Book review

Feeding India: Livelihoods, Entitlement and Capabilities
B. Pritchard, A. Rammohan, M. Sekher, S. Parasuraman, and C. Choitani
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There are very many people in the world whose quality of life and human potential are adversely affected, cut short – sometimes very short – by undernourishment. Of all regions, South Asia has the largest number and the greatest incidence of malnutrition (prevalence of stunting among children 45.5 per cent; cf. Africa 35.6 per cent; World Bank, 2014). A lot of them are in India, where the rate of anaemia among children is 74.3 per cent (cf. South Asia as a whole: 66.5 per cent; and Africa: 64.6 per cent). Feeding India matters.

This short and accessible book concerns the Indian food security enigma: 'Two decades of dizzying economic transformation in India seem to have barely touched an enormous proportion of India's population … Many people's existences remain bound by social relations that inscribe lives of drudgery, poverty and undernourishment' (p. 2). To unwrap this enigma, the authors (from Australia and India) take an approach drawing on concepts of rights, freedoms, and capabilities to explain how food insecurity in India is not fundamentally about food per se. It is a problem of livelihoods resulting from a lopsided pattern of development that should be addressed not by food policies alone but by a livelihoods approach that puts people at the centre.

The introductory chapter draws firstly on Sen's articulation of *entitlements* – people's endowments of tangible and intangible assets; people's *capabilities* – attributes enabling the deployment of those assets to achieve their aspirations; the *opportunities and constraints* (or unfreedoms) which shape the exercise, or processing, of capabilities; and *functionings*, which are the active 'doing' and 'being' of individuals and groups in trying to achieve their objectives. The undernutrition resulting from food insecurity as viewed, therefore, cannot be explained solely in terms of macroeconomic growth but also as cause and consequence of human livelihoods insufficiencies, 'the gap between people's capabilities and their functionings' (p. 8).

Secondly, there is a succinct summary of the sustainable livelihoods concept from its launch by Chambers and Conway in 1992 to its pre-eminence as a framework and adoption by many organizations and practitioners for addressing contemporary problems of development. The authors recapitulate the standard pattern adopted for livelihood analyses, and summarize the three principal pathways for rural livelihoods development: agricultural development through intensification or extensification; diversification of livelihood strategies; and migration. They close the introduction by emphasizing the shift in understanding of food security from issues of production and productivity to social science questions based on the human capabilities (livelihood strategy) and rights-based (entitlement) approaches previously expounded. This is helpful, as far as it goes, but in the concluding comments of this review, a further shift from food security to nutrition is envisaged.

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The rest of the book takes the following shape:

Chapter Two explores how food security is delinked from national economic growth and establishes the huge dimensions of the food security problem in India and the likelihood of failing to meet the Millennium Development Goals for reduction in hunger. The authors deconstruct food insecurity into macro and micronutritional insufficiency, by geographical, socioeconomic, gender, and age parameters. They highlight the particular characteristics of undernutrition, exemplified by the effects of the caste system and of the local socioeconomic relationships which perpetuate inequality, and explore the unresolved puzzle of why per capita calorie consumption is declining in the context of economic growth.

Chapter Three sets out the dynamics of agriculture and the capacity to feed India. A link is established with three crucial forms of food entitlement:

- own-production and natural resource entitlements;
- wage labour and income-based entitlements; and
- exchange-system entitlements though safety net policies.

The point is reiterated that undernutrition exists where food is abundant, partly due to the Green Revolution which has transformed agricultural supply since the 1960s. Lower food prices benefited consumers, and many farmers in favoured areas benefited from productivity gains. But the benefits were socially and geographically uneven, and many small farmers, tenant farmers, and labourers were disadvantaged and displaced, increasing social and spatial inequalities. The authors also point out the trenchant environmental critique of soil, water, and biodiversity depletion, the dissociation of women as decision-makers in household food production and deleterious dietary changes. Nevertheless, they also present a critique of the critique. This serves as a reminder of the agency held by farmers as they navigate social and economic complexities, and even generate new agricultural models linking Green Revolution agronomy with the White Revolution of dairy farming. Thus, technological change has wider livelihood food security impacts. The current stagnation in yields poses new challenges for the development and research communities, such as the role of genetic modification and the institutionalization of research knowledge management.

In **Chapter Four** they ask, *what determines how much food is produced in India, by whom, and how does it help to address food insecurity?*

The chapter begins with a reminder of the 'agriculture–nutrition' disconnect in India and explains the seven pathways whereby agriculture can be linked to improved nutrition and food security. The argument expounded here is that agriculture in India is indeed poorly configured towards positive direct impacts on nutrition and food security. The declining size of land holdings is associated with female alienation from tenancy, fragmentation, and household shifts to net food purchasing. The twin costs of the pesticide and fertilizer 'technological treadmill' and environmental stress have curtailed productivity increases, and disproportionately affect the poor.

High input costs require risky credit and shocks can drive farmers into debt and poverty – and suicide. Environmental stress also has a disproportionate effect in ecologically marginal contexts. Exploiting the opportunities in the high-value agricultural economy through institutional arrangements such as contract farming also disproportionately favours larger, better-off farmers and tends to increase concentration of land ownership. While there is some counter-evidence for scale neutrality, the policy environment may be the determinant of bias: market, state, and community failures conspire against the provision to the poor of agricultural and other essential services such as electricity. Thus, agriculture does not promote better nutrition, but channels poorer households into the non-farm economy – the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter Five analyses *what determines the ability of vulnerable population segments to meet their food needs through engaging in work?*

De-agrarianization in contemporary India is a logical but painful experience. Off-farm employment provides income-earning alternatives and remittances, but too often such livelihood strategies are marginal. Household assets, attributes, and attitudes are framed within sociocultural norms – such as caste – and together influence the choice of livelihood strategies within a set of opportunities shaped in turn by the broader environment. Individual and household livelihood portfolios are often a function of both distress/necessity and opportunity, pursued in India in increasingly differentiated, fragmented, and complex forms. Changing patterns of migration are a part of this household dynamic, but, the authors argue, are somewhat under-researched.

The wider economic environment plays a considerable part, too, and economic growth in India has been shown to have a relatively low elasticity of poverty reduction compared with other Asian countries, and another BRICS country, Brazil. Hence the phenomenon of increasing economic inequality, partly attributable to weak employment growth through the limited development of a manufacturing sector (services requiring higher levels of skills). As the failure of 'trickledown' to the poor is well understood, so this can be described as failure of 'uplift' of the poor. Thus, opportunities for those with few skills are confined to insecure, low-wage, 'informal' employment and increasing casualization in the formal economy. Or worse, no employment. Accompanying these opportunity 'failures' has been food commodities price inflation, pushing the poorest into food insecurity. A particular feature with specific nutritional consequences is the high price of pulses – significantly consumed by the poor – which unlike cereals are not included within the subsidized Public Distribution System. Likewise, recent extreme inflation in the prices of onions, a staple ingredient of otherwise restricted diets, has exacerbated the food insecurity of the 'de-agrarianized' poor.

Chapters Six and **Seven** ask *what determines the extent to which food security in India is met through social safety net programmes?*

For the millions of Indians for whom the entitlement mechanisms described above fail, food security depends on social safety nets. A food safety net began in

the form of the universal Public Distribution System (PDS) in the 1960s, evolved into a Targeted PDS in the 1990s, and was supplemented by the National Rural Employment Guarantee in 2005. Other schemes currently target school meals and child development. The authors give a detailed account of these developments from an entitlement perspective, and comment adversely on the well-documented and multiple inefficiencies of the PDS, which, nevertheless, remains a 'bulwark' of the government's food security policy. The other schemes are discussed, and characteristics of mis-targeting, corruption, and theft are highlighted. The authors make a call for coherent policies and sound administration, noting that the implementation failures tend to disadvantage most severely the poorest of the poor, entrenching 'social and spatial cleavages across the country' (p. 120). Concluding comments to Chapter Six concern a potential convergence between food security policies and a new integrated approach to development which might break the vicious cycle of disadvantage and unequal access; the legal obligations of the State of India to facilitate citizens' universal rights to food; and the debate about the Right to Food Campaign and recent legislative proposals.

Chapter Seven explores India's 'brave new world' of e-governance and cash transfers for enhancing food security. It provides an account of policy reforms intending to exploit the benefits of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and cash transfers (CTs) for food security policy as a means to overcome the weaknesses identified in the previous chapter. We are reminded of the disjuncture between India's IT economy and the intermittent electricity supply to rural areas where in a panchayat office you see 'a dusty, disconnected computer in the corner of a room, surrounded by reams of paperwork' (p. 131). IT, it suggests, is not a panacea for inefficiency and corruption.

The authors then consider the possibility of adopting CTs to replace the physical (in-kind) entitlements to food of the PDS, through vouchers or direct CTs. While there are real opportunities to enhance delivery, the authors also cite cases where 'rent-seekers continue to find ways to undermine efforts to revamp the dysfunctional state of social provisioning' (p. 140). The detailed evidence of persistent fraud in Bihar is fascinating, instructive, and cautionary – yet other states have had significant success. Thus, questions about the appropriateness of the principles of CTs stand alongside deep concerns about differences in implementation. In a somewhat extended section, lessons are drawn for India from Latin America, whence CTs came, and Brazil in particular.

An important point mentioned in passing is that because access to basic foodstuffs does not automatically contribute to dietary diversity, concerns remain about the relationship between food security and nutritional sufficiency and micronutrient intakes. This issue merits greater consideration in the book and in food security debates more generally. But at least, and somewhat imprecisely, the authors state that limited findings about the lack of dietary diversity 'have dire implications for micronutrient, vitamin, iron and protein intakes, with longer-term implications for health and human capabilities' (p. 143).

Chapter Eight recapitulates the themes of the six central chapters and concludes with the principal finding that food insecurity is a function of a complex of economic, environmental, social, political, and cultural factors. Addressing the challenges of feeding India requires a holistic approach based on livelihoods, capabilities, and entitlements.

The book is well-written, interesting, and an easy read. The literature is thoroughly explored and well-deployed as a foundation of the nature and incidence of food insecurity in India. Two comments can be made: first, of the three pillars of food security – availability (actual food), access (ability to produce or otherwise acquire food), and utilization (household preparation, distribution, and metabolism), all within a framework of stability – more could have been made of utilization.

This leads to the second comment, which is the need to reiterate and communicate to food policymakers that food security is not the same as nutritional security. And because food security is a means to another end, which is nutritional sufficiency, the 'dire implications' of lack of nutritional diversity and therefore nutritional insufficiency noted by the authors is a necessary extension of the food security discussions. As members of the international community of researchers, donors, and policymakers are recognizing the developmental importance of under- (and over-) nutrition, so new knowledge is needed about how to harness the potential of rural economies in general, and agriculture in particular, to address nutritional insufficiency. There are programmes that illustrate this focus, and indeed take forward in practical ways the research agenda that is unfortunately only implicit from the principal finding of this book. One such programme is GAIN, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition: 'GAIN supports public-private partnerships to increase access to the missing nutrients in diets necessary for people, communities and economies to be stronger and healthier' (www.gainhealth.org/). Another example is that of SAFANSI, the South Asia Food and Security Initiative:

> The challenge of hunger and malnutrition in South Asia is multi-faceted, and it requires a multi-pronged approach, including: greater availability of food through improved agricultural production; enhanced livelihoods for secure access; education; clean water and sanitation; women's empowerment; social protection; and a focus on infant and child care (www.worldbank.org/safansi).

As a final programme example, LANSA (Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia) is an international research partnership established to understand how agriculture and agri-food systems can be better designed to advance nutrition. The work is focused on policies, interventions, and strategies that can improve the nutritional status of vulnerable groups in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan (http://lansasouthasia.org/).

In a similar vein, *Feeding India* will remind readers of this journal that the food chain is not just about agriculture and food, farm to fork, but is the means whereby agriculture can deliver valuable nutrients to enhance the growth and development of vulnerable consumers, indeed the health and well-being of all consumers. For this reason among others, it is a very good read.

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References

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