



## Speaker Summary Note

**Session:** South Asia

**Speaker:** Vijay Shankar Vyas  
Member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, India

**Title:** Leveraging Agriculture for Improving Nutrition and Health in India

For one of the fastest growing economies India's record in poverty alleviation and ensuring nutrition enhancement to its people is not at all encouraging. This despite the fact that country is signatory to several international agreements to end hunger and mal nutrition, and Food Security is repeatedly proclaimed as one of the principal goals of development. Very concept of Food Security implies "access to adequate food to all people at all times for *an active and healthy life*." It suggests not only avoiding hunger and ensuring adequate calorie intake but also eradication of mal nutrition.

Current situation in the country is as follows:

- Hunger, in terms of starvation, has largely been eliminated, although there is a disturbingly large extent of seasonal hunger, especially in dry areas.
- There has been progress in reducing calorie deficiency. However, a very large proportion of rural households subsist on below 1800 calories per person per day, which the requirement for an active life, even in the so-called progressive states.
- There has been no progress in ensuring nutritional security, i.e. eradicating protein-energy malnutrition, barring in one or two states. The worst sufferers are young children, pregnant and lactating mothers and elderly persons without any family support.

In a country which has been aspiring for decades to achieve Food and Nutritional Security these are very disheartening facts. If the present rate of progress continues, India will not be able to reach the millennium goal of halving malnutrition.

One of the principal reasons for a disappointing performance in this area is the pattern of growth of the economy. The driving force for economic growth in India has been, mainly, the service sector and to an extent industry sector. Agriculture has not contributed to the growth to any significant extent although nearly 52 percent of the country workforce depends on agriculture. Experience all over the world suggests that growth in agriculture leads to much faster percolation of benefits and to a large number of people. Stagnation in agriculture growth meant that the large number of households dependent on agriculture were impoverished and could not improve their standard of living.

There are several reasons for widely prevalent mal nutrition in the rural areas. Firstly, there has been an excessive emphasis on wheat and rice for last several decades, right from the beginning of the Green

Revolution in the early 1960s. This has resulted in the neglect of other cereals including coarse cereals which in many respects are more nutritious. Second, agrarian structure is progressively dominated by the small holdings. Agriculture on these holdings is not profitable and to that extent scope for purchasing more nutritious food from the market is not available to them. Third, in the financial allocation by the government, health and sanitation sectors are grossly neglected, more so when it comes to allocation in the rural area. This aggravates the situation of ill health and mal nutrition. Fourth, the role which civil society could have played in improving awareness on health and sanitation related issues at the household level is totally missing.

While action is needed in all these areas to correct the situation, the most important agenda should be to emphasize agricultural growth, especially on the small farms. The fact that on a large number of small and marginal holdings agriculture is largely for self provisioning the nutritional aspects can be addressed right at the farm level.

The direction in which agriculture has to move to improve nutrition would include:

- Emphasis on the coarse cereals and other indigenous crops which are more nutritious.
- Strengthening the supplementary farm enterprises, e.g. dairy and fruits and vegetables, particularly on the small farms.
- Using breeding technology to develop nutritionally superior crop varieties (an example is the protein rich maize), or fortifying the processed food stuff, e.g. the flour of the cereals.

For undertaking these measures the public and private sector as well as the civil society have important roles. Public research has to give attention to the coarse cereals; public price policy has to discriminate in favour of these and other nutritionally rich crops. The private sector could contribute to the research on nutritionally fortified crops and food products. The civil society has the role in generating awareness about nutrition at the household level.