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Food Sufficiency in India: Addressing the Data Gaps

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Food Sufficiency in India: Addressing the Data Gaps*

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Abstract

The NSSO's survey of consumption expenditure is woefully inadequate for the estimating number of food insecure households in India. Future surveys of NSSO need to collect information on the four pillars of food security: availability, access, nutritional adequacy/utilization and stability. The Comprehensive Nutrition Survey in Maharashtra is an example of such a survey and appears to do a decent job of capturing the different elements of food security.

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Introduction

United Nation's Millennium Development Goal-1 seeks to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. As part of this Goal, one of the targets is to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger over the period 1990 - 2015. In a thought provoking article on the hunger target, *Fukuda-Parr and Orr* (2014) make a few salient observations that can inform the current debate on hunger in India and also on what data should be collected to track progress in reducing hunger. They state that reducing hunger was a poor cousin among the eight goals and 21 targets. Since the hunger target was incorporated into MDG 1 it ended up being overshadowed by the income poverty component of the goal. Hence, it is not surprising that progress was made towards the income goal, with the progress on the hunger target being tardy. The Government of India too admits that there is a problem of hunger. In a report documenting India's progress towards achieving MDGs, the Government of India mentions that progress in reducing hunger is 'slow or almost off-track' (Government of India 2013). This assertion is based on the estimates of households that do not consume an adequate amount of calories. This line of reasoning is not specific to India. As pointed out by *Fukuda-Parr and Orr*, "The theory behind the MDGs is to create outcome targets without reference to—and remaining neutral to—the alternative causal models to achieve them (p. 154). The numeric targeting narrowed the concept of hunger and food security as caloric consumption ..." (p.157).

Food Sufficiency in India

The unfortunate fact is that the debate on poverty and hunger in the Indian context has been constrained by the information available as part of a survey of consumption expenditure conducted by National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). The module on the perception of household regarding the sufficiency of food has not kept pace with data required for tracking progress on hunger. Hence, as in other countries, in India too, hunger has been viewed from the lens of caloric consumption

In the survey of consumption expenditure conducted by NSSO in 2009-10, on the issue of perception of household regarding the sufficiency of food, information is sought on whether all members of the household get two square meals every day. There are three responses: every month of the year, some months of the year, and no month of the year. This question has been asked in earlier rounds of a survey of

consumption expenditure too. The pattern that emerges is the following.

In 1993–94, 4.2 percent of households reported not getting enough food every day during some months of the year. This has declined to 0.90 in 2009–10. Similarly, the proportion of households that reported not getting enough food every day all months of the year declined from 0.4 percent in 1993–94 to 0.16 percent in 2009–10. Thus, in the last two decades, there has been a decline in the proportion of households not getting enough food every day.

In terms of absolute numbers, in 2009–10, over 1.46 million rural households reported not getting enough food some months of the year and 263,284 households reported not getting enough food all months of the year. It is estimated that 6.2 million individuals live in rural households that report not getting enough food during some months of the year and another 1.2 million individuals live in households not getting enough food all months of the year. Since the NSSO has already published a detailed report on perceived adequacy of food consumption in Indian households, we do not reproduce any of the summary statistics here (Government of India 2013).

It is incongruous that the numbers on the perception of the sufficiency of food are inconsistent with the discussion that led up to the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013. As is well known, NFSA seeks to cover to 75 percent of India's rural and 50 percent of urban population. The logical question that arises is the following- If less than 1 percent of households perceive themselves as food insecure then what is the need for covering such a large number of households under NFSA? While these statistics suggests that there are some inconsistencies, the problem in our opinion could possibly lie in the set of questions used by NSSO in its surveys. In the report published by NSSO, it is mentioned that the information collected does not constitute an objective measurement of food inadequacy in the country, but indicate the subjective perception of the population about it. It is fair to be cynical of this measure of food inadequacy since the estimates are a fraction of the head count ratio of poverty for rural India.

Hence, we argue that it is time for NSSO to change the questions relating to food sufficiency. The rest of this paper focuses on the findings from the Comprehensive Nutrition Survey in Maharashtra. *Prima facie*, this survey seems to do a decent job of capturing the different elements of food security.

Food Insecurity in Maharashtra

As per NSSO's estimates, 99.5 percent of rural and 100 percent of urban households in Maharashtra reported getting two square meals every day in the year 2009-10. Contrast this with the findings from the Comprehensive Nutrition Survey in Maharashtra. The list of questions and the responses are given in Table 1. The survey attempted to get a handle on two broad components of household food insecurity: insufficient access to nutritionally adequate and safe food supply at the household level and inadequate utilisation of foods by household members.

Estimates from the Comprehensive Nutrition Survey suggest that only 58 percent of households (Q1 Table 1) in Maharashtra did not worry that they would not have enough food. Such information is not canvassed by NSSO in its surveys. The nutrition survey documented considerable variations in this indicator across the rural and urban areas of Maharashtra as well as across the six administrative regions of the state, viz. Amravati, Aurangabad, Konkan, Nagpur, Nashik, and Pune (See p. 29, Table 2.11 of the report). In Aurangabad, 59.7 percent of households were worried about insufficient food while in Konkan region only 30 percent of households were worried. Among households with a ration card, only 37.4 percent were worried about food insufficiency while 56.2 percent of households without a ration card were worried. This suggests that access to the public distribution system does affect the household's perception on food insufficiency.

Though directly not comparable, Questions 8 and 9 are the ones closest in spirit to the questions asked in the NSSO's survey. The estimate of households with at least one member going to sleep at night hungry because there were not enough food or households with a member going a whole day and night without eating because there was not enough food is higher in the Nutrition Survey than as suggested by the estimates based on NSSO's survey.

The nine indicators listed in Table 1 were combined to construct a measure of food insecurity using the tool developed by USAID's Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance project. While 57 percent of the households were food secure, 16.7 percent were mildly food insecure, 12.7 percent were moderately food insecure, and 13.6 percent were severely food insecure (Table 2.12 p. 30). In Aurangabad and Nashik region, 27.5 percent and 22.3 percent of households can be classified as severe food insecure. No such measure can be calculated from the NSSO data.

Discussion

Looking ahead, future survey's on consumption expenditure undertaken by NSSO need to capture the four pillars of food security identified by FAO Committee on World Food Security: availability, access, nutritional adequacy/utilization and stability. Some elements of the four pillars are collected by NSSO as part of Schedule 0.0 of its survey although this information is not released. For example, the survey does collect information on the distance of the village to the nearest facility and availability of important amenities. In the absence of this information, one is unable to control for any supply side variables like whether the village has an Anganwadi centre, a fair price shop, or an agricultural produce market or rural primary co-operative market etc. Other aspects of the four pillars too need to be included in the NSSO's survey of consumption expenditure. Also, in light of the passage of the NFSA, it does not make sense to continue equating hunger with calorie since by distribution rice and wheat through the public distribution system the issue of calorie consumption will be addressed. What is required is to agree on a set of questions that will help untangle the different aspects of food and nutrition insecurity in rural and urban India and across the states and regions of India.

References:

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Table 1: Perception of Food Insecurity in Maharashtra

Q #		Never	Rarely	Some times	Often	Total
1	Did you worry that your household would not have enough food?	57.9	24.2	14.5	3.4	100.0
2	Were you or any household member not able to eat the kinds of foods your preferred because of lack of resources?	63.4	21	14.0	1.6	100.0
3	Did you or any household member have to eat a limited variety of foods due to a lack of resources?	68.6	17.6	11.8	2.1	100.0
4	Did you or any household member have to eat some foods that you really did not want to eat because of a lack of resources to obtain other types of food?	74.5	15.5	9	1.0	100.0
5	Did you or any other household member have to eat smaller meals than you felt you needed because there was not enough food?	79.7	12.3	7.6	0.4	100.0
6	Did you or any other household member have to eat fewer meals in a day because there was not enough food?	81.8	11.2	6.6	0.3	100.0
7	Was there ever no food to eat of any kind in our household because of lack of resources to get food?	87.8	7.6	4.3	0.3	100.0
8	Did you or any household member go to sleep at night hungry because there was not enough food?	92.3	5.2	2.4	0.0	100.0
9	Did you or any household member go a whole day and night without eating because there was not enough food?	95.5	3.0	1.5	0.0	100.0
Note: Reference Period Last One Month Preceding the Survey						

Source: Table 2.10 International Institute for Population Sciences and United Nations Children's Fund (2013)