while hunger levels in India have diminished somewhat, the improvement has been outstripped by several other countries. Hence India's ranking is worse today than it was 15

years ago. In fact, Bangladesh was ranked 84 with a score of 38.5 in 2000, just below India. But in 2016, it has improved beyond India with a GHI score of 27.1 and a rank of 90 to India's 97.

Overall, global hunger levels are down by about 29% compared to 2000. Twenty countries, including Rwanda, Cambodia, and Myanmar, have reduced their GHI scores by over 50% each since 2000. And for the second year in a row, no developing country for which data was available featured in the "extremely alarming" category.

A Food Law is not enough

Hunger levels in developing countries may have fallen 29% since 2000, but unfortunately, India is still rated as a country with 'serious' hunger levels in 2016, says the *Global Hunger Index* (GHI), which was released in Oct. 2016. It also said that the country is slated to become the world's most populous nation in six years, and it's crucial that it meets this milestone with a record of ensuring that the expected 1.4 billion Indians have enough nutritious food to lead healthy and successful lives. Since 2000, the country has reduced its GHI score by a quarter and has a score in 2016 of 28.5 (rank 97 of 118 countries). Recent data show that almost 40% of Indian children under five years of age are stunted compared to over 60% in the early 1990s.

The report brings back the focus on the implementation of the National Food Security Act. To date, several States and Union Territories have implemented the food security law and the basic entitlements are being delivered. However, it will be entirely correct to say that only implementation of the Act will not solve the India's problem. This is because hunger and malnutrition are closely linked to sanitation issues. According to Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Professor Jean Humphrey, the stunting in children is not simply due to a lack of food. The constant ambush of germs and bacteria from their environmental forces "these children's bodies [to] divert energy and nutrients away from growth and brain development to prioritise infection-fighting survival," Dr Humphrey told *The New York Times*.

India's health infrastructure is in a pitiable state and that has a direct impact on maternal health, which in turn impacts the health of children. Unless and until the full social infrastructure improves, India will not be able to get out of the hunger trap.