



Text of Remarks

Session: Inaugural Address

H.E. Manmohan Singh

Speaker: Prime Minister
Republic of India

Title: Leveraging Agriculture for Improving Nutrition and Health

I am very happy to participate in this very important International Policy Consultation organized by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). IFPRI has established itself as a premier international organization engaged in research for sustainable solutions to end hunger and poverty. I would like to compliment IFPRI for organizing this conference to focus our attention on removal of both hunger and poverty.

These issues are particularly topical today as the world faces rising food prices in many countries and there is growing recognition that climate change may endanger food security in many developing countries.

Leveraging agriculture for improving nutrition and health, which is the central theme of this Conference, is particularly important in developing countries where agriculture is also the mainstay of a very large number of people. In India, about 52% of the labour force is dependent on agriculture for the bulk of their incomes. Studies in India show some correlation between agricultural performance of a State and the nutritional status of its people. States that have high agricultural productivity also have lower malnutrition rates for both adults and children. But malnutrition is a complex process in which habits regarding feeding the new born babies, maternal and child health, and also water quality are at least equally important. Let me offer some comments on how I see these issues in our own country.

Malnutrition remains a serious problem in India and many developing countries. Globally, nearly 1 billion people still go hungry. Nearly one in four children under age of five is underweight. The problem of hidden hunger—that is, deficiencies of essential vitamins and minerals, such as iron, Vitamin A and iodine—is also severe. Nutrition is therefore a serious challenge that has not received the attention it truly deserves.

Malnutrition is not only a consequence of poverty, it is also a cause of poverty. A malnourished child is more vulnerable to disease and less able to earn a living. The complexity of causes that underlie malnutrition calls for a multi-sectoral strategy to address the three key issues of availability, access and absorption.

In our country, rapid growth in agriculture with particular emphasis on the subsectors growing food and on the poorer regions will help to address issues of availability and access. But, experience has also shown that rapid growth in GDP in general and, even agriculture in particular, though necessary, is not sufficient to produce desirable nutritional and health outcomes among the socially and economically disadvantaged groups of the community. There are other causes that need to be addressed.

We need to address the issues of absorption of nutrition, health and hygiene, which in turn depend on many other factors such as the availability of clean drinking water, sanitation and also on the education and status of women in society. Aware of this, our fight against malnutrition incorporates, as it must, all these areas. The Integrated Child Development Services is probably one of the oldest and largest programmes in the world to address the problem of child malnutrition. We have been looking at how to improve this programme and have recently added an element of direct cash transfers for pregnant and nursing mothers. We now have a Right to Education Act to back the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) which has already increased dramatically the proportion of our children who now go to school and reduced gender imbalances in this respect. This is supported by a countrywide Mid-Day Meal Scheme which not only addresses hunger but also promotes better learning. The National Rural Health Mission launched some five years ago has also had visible favourable effects, particularly increasing the number of births that are assisted with expert medical attention. Similarly, under Swajal Dhara, we have a time-bound programme to ensure clean drinking water to all habitations.

We, therefore, do not see Agricultural development as the only element in our strategy but it is nonetheless a key part of any viable strategy.

In India, our first priority has been to ensure food security which in turn requires a high order of self sufficiency. Cereals and pulses are the staple food of the people of India. We have naturally focussed attention on ensuring adequate production of these products to meet the needs of our population. The 'National Food Security Mission' launched a few years ago was designed to promote the spread of best practices that would increase productivity of food grains in areas and states where there was scope for such increase and there indeed is scope for such increase. We are also supporting additional location specific interventions like Eastern Region Development Programs to address underlying constraints to agricultural productivity and market opportunities. The constraints of infrastructure, various climatic stresses like moisture, salinity and floods are also being addressed.

We are also planning to focus on millets that have a high protein, fibre and mineral content and are extremely important food grains for their nutritive value and health benefits. Sustaining high levels of production of food grains is essential for meeting the calorific and nutritional requirement of our population.

Food grains however are only one part of the solution. With economic growth and changing dietary habits, demand for fruits and vegetables, milk and milk products, meat and fish, is steadily increasing. This is entirely natural. Good nutrition requires a balanced diet through multiple food sources.

To support the development of a diversified agriculture, we are promoting several schemes and programs such as the National Horticulture Mission and the National Dairy Development Programme to boost the production of fruits, vegetables and milk products. An integrated farming system promoting food grains, horticulture, and milch cattle, especially for the small and marginal farmers is the way to go forward in ensuring nutritional security. An important point in this context is that agriculture is getting more feminised, with clear evidence that female participation is particularly high in the growing areas of milk and vegetable production. Income from these diversified activities go more to women and therefore, have a gender impact which should add to reduction of malnutrition among other things.

Agricultural diversification in food requires back up support in terms of viable delivery and marketing chains because much of the agricultural produce is perishable. We have not done as much as we should have to promote modernisation of agricultural marketing. I have asked the Planning Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture to focus particularly on this aspect in the our Twelfth Five Year Plan. Modernisation of marketing inevitably implies a greater interaction and involvement of the private sector. We will work with State Governments to ease whatever impediments may exist in this regard.

I understand that research efforts have made it possible to bio-fortify some crops for better nutrition outcomes. Golden rice containing beta carotene provides the calories as well as nutritional supplements that take care of several diseases associated with vitamin A deficiency. Multi grain flour that mixes soya, oats and millets with wheat flour in different product combinations is yet another approach to meeting the challenge of malnutrition. In all these initiatives, the imperatives of food safety and quality are paramount.

Looking ahead, we must all begin to take more concrete steps to meet people's aspirations to get access to healthier, more nutritious foods for their families. The Green Revolution in our own region of South Asia, to which Dr. Swaminathan made a magnificent contribution, shows just how much can be accomplished when technology advances are combined with sound policies. This was followed by the white revolution in milk, which has made India the largest producer of milk based entirely on small holder dairying. We now need a major revolution in agricultural marketing.

Rapid growth in agriculture, particularly that which diversifies the food basket while ensuring adequate availability of energy and other basic nutrients, combined with other activities and initiatives in health, hygiene and women's education will help overcome poor health, hunger and malnutrition. But, since malnutrition is particularly high amongst the poor and the vulnerable section, this needs to be supplemented by viable social safety nets. We are committed to soon bring before our Parliament a Right to Food Act which will seek to ensure this outcome.

This is, therefore, a particularly good time to meet together and exchange ideas on how best to achieve the goals we all share.

This conference serves to launch this conversation, which all of us must pledge to continue, until we meet our objective of a healthy, productive life for all. I wish you all very fruitful deliberations.