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




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## Climate impacts food security and health

Sunita Tripathy and Armin Rosencranz | March 25, 2018 2:10 am

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The Union budget released in February 2018 fixed the minimum support price (MSP) of kharif crops at least 50 per cent higher than the cost of production.

The proposal is timely: Climatic imbalances such as floods and droughts have caused food insecurity and nutritional deficiency in important food crops, contributing to serious health risks.[ST1] Furthermore, industrial agricultural practices have over time drastically disrupted ecosystems and natural habitat.

These practices have undermined the ecosystem's capacity to provide essential environmental services such as clean air, water and bio-genetic diversity. In fact, about a third of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are caused by the global food system alone.

While the increasing use of chemical pesticides has led to loss of pollinators such as butterflies, honeybees and wasps which will impact future food production adversely, unsanitary conditions prevalent especially in developing countries increase occurrence of infections and foodborne diseases across food chains.

(WHO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2015) Women and children belonging to the poorer sections of society are most susceptible to these adverse conditions and to such human health impacts of agriculture.

Government efforts to address the food-health-climate nexus in India requires robust scientific evidence complete with documentation of available data, in the absence of which the problem of uninformed and ineffective policy is only exacerbated.

For example, the recent unusual smog occurrence in New Delhi and Haryana between November 2017 and February 2018 came to be incorrectly explained by the Delhi state government as environmental contamination caused due to vehicular pollution whereas the practice of burning residual crop stubble was the real primary reason for elevated rates of airborne particulate matter in the area.

Lack of awareness and ineffective policy that do not target causative factors and pollutants cause a boomerang effect, especially because these problems do not allow much time for scientific or political deliberation.

For instance, in agriculture, pollutants further deteriorate the soil composition which makes farming susceptible to pests; and the pests are treated with more chemicals and pesticides which go on to contaminate the upstream food chain again – leading to the vicious cycle that engenders consumer health.

Furthermore, low-cost or subsidised chemical-intensive farming has led to the depletion of traditional manuring practices that are a sustainable alternative.

Incentivising traditional agricultural practices with resource management through a decentralised participatory approach can act as a promising long-term solution.

Self-government authorities, such as village panchayats and Gram-sabhas can play an important role in data collection at the grassroots level so as to comprehend the risks and uncertainties in their completeness.

This is especially important because of the problems that lack of local and reliable scientific evidence cause. Glaring evidence gaps, such as those discussed here, can lead to incorrect health narratives and can cause polarisation of public debate on what should constitute a sustainable food system, offering no alternative solutions best suited for the Indian population.

Earlier studies on food system sustainability have largely focused on disease prevention, management of chronic conditions, and general promotion of health alone. However, the requirement of holistic solutions now demands a broader approach in gathering statistics.

The World Health Organisation has shown that low-income regions of the world are disproportionately affected by food-borne diseases. Children under the age of five incur 43 per cent of the disease burden of contaminated food in these regions.

According to a recent report by the International Livestock Research Institute, only 19 countries, including India, bear 75 per cent of the total global disease burden. Poverty naturally creates greater social inequality because of poor people's inability to access adequate food and essential healthcare.

With over 63 million persons faced with poverty due to healthcare costs alone, (The National Health Policy, 2015) India requires an evidence-based policy direction to reduce the health costs brought about by contaminated food.

Though public sector agricultural R&D spending has been on the rise in recent years, the estimated human and economic cost of inaction towards building sustainable food and non-food-but-agricultural systems is also bound to increase.

Farmer suicides in India have been frequently associated with cotton farming, a non-food agricultural commodity that has been severely affected due to the pricing strategies and market practices of corporate conglomerate Monsanto.

Monsanto's required annual repurchase of its "super-seeds" forces the farmer-purchasers of these seeds to incur unsustainable debt, leading to thousands of farmer suicides over the years.

Agriculture also contributes to large scale heavy metal (arsenic) contamination of groundwater in the Indus valley, which has come to be estimated to affect more than 50 million people.

Marginalised low-income agricultural communities in India have poor or no access to potable water and suffer from health impacts of water pollution.

They rely on contaminated water bodies and ground water wells for drinking water, which are often highly toxic due to the presence of organochlorine pesticides and other similar prohibited substances.

Reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development show contrasting conditions in urban India, where unhealthy dietary habits have led to nearly 20 per cent of the population being overweight.

India is also the third in the world for the greatest number of people living with the lifestyle disease 'diabetes'; estimated at 69 million next to China's 110 million according to statistics by International Diabetes Federation.

The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems in the European Union has recently reported that a systemic view with socio-cultural and environmental determinants of food systems associated health will help identify the causes for widespread food-related harms.

Therefore, the health risks due to (i) occupational hazards at the farms, (ii) contaminated environments 'downstream' of food production, (iii) ingesting compositionally altered, unsafe food, (iv) unhealthy diets causing non-communicable disease conditions such as diabetes and cancer and (v) food insecurity or inability to access adequate and acceptable food are the major hurdles that require critical empirical impact assessment.

Documenting and clearly explaining the potential of diversified agricultural systems to reconcile productivity gains, environmental resilience, social equity and health benefits is the need of the hour.

Rehabilitating ecosystems on these lines entails nutrition-building via access to diverse foods, while inequalities are reduced and power is redistributed in the process.

*The writers are professors of law at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat.*



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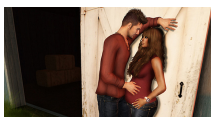
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